



Xinyuan Dai and Lucie Lu

**Beyond Liberal Narratives. China and the
International Human Rights Order**

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Beyond Liberal Narratives.

China and the International Human Rights Order

Xinyuan Dai and Lucie Lu

ABSTRACT

The meteoric rise of China represents a seismic shift in International Relations. With a focus on human rights, we examine this shift's implication on the international institutional order – does China challenge, undermine, and replace rules and institutions that an earlier and much weaker China did not get to participate in making? Using the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as a laboratory, we analyse more than 93'000 recommendations made between 2008 and 2021 to reliably depict where China stands on international human rights norms and how China's position compares with others. Our findings suggest that China is invested in international human rights governance, and rather than seeking to replace the international human rights regime, China selectively endorses some rules more than others, just as the United States and most other countries do. Importantly, China's position overlaps that of most countries and resonates significantly within the Global South.

1 INTRODUCTION¹

China's rise over the past four decades has been remarkable, transforming the country from a largely agrarian and isolated nation into a global economic and technological powerhouse. China sustained an annual average GDP growth rate of around 10% for over three decades. This success has made China the world's second-largest

economy by nominal GDP. China dazzles the world with its awe-inspiring infrastructure development, technological advancement, military modernisation, and ever-growing consumer market.

Along the way, China has become more confident on the world stage. As one of the world's leading trading nations, China is an indispensable partner for many countries. Furthermore, through engagement in diplomatic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and participation in – as well as the creation of – international organisations, China has amassed unprecedented diplomatic clout. Indeed, in almost all areas of international interaction, including global governance and regional security, China's ascent has sparked many questions and spirited debates.

One of the most profound questions concerns the implications of a rising China for the international order. Much of the literature seeks to assess the nature of a rising China. For instance, is China a status quo power or a revisionist state (Chan et al. 2021; Chan et al. 2019; Feng 2009; Johnston 2003; Kastner/Saunders 2012; Medeiros 2019; Zhao 2018)? Answers to this question carry immense policy implications.² If China is a revisionist power that seeks to undermine and replace the international order, beneficiaries of the order may seek to deter or contain China's growing power and influence around the world. If China is a status quo power,

1 Parts of this project have been presented at the Association of Chinese Political Studies Annual Meeting, Duisburg, Germany, October 2023 and the BIRT (Berlin International College of Research and Graduate Training) Colloquium at Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany, November 2023. We thank participants at these fora, especially Rosemary Foot, Wei Liang, James Paradise, Margaret Pearson, Thomas Risse, Federico Salvati, and Edward Yang for their helpful comments.

2 Policy implications are particularly important when labelling China as a revisionist state is cemented in official documents, as in the US National Security Strategy in late 2017 and the US National Defence Strategy in early 2018 (Johnston 2019).

less coercive or more constructive measures would be warranted in dealing with a rising China.

Specifically, does a rising China seek to challenge, undermine, or replace the international order (Feng/He 2017; Hameiri/Jones 2018; Öniş/Kutlay 2020)? Such concerns are natural given that the current order is largely rooted in Western liberal origins and has been constructed without significant input from the then much weaker China on the periphery. How China relates to the institutional order impacts the stability of the international system and, particularly, the effectiveness of global governance. The role of China is crucial to our understanding of the crises confronting the international order as well as our search for solutions to some of the challenges.

Yet, however important and useful binary conclusions to these important questions may be, they can be equally perilous. Attempts at easy answers can be misleading, especially when they suffer from two common shortcomings, as seen in extant literature. One is that it is often unclear what analysts mean by the international order. Sometimes, it seems to be equated largely to the equilibrium of power distributions (Mearsheimer 2019). Alternatively, we can think of the international order as a complex system of norms, rules, and principles (Lake et al. 2021). This rules-based international order, alternatively called the international institutional order (Dai 2020), is multi-dimensional; it is composed of not one but multiple sets of rules of the game across diverse issue areas, often codified in international treaties and buttressed by international organisations. All states – China included – do not commit to or comply with all rules across all issue areas the same way. Another shortcoming in the literature is that the evidence upon which analysts draw their conclusions is not always transparent. States engage with a complex set of rules and principles through various channels and mechanisms. To draw reliable inferences, it is important that we rigorously

analyse a comprehensive body of evidence within well-defined scopes.

In this article, we analyse how China relates to one of the most controversial and intricate areas of global governance: international human rights. On one hand, China has been recognised as an increasingly active and often constructive contributor to the United Nations. On the other hand, China's human rights record does not align with many norms and principles, especially those championed by liberal democracies. Accordingly, many analysts expect that, while China may behave like a status quo power in areas such as economic integration and diplomatic engagement, China is more likely to be a revisionist in areas such as human rights. Between the positive light on its contribution to international organisations and the negative light on its human rights record, how does China actually involve itself with international human rights norms and principles in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC)? There is a wide range of potential actions that China could take. Does China seek to undermine UN human rights organisations or, on the other hand, uphold nearly universally accepted human rights principles? While China's uneasy relationship with the international human rights regime has been widely discussed, China's alternative narratives on human rights have only begun to receive significant attention (Berger 2023). We examine China's position on international human rights and analyse how it compares with other countries.

We take care to avoid the two common pitfalls mentioned. First, we clearly define the aspect of the international institutional order under study. We focus on one specific aspect pertaining to human rights. The key tenets of the international human rights order have been enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and global human rights treaties that have been actively promoted by various treaty organisations and in the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Second, we gather comprehensive and reliable evidence. To do so, we go beyond isolated statements and examine instead recurring practices. Building on recent efforts to systematically analyse states' positions on international human rights (Lu 2023; Terman/Byun 2022; Terman/Búzás 2021), we utilise newly available data from the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR is a mechanism within the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) that assesses the human rights records of all UN member states. Since its inception in 2006, three review cycles have been completed, each lasting four to five years. Within each cycle, each member state is expected to go under review exactly once. The state under review submits a comprehensive report on its human rights situation and presents its report at a review session in the UNHRC. At this review session, all other states can ask questions, seek clarification, and make recommendations to the state under review. The state under review is expected to consider the recommendations from other states and is further encouraged to implement accepted recommendations and report on implementations in subsequent UPR cycles.

The UPR presents a valuable empirical laboratory for examining how states distil their positions on the international human rights order as they are prompted – repeatedly and continually in evaluating each and every other state – to articulate what they take as the most important human rights norms. Through all three completed cycles, countries have offered 90'938 recommendations altogether. China has provided 638 recommendations. We assemble a comprehensive dataset of all recommendations by all countries through all three cycles from 2008 to 2021 and analyse each state's position on human rights based on all the recommendations it has issued.

Our findings echo prominent recent studies that international human rights norms are multi-dimensional: a country may selectively engage with some norms but not others, and, to some extent,

most countries are partial with select rights. China's position overlaps that of most countries, but it strongly and increasingly champions social and economic rights and sidelines civil and political rights. This stance contrasts most strikingly with the United States, which primarily advocates civil and political rights over social and economic rights. Furthermore, China's position enjoys a significant following from the Global South, especially recipients of Chinese development aid. The echoing of the Chinese position is most evident when countries from the Global South are in direct dialogue with China: they elevate social and economic rights above all, as China does, but interestingly, they do not completely strike out civil and political rights, as China does. These findings do not support the claim that China seeks to overturn rules and institutions in the global human rights regime. Rather, they suggest that, along with significant convergence among all countries towards the international human rights order, China champions social and economic rights, an area sidelined by liberal democracies and where China has earned credibility through its economic miracle over the past decades.

Our paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we explicate international institutional order as pertaining to human rights, highlighting the fact that it is multi-dimensional. In Section 3, we discuss, among various approaches, how we assess China's engagement with the international human rights order. Section 4 describes the comprehensive dataset we gather and further discusses the text-as-data methods with which we analyse large collections of texts. In Section 5, we conduct our empirical analysis and report our findings. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of our findings in Section 6.

2 INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ORDER

When scholars debate whether China is a challenger to the international order, it is often unclear what that order is. Some think of that order essentially as the distribution of power among leading states (Mearsheimer 2019); China's rise, or the US decline on the flip side, would destabilise that order. Others understand the international order as a complex system of norms, rules, and principles (Lake et al. 2021). Many call it a liberal international order. However, what makes this order liberal is debatable. If liberal simply means open and rule-based, then China can be reasonably seen as cherishing rather than undermining that order (Ikenberry 2011). Or, does liberalism also entail capitalism and democracy, with which China's state capitalism and, especially, its single-party system would clash? Furthermore, while we know human rights represent an important component of the contemporary system of norms, rules, and principles in global governance, is human rights liberal? Recent studies have re-energised such debates (Berger 2023). But the question of which human rights are liberal (e.g. rights to free speech) and which are not (e.g. the right to development) is far from resolved.

Popular media often make the international human rights order sound rather narrow in scope, adding to the ambiguity. For instance, whenever the US is reported to criticise China for violating international human rights law, the criticisms typically concern individual liberties such as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. Similarly, some of the most used human rights indices – for example, the personal integrity score (Cingranelli/Richards 2010), latent human rights score (Fariss 2014), and the freedom indicator by Freedom House – all put heavy emphasis on states' protection of citizens' civil and political rights, partly because many of these indices are based on compilation of accusations of rights violations, which by nature tend to be particular rather than comprehensive.

Instead, we call the rule-based international order the international institutional order (Dai 2020). This order is multi-dimensional; it is composed of not one set of rules of the game but multiple sets across diverse issue areas. Within each issue area, the tenets of the order are not defined by any one particular country; rather, they are codified in international treaties and buttressed by international organisations. The international human rights order consists of international human rights agreements and especially the foundational global human rights treaties in the forum of the United Nations. The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) codifies a wide range of norms and principles, including equality and dignity, freedom and liberty, access to education and work, respect irrespective of gender, ethnicity and religion, and the right to development and environment. Along with the UDHR, two main pillars of international human rights law are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Furthermore, the core of international human rights law consists of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), as well as various conventions aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, including Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Together, the international human rights regime does not simply impose a negative duty on others, particularly states, to refrain from interference or actions that would infringe upon individual liberties. Negative rights are often associated with civil and political rights and include rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from torture or cruel treatment, and the right to a fair trial. Beyond that, the international

human rights regime also imposes a positive obligation on states to fulfil certain needs or entitlements. Positive rights are often associated with economic, social, and cultural rights and include rights such as the right to education, health care, work, and an adequate standard of living.

3 CHINA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE HUMAN RIGHTS ORDER

How does China engage with the international human rights order? Equally importantly, how would one capture that engagement? One way to assess a country's engagement with the international human rights order is to examine the extent to which that country accepts the rules codified in global human rights treaties as legally binding. The Chinese government has expressed its intent to follow the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Over the years, China has endorsed and become a party to many of the most important global human rights treaties, demonstrating a greater commitment to the international human rights order than, by contrast, the United States. China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1980³, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1981⁴, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT) in 1988⁵, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992⁶, the International Covenant on

Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 2001⁷, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008⁸, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) in 2011⁹. Such commitment – accepting human rights treaties as legally binding – is the most direct engagement with the international human rights order, though it does not automatically ensure actual compliance with international human rights law.

Another way to assess a country's engagement with the international human rights order is to examine the extent to which it complies with international human rights law. Many actors contribute to painting a picture of China's human rights practices, with the greatest concerns about China's approach to civil and political rights. Western democracies have criticised China for censorship, suppression of political dissent, and treatment of ethnic minorities, among others. Perhaps not surprisingly, China has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)¹⁰, which addresses issues such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and political participation. China's human rights practices have been scrutinised and debated in prominent international forums such as the UN General Assembly. Furthermore, China's human rights record often attracts the attention of global public opinion through social media, academic research, and public discourse. Human rights activists and researchers further contribute to raising awareness of these issues. The widely used human rights indices – with their heavy emphasis on states' protection of citizens' civil and political rights – often

3 In contrast, the United States is one of only seven countries, including Iran, Sudan, Somalia, Nauru, Palau and Tonga, that have not yet ratified CEDAW. For more details, see Human Rights Watch (2009).

4 ICERD is the oldest of the nine core international human rights treaties and the principal treaty aimed at eliminating racial discrimination globally. The UN General Assembly unanimously adopted ICERD in 1965, and it took effect on January 4, 1969. The United States signed ICERD in 1966 but did not ratify it for nearly three decades – until October 21, 1994. For more details, see Maya K. Watson (2020).

5 The United States ratified CAT in 1994.

6 CRC entered into force in September 1990 and has been ratified by 195 countries, making it the most widely ratified human rights

treaty in the world. Two countries, the United States and Somalia, have not ratified the Convention. For details, see United Nations General Assembly (1989).

7 The United States signed but did not ratify ICESCR.

8 The United States signed but did not ratify CRPD.

9 The United States neither signed nor ratified ICRMW.

10 The US ratified ICCPR in 1992.

rank China among the more problematic. By and large, concerns in the West over China's human rights practices reflect the tension between China's political system as an authoritarian regime and individual liberty that Westerners hold dear. Beyond civil and political rights, comprehensive assessments are lacking, though there has been growing attention to this shortcoming in the literature. Some scholars have noted that social and economic rights have not received adequate attention in constructing human rights indicators (Rosga/Satterthwaite 2009). Some have begun to construct indices, for example, for the right to education (De Beco 2013). There has also been growing attention across the globe to substantive rights such as education and health care, along with efforts to enshrine these rights in national constitutions (Gauri/Brinks 2008). China is cast in a more positive light by these assessments.

International relations and international law scholars have devoted considerable attention to the twin issues of commitment and compliance (Simmons 2013). Neither is a perfect indicator of a state's attitude towards the international human rights order. On the one hand, commitment – as a sovereign decision to be legally bound by human rights treaties – is the most formal indication of a country's attitude towards the international human rights order. But, it may not reflect an “actual” or “true” attitude if the formal declaration is not frequently invoked in practice. On the other hand, compliance – as actual behaviour and societal outcomes in accordance with international human rights law – would indicate substantive, if not formal, endorsement of the international human rights order. But, it is incredibly difficult to attribute whatever we deem as compliance to genuine commitment. Aside from the issue of which rights practices to spotlight and which indices to construct, human behaviour and societal outcomes are a function of much more than treaty ratification.

In the case of China, how should we think about the good record of commitment and the not-so-good record of compliance? Perhaps China's commitment to international human rights treaties was insincere (Hafner-Burton/Tsutsui 2007; Smith-Cannoy 2012). It is also possible that China's endorsement of international human rights norms and principles reflected a genuine aspiration to promote human rights, but political realities interfered and rendered the outcome less than desired. Recall that China ratified many global human rights treaties in the early years as it opened to the world, pursuing economic growth but also political reform. Certainly, there was the hope that after the end of the Cold War, countries like China could become genuine endorsers of international human rights law (Dai 2007; Johnston 2008; Risse 2000; Risse et al. 1999; Simmons 2009). We may never know the original intention, let alone that of the complex government of a huge country that has evolved in unprecedented ways over several decades.

What is evident is that seen through the lens of commitment and compliance, China has been in an awkward place in international human rights governance. While it professes to accept international human rights and principles, China has often been criticised as violating many of the most important ones, especially those emphasised by liberal democracies. Thus, in the area of human rights, China is arguably the least likely to lead in global governance compared to many other areas. This sentiment echoes recent findings that China has been less embedded in the international institutional order in human rights than other issue areas (Dai/Renn 2016). It is important that we consider our findings about China's engagement with the international human rights order against this larger comparative backdrop.

Recognising that China has been in a tricky situation in global human rights governance, we assess China's engagement with the international human rights order through – instead of formal

commitment or practical compliance – how China invokes international human rights norms in recurring practices when interacting with all countries in the world. How China invokes human rights norms likely reflects, to various extents, both its legal commitment and actual practice. To the extent that we can reliably collect all stated positions that China takes when interacting with each and every other country in the world concerning all – rather than selective – rights codified in international human rights law within a clearly defined – rather than ad hoc – scope, we can reliably capture China’s position on the international human rights order. The fact that the action to state one’s position is recurring and is public in front of all countries in the world further enhances the reliability of our depiction. Next, we discuss how the UPR provides an ideal laboratory for this purpose.

4 LABORATORY OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW

The UN human rights regime allows states to socialise through communication, reflection and action on the predominantly normative practices in human rights. In particular, the UN Human Rights Council has set up a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) system that holds member states accountable to their peers for the treatment of the domestic population. The UPR is the comprehensive and elaborate multilateral human rights mechanism where states are the primary actors in reviewing each others’ human rights practices. The formal forum-like peer review system “give[s] equal treatment to all the countries and allow[s] them to exchange best practices” (UN News 2018). This mechanism obligates each country to compile information on its own human rights practices and allows all other countries to review them. The review mechanism in the UPR has the potential to discourage malfeasance through public shaming (Carraro et al. 2019). Moreover, multiple cycles of reviews can reveal changes in practices over time.

Between 2008 and 2021, there were three complete cycles of Universal Periodic Review: Cycle 1 (2008–2012), Cycle 2 (2012–2016), and Cycle 3 (2017–2021). Each cycle lasts about five years, and each of the 193 UN Member States undergoes an interactive review of its human rights situation, with a 100% participation rate so far. During each cycle, it takes about 13 sessions – three sessions each year – to review all countries exactly once. At each session, about 14 countries are reviewed. The timeline of the sessions for the ongoing cycle is publicly available so states can anticipate when they will be under review and prepare accordingly. Typically, a state under review presents a self-report of its human rights practices and is given a chance to explain the actions it has taken, or plans to take, to address issues with human rights. Other countries can then ask questions, make comments, and provide recommendations to the state under review.¹¹ Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations, they tend to use their monitoring power selectively for issues about which they are most concerned. They must reduce the complex reality of human rights conditions in the country under review over a period of five years to a condensed statement. We can infer that recommendations in the UPR address the most important and meaningful problems in the state under review from the perspective of the reviewing state. After the review session, a report is prepared to summarise the actual discussion and is available at the UN Human Rights Council. Recommendations from all sessions can be found on UPR Info (n.d.), covering all three completed cycles.

The UPR provides a useful laboratory to examine how states engage with the international human rights order: which rights they invoke and how consistently they invoke them. Three features

¹¹ Before writing their comments and recommendations, reviewing states are encouraged to meet with NGOs and local stakeholders in the state under review to gather information on the state under review.

of the UPR help us depict states' positions reliably. First, the UPR is an inclusive mechanism where all UN member states participate and give peer reviews to each other, as opposed to experts from non-randomly selected regions making recommendations as in other human rights institutions. Second, the UPR grants states multiple opportunities to articulate their positions in recurring interactions: in each cycle, states have one chance to be reviewed (to be a state under review) and multiple chances to give recommendations to other countries (to be a reviewing state). Third and most importantly, the UPR addresses a holistic set of human rights as codified in all core human rights treaties, heeding the fact that the international human rights order is multi-dimensional; it contrasts the review mechanisms in various treaty organisations that focus on specific rights. Therefore, the UPR mechanism, along with the rich collection of states' statements it has produced, provides an excellent opportunity to study how states distil and communicate their principled engagement with the international human rights order in numerous iterations over a sustained period of time. We capture states' positions on the international human rights order as emerging from their recommendations in the UPR peer review system. In principle, whenever a state is under review, delegations of all other countries can review and issue recommendations. A body of information is made available to reviewing states before they issue their recommendations. It includes factual documents from a report compiled by the state under review, observations and comments compiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights conditions in the state under review, as well as opinions from other stakeholders including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and national human rights institutions. During a typically 3.5-hour review session for each state under review, reviewing states can ask oral or written questions and make recommendations (Bureau of Democracy n.d.).

When making recommendations, reviewing states have broad leeway to choose what human rights topics to address. They can focus on topics where the state under review has done particularly well or badly. In the former case, it plays a cheerleading role to encourage the state under review to continue its practices and keep up the progress. In the latter case, the state under review may feel reluctant to adopt difficult recommendations and commit to implementing them for the next review if it does not see a prospect to improve the situation as the recommendations suggest. Hence, although recommendation is a neutral term, the actual contents of different recommendations range from praise to shaming.

We focus on states' aggregate recommendations when they serve as reviewers in the UPR. Following Rochelle Terman and Zoltán I. Búzás (2021), we conceptualise states' aggregate recommendations as indicative of their relative emphasis on different human rights norms. When they make recommendations to each state under review, the recommendations may not necessarily reflect their genuine views about right or wrong. Indeed, the topics a reviewing state chooses to highlight for a specific state under review may reflect various considerations, such as the area of human rights about which the reviewing state is most concerned, the actual human rights conditions in the state under review, geopolitical relationships between the two (Terman/Byun 2022), other countries' reviews of the state under review, plus additional contextual factors. However, in the aggregate, the reviewing state's recommendations reflect its own vision of the international human rights order. In particular, because we aggregate a reviewing state's recommendations to all other countries in the world, the factors related to any individual state under review do not systematically bias the aggregated position. Furthermore, states can affirm and reaffirm particular human rights norms by devoting more of their recommendations toward those specific norms.

Therefore, a state's recommendations, in aggregate, represent its engagement with the international human rights order. Because this representation is based on regular and recurring practices – involving different states under review and the global audience at the same time – it is more accurate and reliable than reading select official documents and hearing select official speeches.

5 ANALYSIS

We analyse the UPR data compiled by UPR Info, a non-profit organisation that supports access to information for all key stakeholders of the UPR (UPR Info n.d.). The data includes all recommendations during each of the three cycles of the UPR. For each recommendation, we have information about the time of the review session, reviewing states, the state under review, the verb choices used in each recommendation conveying the necessary level of changes, and specific issue(s) addressed among a set of 56 non-mutually exclusive categories hand-coded by UPR Info researchers. Each recommendation may address multiple issues and thus be labelled with multiple tags. The codebook is available to justify why different issue tags are attached to the recommendation (UPR Info 2017). Following Rochelle Terman and Joshua Byun (2022), we cluster the 56 issue tags into 8 issue topics, largely corresponding to the core global human rights treaties. These issue topics are (1) civil and political rights, (2) governance and public services, (3) migrants and workers, (4) physical integrity rights, (5) racial, ethnic and religious minorities, (6) social and economic rights, (7) protection of vulnerable populations, and (8) general and others.¹² In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

After extracting all the topics covered in each recommendation, we create a state-topic vector by grouping the topics from all recommendations made by a reviewing state. Each state-topic vector represents the number of times each topic is highlighted among all recommendations by a reviewing state in each cycle. This way, each reviewing state's position on all human rights norms is translated into a state-topic vector. Accordingly, we can compare China's position on the international human rights order with that of any other country.

5.1 CHINA ON THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ORDER

How does China's stance on the international human rights order look? Figure 1 is a word cloud that sums up China's stance on international human rights. The larger the issue topic appears, the more frequently such a topic is addressed in China's recommendations. When China provides recommendations to other countries through all three cycles, it most often addresses efforts to protect citizens' social and economic rights. Examples of this dimension of human rights include the right to water and the right to education, thus addressing poverty or environmental issues. Next, it addresses the protection of vulnerable populations, including women, children and persons living with disabilities, and the issue of human trafficking. It is worth noting that China so rarely addresses the topic of civil and political rights in its recommendations that this topic does not even appear in the word cloud, while this topic is one of the most classic and essential issues in Western liberal democracies.

¹² See the Appendix for all tags under each of the 8 issue topics.

Figure 1: China's human rights script.

Word cloud of topics of China's recommendations to other countries, all three cycles included



Table 1 presents a summary of the relative weights attached to different categories of rights in China's recommendations over the three cycles. The top three categories of rights China highlights most frequently are consistent across the three cycles: social and economic rights (highlighted in red), protection of vulnerable populations, and physical integrity rights. Furthermore, there is a growing emphasis on social and economic rights over time; in Cycle 3, for example, the mention of this particular dimension of human rights occupies half of the space. By contrast, the topic of civil and political rights, in blue, is hardly addressed.

5.2 CHINA'S STANCE IN COMPARISON

With its vision on the international human rights order described above, is China an outlier on the world stage? We would expect so, at least compared to Western liberal democracies, who have often criticised China for its human rights policies and practices. Table 2 shows the frequency of topics highlighted by G7 countries in their recommendations over the three cycles. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the topic of civil and political rights is higher on the table, occupying a significantly larger space in G7 recommendations than that of

Table 1: Summary of topics in China's recommendations to other countries

Topics	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total Topics
1 Social and economic rights	0.42	0.41	0.5	377
2 Protection of vulnerable populations	0.16	0.22	0.22	180
3 Physical integrity rights	0.13	0.11	0.12	99
4 Race, ethnicity, and religious minority	0.07	0.1	0.08	75
5 Migrants and workers	0.04	0.07	0.05	49
6 General and others	0.14	0.05	0.01	35
7 Public services	0.02	0.04	0.01	21
8 Civil and political rights	0.01	0.01	0	3
9 Total Topics	90	392	357	839
10 (Total Recommendations)	78	305	315	698

Table 2: Summary of topics in G7 countries' recommendations to all other countries

Topics	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total topics
1 Physical integrity rights	0.32	0.33	0.29	4'134
2 Protection of vulnerable populations	0.27	0.27	0.31	3'698
3 Civil and political rights	0.14	0.14	0.16	1'914
4 Public services	0.08	0.07	0.06	938
5 Race, ethnicity, and religious minority	0.06	0.07	0.06	832
6 Social and economic rights	0.04	0.06	0.07	750
7 General and others	0.05	0.04	0.02	469
8 Migrants and workers	0.03	0.03	0.03	423
9 Total topics	4'288	4'989	3'881	13'158
10 (Total recommendations)	3'621	4'027	3'289	10'937

China. Interestingly, however, it is not the most frequently mentioned category of rights. Rather, the G7 countries address the protection of vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights more often. They devote 60% of their recommendations to addressing these two categories of rights. On the other hand, the topic of social and economic rights is near the bottom of the table, occupying about 4–7% of the total topics addressed by G7 countries. Considering that most countries are developing countries, the scant attention this prominent group of developed countries give to development issues is striking.

Does China's position on international human rights resonate among other countries, particularly from the Global South? While the term „Global South“ is defined variably in the literature, we use the term to refer to the developing world. This study includes 151 Global South countries that received development projects funded by Chinese governmental institutions or state-owned enterprises from 2000 to 2017, the period during which most Chinese development aid was granted, according to AidData (2021). Table 3 shows that the collective vision of the Global South with regard to rights is closer to China than the G7. Countries in the Global South give the top priority to the

same three categories of rights that China identifies as most important. They do not prioritise social and economic rights above all other rights as China does. They address social and economic rights in less than 20% of their recommendations, while China addresses development-based rights in 50% of its recommendations. Yet, like China, the Global South address civil and political rights the least. Across three review cycles, there is an increase in the proportion of recommendations that address social and economic rights, but the topic of civil and political rights remains stable at the bottom of the list, with a weight of about 4% concerning this category of rights across three cycles.

These findings do not yield an easy answer in black and white that China is an outlier. First, while often neglected in the literature, a great deal of agreement exists in how countries engage with the international human rights order. Across the globe, countries converge on the importance of protecting vulnerable populations and physical integrity rights, topics most frequently addressed by G7 countries as well as the Global South. China shares that agreement as these topics are among the top three categories of rights that China addresses most often in its recommendations. Second, China stands out in championing social and

Table 3: Summary of topics in Chinese-aid-recipient countries' recommendations to all other countries

Topics	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total Topics
1 Protection of vulnerable populations	0.26	0.29	0.33	16'582
2 Physical integrity rights	0.19	0.21	0.19	10'755
3 Social and economic rights	0.16	0.15	0.18	9'044
4 Public services	0.08	0.08	0.08	4'512
5 Race, ethnicity, and religious minority	0.07	0.08	0.08	4'435
6 Migrants and workers	0.07	0.08	0.07	4'105
7 General and others	0.12	0.07	0.04	3'720
8 Civil and political rights	0.04	0.04	0.04	2'104
9 Total Topics	10'699	22'217	22'341	55'257
10 (Total Recommendations)	9'335	19'343	19'035	47'713

economic rights, devoting, on average, close to 50% of its recommendations to this topic. While the G7 countries clearly do not adhere to this vision, the Global South seems more inclined as they treat this category of rights as among the top three most important categories. Third, China diverges most strikingly from G7 countries, by ranking social and economic rights first and civil and political rights last. By contrast, G7 countries elevate civil and political rights and downplay social and economic rights in their recommendations. Between China and G7 countries, the vision of the Global South is closer to that of China because, unlike G7 countries, the Global South addresses social and economic rights much more often than civil and political rights. In fact, like China, the Global South gives the least attention to civil and political rights among all topics.

5.3 WHEN DOES THE GLOBAL SOUTH MIRROR CHINA'S VISION?

The above analysis suggests that the Global South leans closer to China's stance on international human rights than the G7. However, the Global South's position is not identical to China's. In particular, their recommendations do not prioritise social and economic rights as much as China's.

Interestingly, as shown in Table 4, when countries in the Global South interact directly with China to review human rights conditions and offer recommendations, they echo China's vision more. Recommendations that Chinese development aid recipients offer to China emphasise the same three top topics as China's recommendations as well as their own aggregate recommendations: social and economic rights, physical integrity rights, and the protection of vulnerable populations. Notably, they prioritise social and economic rights above all others, as China does. This category of rights takes centre stage in recommendations provided by the Global South to China as if China's vision of the international human rights order sets the tone for the conversations and interactions. When reviewing China's human rights conditions, the discussions around social and economic rights comprise 30% of the total topics, rising from 33% in Cycle 1 to 38% in Cycle 3. Recipients of Chinese developmental aid do not completely ignore civil and political rights in China. However, they collectively devote less space to this issue, not only as compared to social and economic rights but also over time. The weight attached to civil and political rights has decreased dramatically from 16% in Cycle 1 to 8% in Cycle 3.

Table 4: Summary of topics in Chinese aid-recipient countries' recommendations to China

Topics	Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3	Total topics
1 Social and economic rights	0.33	0.3	0.36	149
2 Physical integrity rights	0.29	0.2	0.14	78
3 Protection of vulnerable populations	0.04	0.15	0.2	75
4 Civil and political rights	0.16	0.17	0.08	54
5 Public services	0.04	0.05	0.08	29
6 General and others	0.11	0.05	0.05	25
7 Migrants and workers	0	0.03	0.06	20
8 Race, ethnicity, and religious minority	0.02	0.04	0.03	15
9 Total topics	45	164	236	445

Might the apparent emphasis on social and economic rights in the recommendations by the Global South to China simply reflect their own vision of the international human rights order? Evidence from Table 3 suggests otherwise. Further analysis of the specific recommendations the Global South made to individual BRICS nations shows that the Global South seems to want to demonstrate their endorsement of what China seeks to champion more strongly when they interact directly with China. Indeed, Table 5 shows a nuanced picture.

The Global South does not prioritise social and economic rights above all in its recommendations to Russia, South Africa, India, or Brazil. They highlight the protection of vulnerable populations as the most important when reviewing these countries, in accordance with their overall recommendations. In contrast, the Global South seems to reserve its emphasis on social and economic rights only when it reviews China and offers recommendations to China.

Table 5: Summary of topics in Chinese aid recipient countries' recommendations to BRICS countries in all three cycles (ordered by China's review topic numbers)

Topics	China	Russia	South Africa	India	Brazil
1 Social and economic rights	149	44	68	53	69
2 Physical integrity rights	78	81	33	59	49
3 Protection of vulnerable populations	75	106	73	77	75
4 Civil and political rights	54	29	0	4	8
6 Public services	29	19	12	16	19
7 General and others	25	28	6	11	2
8 Migrants and workers	20	18	19	3	11
9 Race, ethnicity, and religious minority	15	47	48	16	34

Thus, an important question emerges beyond whether China is an outlier in its stance on the international human rights order: whether China effectively influences others, especially countries in the Global South, in their engagement with that order. While more research is needed, our analysis suggests that the Global South echoes China's vision more than that of the G7's, emphasising social and economic rights much more than civil and political rights. Furthermore, the Global South seems to mirror China's vision even more – prioritising social and economic rights – when they are in direct dialogue with China.

6 CONCLUSION

How does a rising China influence the international order, particularly the international institutional order concerning human rights? Our research offers a more complex view of China's engagement with the international human rights order than the simplistic question of whether China is a revisionist power. Leveraging the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the UN Human Rights Council – a recurring peer-review mechanism – we uncover a previously under-appreciated convergence among all countries in supporting the protection of vulnerable groups (i.e. women and children) and prohibition of torture and other repressive practices against individuals. While China shares that convergence, it champions social and economic rights more prominently but substantially downplays civil and political rights.

If we put China's human rights vision and the G7's on the two ends of a spectrum where the key difference lies in the different weight attached to social and economic rights versus civil and political rights, the Global South leans towards China's position. They place greater emphasis on social and economic rights than civil and political rights. This position is particularly evident in their reviews of China, where a majority of recommendations to

China are about China's recent progress in this category. Further work needs to investigate why, collectively, the Global South is silent on civil and political rights while many are indeed stable democracies. While it is understandable that the need for development is prominent in the Global South, it is nevertheless interesting to see them using the primary forum for human rights to advocate development-based rights. Their focus on development-oriented rights in human rights dialogue raises questions about whether this reflects their own normative stances or China's influence. While our analysis is compatible with the possibility that China's economic clout may extend to shaping how the Global South engages with the international human rights order, more in-depth analysis is needed to investigate how China may leverage its economic leverage in the Universal Periodic Review process.

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APPENDIX I: TAGS UNDER EACH HUMAN RIGHTS TOPIC

1. **Civil and political rights:** “CP rights-general, civil society, elections, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of the press, freedom of movement, human rights defenders”.
2. **Public services:** “corruption, public security, human rights education and training, counter-terrorism, privacy, national human rights institution”.
3. **Migrants and workers:** “asylum-seekers-refugees, freedom of movement, labour, migrants, internally displaced persons”.
4. **Physical integrity rights:** “justice, death penalty, detention, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, human rights violations by state agents, impunity, torture and other CID treatment, disability rights”.
5. **Race, ethnicity and religious minority:** “freedom of religion and belief, minorities, racial discrimination, indigenous peoples, statelessness and the right to nationality”.
6. **Social and economic rights:** “environment, right to land, right to water, economic, social and cultural rights, right to development, poverty, right to education, right to food, right to health, right to housing, ESC rights-general, business and human rights”.
7. **Protection of vulnerable populations:** “disabilities, HIV-Aids, sexual orientation and gender identity, rights of the child, trafficking, women’s rights”.
8. **General and others:** “special procedures, technical assistance and cooperation, UPR process, general, others”.

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