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Nele Noesselt

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## **Chinese Perspectives on International Power Shifts and Sino-EU Relations (2008–2011)**

### **Abstract**

With the beginning of the post-Maoist era, the focus of Chinese foreign policy shifted from ideology and revolution to pragmatism and reform. Chinese scholars in the field of International Relations (IR) are now encouraged to develop abstract scientific analyses of China's international environment. This requires not only the handling of IR theories and methods of foreign policy analysis (FPA), but also a sound knowledge of the organizational structures and policy principles of other states.

The professionalization of Chinese IR research does not automatically imply a convergence of "Chinese" and "Western" IR research. Chinese IR publications continue to construct the world from a Chinese point of view. To examine the views of China's leading IR scholars on the current state and the future of the international system, this paper conducts a discourse analysis of China's core IR journals. In order to illustrate the continuity and (gradual) changes in China's perspectives on its international environment, the empirical part of the paper focuses on China's reevaluation of the EU in the international context and as the PRC's strategic partner. This evaluation is based on articles published between 2008 (the outbreak of the financial crisis) and 2011.

**Keywords:** China, Sino-EU relations, financial crisis, worldviews, International Relations (IR) theory

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# **Chinese Perspectives on International Power Shifts and Sino-EU Relations (2008–2011)**

**Nele Noesselt**

## **Article Outline**

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Old and New Approaches to Chinese Foreign Policy
- 3 Chinese Visions of the International System and Sino-EU Relations
- 4 Conclusion

## **1 Introduction**

For quite a long time, China's relationship with the EU was described as a "secondary relationship" (Yahuda 1994), relative to Sino-US relations, or as that of "distant neighbours" (Kapur 1990). This classification persisted as the general view among political scientists and area specialists until the year 2003, when the PRC issued its policy paper on its relationship with the EU (MOFA 2003). The international academic community reacted by predicting the emergence of a new Sino-European axis in world politics (Shambaugh 2004; Scott 2007).<sup>1</sup>

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1 Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at the ECPR General Conference 2009 and the WISC Third Global International Studies Conference 2011. The author would like to thank Patrick Koellner, Dirk Nabers, Anja Jetschke and the conference participants for their valuable comments.

From the Chinese side, the strategic partnership was described in the following words: “There is no fundamental conflict of interests between China and the EU and neither side poses a threat to the other. However, given their differences in historical background, cultural heritage, political system and economic development level, it is natural that the two sides have different views or even disagree on some issues” (MOFA 2003). The Chinese policy paper did not develop its own interpretation of the Sino-EU partnership, nor did it provide a vision for future interactions. However, it is obvious that the paper reflected China’s interpretation of the EU and its role in the international system. This ideational level – that is, the ideas rooted in China’s political culture and shaped by its historical past – is nevertheless not openly exposed to the international public.

As earlier works on China’s perceptions of the world, bilateral relations and selected states have shown, China’s interpretations of its international environment are not static, but rather subject to dynamic changes.<sup>2</sup> One would thus expect that changes at the subsystemic level – modernization and reform – and power shifts in international politics – the financial crisis, China’s rise – might directly correlate with a readjustment of China’s perspectives on the international system.

This paper analyses China’s perspectives on the EU based on an examination of publications by Chinese political scientists for the period 2008–2011. The analysis is divided into three parts. In the first section of the paper, I discuss the main approaches to the analysis of China’s external relations and outline the methodological controversies in foreign policy analysis (FPA) regarding the measurement of perceptions and ideas. After briefly outlining the methodological traps of sociocognitive models in FPA, I propose that the arguments documented in the writings of China’s political scientists be classified not as “perceptions” but as discourses. Inspired by constructivist assumptions, I postulate that these discourses contribute to the causal construction of the world from a “Chinese” perspective.

In the subsequent empirical section, I conduct a discourse analysis of three leading Chinese academic journals (*Contemporary International Relations*, *International Studies*, *European Studies*) in order to examine China’s view of the international system and the Sino-EU partnership, and the role it attributes to the EU.

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2 Traditionally, research on the partnership between the EU and China has focused on policy papers and official political statements. Quite often, research has been limited to a mere enumeration of the history of (recent) events. Only a few articles have tried to understand the underlying dynamics of the Sino-EU partnership by focusing on the level of ideas and perceptions (Men 2006; Geeraerts 2007; Shambaugh 2008); however, none of these studies goes beyond the year 2006.

## 2 Old and New Approaches to Chinese Foreign Policy

Research on Chinese foreign policy can be roughly subdivided into the following categories: external/systemic approaches, domestic/societal approaches and multidimensional-linkage approaches (Kim 1998: 11–27; Zhao 1996: 9–15).<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with positivist assumptions, the external/systemic approach identifies the structure of the international system as the independent variable that determines the behavior of a state vis-à-vis other states or international institutions. In the time of the Cold War, China's foreign relations were analyzed in the context of the systemic antagonism between the US and the USSR. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the transformation of the Eastern European socialist states, unipolarity and nonpolarity have constituted the theoretical pillars of the international system. Whereas (neo)realist analyses predict an inevitable conflict between the US, the only remaining superpower after 1989–1991, and the rising PRC, liberal approaches assume that globalization and growing economic interdependence will strengthen cooperation (Johnston 1998).

The domestic/societal approach tries to open the black box of the Chinese state to examine the impact of subsystemic developments on the PRC's formulation of foreign policy. Those studies that focus on sociopolitical development in the domestic context analyze the impact of the Maoist mass campaigns, especially the Cultural Revolution. Others examine the process and structures of foreign policy formulation and outline the gradual transition towards consultation and collective leadership in the post-Maoist period. In general, China's economic reforms and the related, and growing, need for resources are regarded as determinants of China's external relations (Bachmann 1998). All of these studies adhere to the generalized assumption that "foreign policy formulation will increasingly resemble domestic economic policy formulation" and that "foreign policy is a key component of the resources available to the leaders of major powers in building their domestic authority" (*ibid.*: 59).<sup>4</sup>

Influenced by Rosenau's (1969) linkage theory, Zhao Quansheng (1996) has proposed integrating these two approaches and basing the analysis of Chinese foreign policy on a combination of the constituents of foreign policy at the macro level, which include international (structure/system) and domestic (society/institutions) factors, and of the determining factors at the micro level, which include the personal convictions and calculations of the political decision-makers.

All these approaches have one thing in common: China's foreign policy remains somewhat opaque. Due to the lack of information concerning the decision-making processes and functional mechanisms inside the system (Ng-Quinn 2004: 25), the external relations of

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3 Multiple factors impact China's foreign policy formulation. Due to the lack of information on the process itself, most research focuses on the general responsibilities of party institutions (Lu, Ning 2001) or on the linkages between the party-state and military organs in the drafting of China's foreign policy (Cheung 2001).

4 For a comprehensive overview of the domestic sources of Chinese foreign policy in selected case studies see also Lai (2010), Li (2009), Hao and Lin (2005).

“closed systems” such as the PRC are still a rather undertheorized domain of FPA. Instead of developing new analytical frameworks to cover the varieties of foreign policy processes in authoritarian systems, most studies have limited themselves to historical accounts and summaries of the official political statements (Hunt 1996). These approaches were reasonable in the Maoist era, when access to information on Chinese foreign policy was restricted and mainly consisted of official statements from the political elites and the newspapers published by the party-state. Since the late 1970s, however, the situation has changed; (selected) archives have been opened to the public and additional information can be gathered through interviews with people involved in the decision-making processes (Bachmann 1998: 34).

Along with the above-outlined studies on the structural constraints and material sources of Chinese foreign policy, additional attempts to understand the calculations and interpretations that underlie China’s positioning in international affairs, which began to emerge in the reform period, have been based on a close reading of think-tank publications. This new stream of research, which focuses particularly on the Chinese elites’ interpretations and “perceptions” of the international system, is generally grouped under the domestic/societal approach to foreign policy analysis (Deng and Wang 2005: 7).

Think tanks have played a central role in the Chinese foreign policy process since the founding of the PRC. The “old” think tanks mainly fulfilled the function of legitimizing the Chinese party-state. However, due to the ongoing reform process since 1978, Chinese think tanks have undergone a restructuring: Young, polyglot scholars with international university degrees are hired; think tanks try to establish contacts with research institutes abroad and to organize joint conferences.<sup>5</sup> However, the interplay between think tanks and policy formulation is still not exposed to the general public. Contrary to European think tanks, which influence the policy process by means of lobbying or policy consultation, the power and impact of Chinese think tanks derives from their organizational linkages with the state apparatus (Zhu 2011: 29). Three types of think tanks can be identified: the think tanks of the State Council, the think tanks of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, and university think tanks (Shambaugh 1991: 8–9). Those Chinese IR scholars who are located at one of these institutions have a dual function as researchers and as advisors to the political elites. As there has been a clear shift, in the post-Maoist period, from the personalized state-centric decision-making of the Maoist era to collective leadership and consultation, the opinions of researchers and of advisors to the political decision-makers have become a crucial element in China’s international positioning strategy.

Research on Chinese think tanks and academic publications by Chinese scholars began to flourish in the late 1970s, when the opening up of archives and the possibility of accessing *neibu* publications – analyses and statements originally intended for internal circulation –

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5 The trend towards professionalism in Chinese foreign policy decision-making has been discussed in detail by Lampton (2001: 5–12).



provided new (retrospective) insights into the inner dynamics of China's foreign policy decision-making (ibid.: 27–28). The interpretation of these materials is quite a challenging endeavor: Shambaugh has made the caveat that the “perceptions” documented in Chinese academic journals do not automatically mirror the “real” beliefs of their authors. Due to the lack of objective methods to measure “perceptions,” Shambaugh (ibid.: 5) has introduced the term “articulated perceptions.” These include the author's interpretations of the past, analyses of the current state of affairs and predictions about future development.<sup>6</sup> “Articulated perceptions” are not automatically converted into foreign policy decisions. Nonetheless, given the organizational embeddedness of the think-tank researchers within the architecture of the Chinese party-state, Shambaugh (ibid.: 28–29) postulates that the academic publications of Chinese IR scholars (referred to as the “influential elite”) have a decisive impact on China's political decision-makers.

If the assumption that the analyses provided by research institutes influence the political elite's foreign policy decision-making is correct, a close reading of think-tank publications should bring more light into the darkness of China's strategic calculations in the international context.

## 2.1 Methodological Controversies

During the Maoist era, articles by Chinese IR scholars were dominated by “ideological concepts;” even after the beginning of reform and opening up they continued to reflect a Marxist-Leninist understanding of history and world politics. Relying on normative, ideological frameworks, these articles constructed the world from a “Chinese” point of view (Friedrich 2000: 43). Since the 1990s, however, such ideological frameworks have been replaced in a step-by-step manner by theory-guided research. Although Marxist paradigms persist, many younger scholars have turned to IR theories like realism, liberalism and constructivism to interpret China's international environment and its bilateral relations. The majority of IR scholars, who are not only able to follow the English-language IR debate but have also often studied at a university in the US or Europe, rely on (neo)realist approaches (Qin 2009: 192). Although the legacy of historical and dialectical materialism is still visible in “official” political discourses, an increasing number of Chinese scholars engage in critical, theory-guided

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6 In the 1990s, the concept of “articulated perceptions” was transferred to the study of Sino-EU relations. Friedrich (2000: 43) postulates that the “articulated perceptions” in Chinese publications on the EU and international politics do not describe the world “as it is,” but rather the world as it “should be”: In the 1980s and 1990s, Maoist models of the world order (intermediate zones; Three World Theory) no longer served as the guiding principles of Chinese foreign policy. “Articulated perceptions” provided a way to fill the ideological vacuum with more abstract concepts like multipolarity. However, these concepts still presented a “Chinese” vision of idealized world politics and did not derive from a critical evaluation of the international system.

discussion of the current international constellations and dive under the surface of the “official,” formalized IR terminology.

Scholars specialized in the field of Chinese foreign policy have generally agreed with the new consensus that although “China’s government pursues its goals with basic rationality” (Christensen, Johnston and Ross 2006: 379), one should not “simply apply abstract models to China without attention to the specific historical, domestic, and ideational context within which Chinese elites pursue [their] goals” (ibid.: 380; emphasis added).

Analyses of think-tank publications on Sino-EU relations help to deconstruct the ideational context of Chinese foreign policy. “Perceptions” are no longer identified as part of the political elites’ belief system, but rather as elements of the Chinese “worldview.” This theoretical approach is based on the constructivist assumption of codetermination between agents and structures. Worldviews and national interests thus have to be regarded as context-dependent variables (Geeraerts 2007: 4–5).

However, the role of “perceptions” is also highly contested. Criticism has been raised with regard to the methods used to collect (reliable) data on “perceptions.” Although newspapers, especially those from the Maoist era, document the official view of the party-state, there is no guarantee that this view can be equated with the perceptions of the political decision-makers. Statements in the newspapers may be instrumentalized for propaganda purposes and for the post hoc legitimization of political acts (Ng-Quinn 2004: 28). In addition, although culture, ideology and idiosyncrasy are generally identified as constitutive elements of Chinese “perceptions,” they are not measurable in abstract, quantifiable terms. Furthermore, perceptions, which represent the synthesis of these elements, are “not (...) static, but in constant interaction with the empirical environment” (ibid.: 36). Given the lack of reliable empirical information about the domestic and systemic levels of the PRC’s foreign policy decision-making process, Ng-Quinn (ibid.: 50) proposes a research design that starts with the “observable factors,” that is, the international system and the power matrix of international politics.

Instead of turning back to the international/structural dimension of FPA, it is possible to overcome the methodological shortcomings of perception-based studies through the use of discourse analysis. In contrast to early studies on the role of perceptions in Sino-EU relations, which outlined a dichotomy between the “real” world and the “articulated perceptions” of the Chinese elites, (post-positivist) discourse analysis starts from the assumption that actors not only perceive the world, but also “constitute the world by their beliefs” (Larsen 1997: 9). Language is seen not as a neutral medium that conveys meaning, but as “a medium with its own dynamics” (ibid.: 13). This implies that it is not possible “to ‘read’ the beliefs and psychological mechanisms directly from the sources” (ibid.: 9).

In the discourse-theoretical sense, the interpretations of the Sino-EU relationship documented in Chinese academic publications contribute to the construction of the world from a Chinese perspective. These “worldviews” have two functions: in their first (ontological) function, they “do not reflect the world (...) they re-present it, not only constraining our vision but

also enabling us to develop a language of concepts and terms that in turn make it possible to talk intelligibly about IR" (Griffiths 2007: 1); in their second function, these worldviews "provide the basis for judging and prescribing" the international environment (ibid.).

## 2.2 Think-Tank Publications on Sino-EU Relations

Earlier studies on Chinese "perceptions" and "images" related to the Sino-EU partnership (Friedrich 2000; Men 2006)<sup>7</sup> were based on the following think-tank publications:

- The journal *Contemporary International Relations* (*Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*), published by the Chinese Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) in Beijing. CICIR is grouped directly under the State Council and is ranked China's number one policy think tank. Its main focus is research and intelligence analysis (Shambaugh 2011: 360, 361). The first issue of the journal was published in 1981.
- The journal *International Studies* (*Guoji Wenti Yanjiu*), issued by the Chinese Institute of International Studies (CIIS). This think tank was originally established as the Institute of International Relations in 1956 and is affiliated with the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Since the merger of the CIIS and the China Center for International Studies (CCIS) in 1998, the institute's influence on China's foreign policy has grown continuously (Bondiguel and Kellner 2010: 6; Shambaugh 2011: 361). *International Studies*, published as a bimonthly journal since 2000, covers current events in international politics and is less dedicated to theoretical research.
- In addition to the CICIR and the CIIS, both of which are categorized as State Council think tanks, a third nonuniversity think tank with strong regional expertise on Europe is the Center for European Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Set up in 1981, three years after the CASS was established, the institute started with a specialization in Western European politics (Friedrich 2000: 75). In the mid-1990s it was reorganized to cover Europe (West/East) as well as the EU. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences edits the only journal specialized in EU politics: *European Studies* (*Ouzhou Yanjiu*).<sup>8</sup> It covers the institutional development of the EU, the European integration process, case studies on selected political issues (law, social policy) and the EU's policy foundations.

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7 Friedrich's study covers the period between 1981–1983 (when the "new" Chinese IR journals were first issued) and 1995 (when the European Commission published its first common China policy). Due to the time frame selected, Friedrich's data set consisted of two separate groups of articles: analyses of the international system published in the IR journals, and studies on Europe and the European Community published in China's area studies journal *Europe*.

Men Jing focuses on journal publications between 2000 and 2005, because, in her understanding, this was the period during which "EU-China relations developed most rapidly" (Men 2006: 792).

8 Between 1983 and 1993 the journal was published under the title *Western European Studies* (*Xi'ou Yanjiu*); in 1993, due to the transformation of Europe after the end of the Cold War and the establishment of the European Union, it was renamed *Europe* (*Ouzhou*). Since 2003 it has been called *European Studies* (*Ouzhou Yanjiu*) (Men 2006: 791).

- Men Jing (2006) also refers to the journal *Seeking Truth* (*Qiushi*), a CCP journal that is written in the formalized party terminology and provides policy-related analyses. In the issues between 2008 and 2011, the journal carried only one single article on the EU, or more precisely on the sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone (Zhao, Zongbo 2011). *Seeking Truth* has therefore been excluded from this paper's data collection.

The articles published in *Contemporary International Relations* and *International Studies*, at least during the period covered in this paper (2008–2011), are primarily based on English-language news reports and include references to analyses of the international system by American scholars. Their argumentation is built upon a profound knowledge of the history of events and the dominant interpretations and discourses linked to them. The overall majority of the articles use the terminology of the international IR debate. However, some articles also integrate terms and concepts from the IR debates among Chinese scholars, which are deeply rooted in Marxist philosophy. In this Marxist research tradition, the developmental stages of world politics are subdivided into “eras” (*shidai*). Each era has its distinct topics and paradigms. The Maoist era, for example, was shaped by “war and revolution,” which were replaced by “peace and development” in the early reform era. These slogans reflect a visionary interpretation of how the world should be organized: China officially favors a “democratization of international relations” that would contribute to the “multipolarization” of the international system.<sup>9</sup>

The journal *European Studies* is different from the above IR journals in the sense that it tries to “understand” the organizational principles of the EU and documents the “European” perspective. For the period under study (2008–2011), most issues of the journal were dedicated to a special topic (Lisbon Treaty, financial crisis). The journal invites contributions from European scholars and often publishes summaries and compilations of papers from joint Sino-EU academic workshops. In general, the journal does not discuss the role of the EU in China's foreign policy or the future of the Sino-EU partnership. As an area studies journal, it provides information about the EU that is taken from official EU documents.

European studies was established as an independent academic discipline in China in the mid-1990s and was financially supported by the EU.<sup>10</sup> For the period 2004–2008, the EU not only provided the funding to maintain the 15 already existing European studies centers, but also promoted the establishment of new centers and research programs with 10 million euros.<sup>11</sup> The main motivation behind these efforts can be found in the EU's Asia and China policy papers, in which the point “to raise the EU's image abroad” is mentioned as a basic principle of the EU's strategic agenda (COM 1995: 279).

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9 The “official” terminology is used (and defined) in China's white papers on national defense.

10 For an overview of the historical development of European studies in China see also Dai (2008: 105–125).

11 Onliene: <[http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/case-studies/china\\_higher-education\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/documents/case-studies/china_higher-education_en.pdf)>.

With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that the views expressed in the *European Studies* journal are similar to those of discussions conducted inside the EU. There have been only a few exceptions: In 2009, the Center for European Studies at CASS edited a special issue of *European Studies* entitled “Sixty Years of China-Europe Relations.”<sup>12</sup> This issue included diplomatic statements by Chinese officials as well as academic contributions by famous Chinese EU scholars. It began with an address by China’s foreign minister, Yang Jiechi (2009), and a statement on the “new phase of China-Europe relations” from the deputy foreign minister, Zhang Zhijun (2009). Both articles outlined the generally peaceful and cooperative nature of the relationship between China and Europe. The PRC reconfirmed its support for the European integration process and committed itself to the idea of a long-term strategic partnership. However, these statements also referred to “different” and “conflicting” views in some areas of the partnership. These differences – resulting from the differences between China and Europe in terms of ideology, historical and cultural traditions, and their levels of economic development – were, however, regarded as minor obstacles (Yang 2009). In contrast, the controversy over Tibet and human rights issues (2008), the withholding of recognition of China as a market economy, the continuation of the EU’s arms embargo, and related frictions were classified as asymmetries that impeded a deepening of the strategic partnership (Zhang, Zhijun 2009; Ma 2009; Guan 2009). Ding Yifan (2009) interprets the twists and turns of China-Europe relations between 2005 and 2009 as the result of failed strategic expectations on both sides. He argues that because China did not transform its system as demanded and expected by the EU, the European side took steps that hurt China’s key national interests. According to Ding, a new stage of cooperation can only be reached if the EU restrains from normative wishful thinking. Tian (2009) further elaborates on the meaning of ideas in Sino-EU relations and outlines the divergences between China and Europe in terms of their “worldviews” and their interpretations of the international system.

Nonetheless, the “official narrative” is still as follows: The Sino-EU relationship is developing relatively smoothly, at least in comparison to the PRC’s relations with the US. There are neither fundamental conflicts of interest nor historical cleavages (Ding, Yuanhong 2009). In general, China’s leading EU scholars still conclude that frictions and controversies in the Sino-EU partnership are of minor importance compared to the shared interest of China and the EU in solving regional and global issues and engaging in bilateral trade (Feng, Zhongping 2009).

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12 Official diplomatic contacts between the PRC and the European Community were first set up in 1975; the year 2009 was therefore the thirty-fourth anniversary of official relations. From the Chinese perspective, however, Europe has always been integrated into China’s analysis and interpretation of world politics (see for example Mao’s concept of the intermediate zones and his Three World Theory). The heading of the special issue signals that it presents a “Chinese” understanding of the PRC’s relations with Europe.

### 3 Chinese Visions of the International System and Sino-EU Relations

#### 3.1 Power Shifts and the EU's International Status in the Shadow of the Financial Crisis

For the initial years of the twenty-first century, Chinese IR scholars have identified two turning points in international politics. Both are related to the distribution of power resources among the actors in the international system. The first, 9/11, is regarded as the beginning of a new conceptualization of the global order. Whereas “polarity” and “nonpolarity” are the dominant terms in the theoretical debates in the West, the reference model for Chinese IR scholars is captured with the slogan “one superpower, many great powers” (Lin 2011b: 34–35). The second, the international financial crisis, is regarded as representing another major challenge to the existing international structure (Wang and Zu 2010). With respect to the post-crisis configuration of the global order, Chinese scenarios predict a gradual transition from unipolarity to a multipolar, multi-actor structure. Great powers will continue to play a central role, but power will shift towards the non-Western, Asian part of the world. The late twentieth century's global antagonism between North and South will be replaced by a dichotomy between Western and non-Western regions (Lin 2011a: 43). This dichotomy, according to Chinese forecasts, will, however, not exhibit the overt power competition seen between the old power centers, but, in official Chinese IR terminology, follow the basic principles of peace and development and rely on cooperation and coordination (Liu 2009: 23–24).

With regard to the EU, most Chinese analyses draw a rather pessimistic picture. Due to external challenges such as the financial crisis and internal obstacles such as growing discontent on the part of European citizens, the EU's international influence will decline and it will resort to market protectionism and seclusion (Lin 2011a: 45). Pessimism is also expressed concerning the (late) ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. In 2008 the rejection of the reform treaty by the Irish referendum sparked a debate among Chinese IR scholars over the state of the integration process and the future role of the EU in the international system. The democracy deficit, the lack of trust in and support for the EU on the part of European citizens, developmental differences between northern and southern European states, and the discrepancies between old (“Western”) and new (“Eastern”) Europe are seen as general, systemic obstacles to the integration process. Ireland's “no” to the Lisbon Treaty is regarded as a manifestation of these prevailing and persistent internal conflicts (Zhang, Jian 2008).

According to Lin Limin, Europe is currently undergoing its third all-encompassing restructuring process since 1945. The first one took place after the end of the Second World War with the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, and the second took place in 1991 with the end of the Cold War. The main readjustment now is, as Lin Limin stresses, the reconfiguration of the EU's external relations with Russia and China. Due to the financial crisis, the interdependence in the Sino-EU partnership has shifted in favor of the PRC. Instead of formulating unilateral demands, the EU can only try to convince the PRC to support the crisis-hit European economies (Lin 2011a: 45).

Zhao Ke, a specialist on Sino-EU relations affiliated with the CASS, stresses the opportunities for cooperation and coordination between China and the EU in the reform of the international financial system (Zhao, Ke 2011). He assumes a convergence of strategic interests. The EU is demanding new control and regulatory mechanisms for the international financial system; this demand is basically backed by the Chinese, as the PRC needs a stable international environment in order to maintain its high-speed economic growth. Zhao's remarks definitely do not represent his personal views alone: the bilateral "consensus" concerning the reform of the international financial system<sup>13</sup> was reported in the Chinese media after the Sino-European business and trade talks that were held in Beijing in December 2010 (*ibid.*: 56).

It is not the EU but rather Germany that Zhao ranks as the most powerful EU member state, which has become the advocate and representative of the euro in relations with China (*ibid.*: 59–60). This explains China's growing interest in strengthening its relations with Germany while also maintaining contacts with the EU as an integrated actor.

Until 2008, the Chinese vision of a multipolar world order involved five powers: the US, the EU, Japan, China and Russia (Qiao 2008: 33). The debt crisis in the US has opened a window of opportunity for China: it might allow China to finalize its "peaceful rise" – that is, to expand its international influence without being drawn into a struggle for hegemony. According to Qiao (*ibid.*: 35), China, Europe/the EU, Russia, India and other rising economies in the non-Western hemisphere are poised to become the architects of the new economic and political order in the international system.

The IR Study Group at Qinghua University has introduced a more differentiated model. Rather than treating Europe as an integrated actor, they have focused on the role of those European states that are classified as the main power centers of the European continent: Great Britain, France and Germany (IR Study Group 2008). Instead of the "new" pentapolar pattern outlined by Qiao, this framework mirrors the former structure (US, Europe, Russia, Japan, China) but enlarges it into a heptapolar model ("Europe" is represented by its three most powerful member states; India has been added as a representative of the new rising economies) (*ibid.*).

Qin Yaqing (2008: 1), in contrast, predicts the formation of a tripolar world, with the poles consisting of the US, the EU and China. Jin Canrong (2009: 17), one of China's leading America watchers, contradicts this model and postulates that the US will maintain its status as the world's only superpower. However, given the relative decline of the US and the EU's integration dilemmas, Jin and Liu (2010: 6) postulate that the PRC should nonetheless reconsider its international position and adapt its foreign policy to the changes in the international environment.

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13 The new financial order, which China favors, would require the replacement of the US dollar with a supranational reference currency.

Chu Shulong's (2009: 10) comments point in the same direction: he comes to the conclusion that the international status of the US, Europe and Japan has not declined, but he also documents an increase in relative power among the rising economies China, India and Brazil. Russia's economy, according to Chu Shulong, has been deeply injured by the financial crisis, and Russia has not been able to recover or to maintain its international power status. Like Jin Canrong, Chu forecasts a gradual rapprochement between the US and China in international affairs that will have a direct impact on the US-EU and the Sino-EU partnerships.

Feng Shaolei (2011) opposes the Sino-US centered model and the pentapolar model and constructs a new strategic triangle (China, the US, Russia) for the post-Cold War world. Although he agrees with the scholars quoted above that the international system is shifting from a bipolar to a multipolar structure, he conceives of the world as being dominated by the strategic alliances of the "old" power centers.

Overall, however, China-US relations are given priority in Chinese academics' forecasts regarding future global politics. The EU or single European member states are included in these scenarios, but the Sino-EU partnership still ranks second to the Sino-US axis (Guo et al. 2009; see also this paper's appendixes).<sup>14</sup>

### 3.2 The "New" Sino-EU Partnership

In his retrospective on the development of Sino-EU relations in the twenty-first century, Zhou Hong (head of the European Studies Center at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) differentiates between a period of strategic cooperation – the "honeymoon period" – of Sino-EU relations (2001–2005) and a second period of growing mistrust (Zhou 2011).

The joint EU-China satellite navigation program, initiated in 2002, and the publication of the Chinese and EU policy papers on the Sino-EU partnership in late 2003 illustrate how bilateral ties were deepened at the beginning of the new millennium (ibid.: 34–35). From the Chinese perspective, the strategic honeymoon did not last long. After the PRC's accession to the WTO, competition between China and the EU increased dramatically. The EU ultimately reacted by reformulating its common China strategy in 2006; the new strategy demanded that China take on more responsibility in global issues. The confrontation over the handling of the riots in Tibet in the run-up to the Olympic Games in Beijing also caused a deterioration in the bilateral partnership (ibid.: 35). When the *Power Audit of EU-China Relations* (Fox and Godement 2009), a policy report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), demanded an end to the EU's "unconditional engagement" with China in order to

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14 As the figures in the appendix illustrate, Chinese IR journals are primarily concerned with Sino-US relations and US politics. Interest in Russia has declined since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, but it still ranks among the three bilateral relationships covered most often in Chinese IR research. The significance attributed to the China-EU partnership and the China-Russia partnership has changed over time – to explain these shifts, additional qualitative analyses (which surpass the scope of this paper) would have to be conducted.



defend the EU's normative interests and values, this was met with severe criticism from Chinese scholars (Zhou 2011: 36).

Although the political constellations and trade interactions between China and the EU did not undergo any major transition between 2003 and 2008, "erroneous cognitions," that is, mutual threat perceptions and misunderstandings, led to a cooling down of the strategic partnership (Zhou 2011). The key reason for the increasing tensions, according to Chinese EU scholars, lies in the negative images that have been articulated by influential EU elites with regard to China (Zhou 2011: 40; Ye 2011: 3). To avoid the spread of such negative sentiments and to generate sympathy for China's national interests, policy advisors have proposed strengthening the PRC's public diplomacy mechanisms with regard to Europe (Song et al. 2011).

According to the arguments made in the Chinese academic articles analyzed for this paper, the EU's "perceptions" of China are linked to the power shifts in the global context and the progress of China's (re)emergence as a central player in world affairs.<sup>15</sup> In addition to such external factors, however, a number of internal EU structures and mechanisms are also seen as further constraints to the EU's China approach:

The EU's foreign relations were restructured by the Lisbon Treaty, which was adopted in December 2009. The new mechanisms and responsibilities of the EU's organs and representatives are intended to guarantee a more coherent position in the EU's relations with other countries and in global affairs. When the Lisbon Treaty finally entered into force, it was generally regarded as a breakthrough in the European integration process (Xing 2011: 32). However, the euphoric view regarding the EU did not last for long. For Chinese scholars, the developments after the outbreak of the financial crisis once more revealed the internal controversies among and inside the EU member states concerning the constitutionalization of the integration process (2008/2009). Chinese IR journals also dealt with the EU's democracy deficit. Chinese analysts stated that this deficit would not manifest itself in the form of challenges to the EU's supranational institutions and procedures, but that it would impede the further consolidation of a common European identity. As a political entity is only regarded as legitimate if it is accepted and supported by its citizens, Chinese scholars have identified the latest readjustments of the EU as steps to reaffirm the regional integration process with the final goal of avoiding a governance crisis (Lu and Heng 2008).

Ye Jiang argues that the meaning of the EU's organizational restructuring for the future of Sino-EU relations should not be underestimated. The strengthening of the rights and responsibilities of the European Parliament might pose new obstacles to the deepening of the bilateral partnership. Ye postulates that the European Parliament's views on foreign policy

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15 The December 2010 "Ashton Report" on the EU's strategic partnerships, which stressed the need for cooperation on international security and global issues, upgraded China's status in the EU's external relations (online: <[www.europolitics.info/europolitics/ashton-to-report-on-strategic-partnerships-art290508-46.html](http://www.europolitics.info/europolitics/ashton-to-report-on-strategic-partnerships-art290508-46.html)>). Chinese commentaries on the report paid special attention to Ashton's statement that China, the US and the EU should set up a trilateral dialogue system (Feng, Zhongping 2011: 3).

issues are shaped by the prevailing public opinions inside the EU member states (Ye 2011: 4). If this is true, the fact that, according to Ye, the most central EU member states hold a rather unfavorable view of China might cause further frictions and confrontations in the strategic partnership (*ibid.*:4–5).

Since 2007 the European Parliament has repeatedly criticized China for its noncompliance with internationally agreed-upon norms. Criticism has been expressed regarding the human rights situation, the Tibet issue, the handling of the unrest in Xinjiang, and China's relations with African autocracies. In all of these cases, the parliament wanted European governments to confront China with their demands and to announce sanctions in the case of rule violations (*ibid.*: 5). Although the instruments of the EU's China policy are seen to be soft and not very strongly influenced by normative principles, Chinese scholars anticipate that the EU will further revise its foreign policy with respect to the rising powers (BRICS) due to the pressures of the financial crisis. The EU, according to Ye, is now pushing the rising powers to take on more responsibility in global affairs (*ibid.*: 5–6).<sup>16</sup>

According to Chinese analysts, the EU's China policy since the outbreak of the financial crisis can be characterized as taking a pragmatic economic approach (Jin, Ling 2011; Feng, Zhongping 2010; Feng, Zhongping 2011: 4).<sup>17</sup> Those Chinese scholars and policy advisors who adhere to a rational choice reading of Sino-EU relations interpret this new orientation in the EU's China policy as being favorable to China's economic interests. However, they also note that the EU will be more concerned with the growing trade imbalance and unsolved frictions in the field of economic relations (Feng, Zhongping 2010: 16).

#### 4 Conclusion

The professionalization of IR research in post-Mao China does not automatically imply the convergence of "Chinese" and "Western" IR research. Chinese IR publications continue to construct the world from a Chinese perspective. The discourses documented in Chinese IR journals reflect the educational background of the author (language skills, training at US/European universities) and his/her integration into the "Chinese" IR discussion. The field of post-Maoist IR research is highly fragmented and consists of various, competing theoretical traditions. Regardless of their choice of theoretical framework, however, Chinese IR researchers' interpretation of international politics and China's international relations is de-

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16 Ye (2011: 6) remarks that the US factor continues to play a crucial role in the Sino-EU partnership. The EU still depends on NATO for its defense, but the post-9/11 controversies, as Ye Jiang outlines, over the duties and responsibilities of the transatlantic defense alliance have revealed growing discrepancies between the US's unilateralist orientation and the EU's quest for an independent European defense policy (*ibid.*).

17 In June 2010, the British government published its first policy paper on its relations with the PRC. The paper referred to China as an economic and political power in global affairs, and thus documented a reappraisal of China's international role and its status in global affairs (Feng, Zhongping 2011: 2).

terminated by their geocultural background. As can be deduced from Chinese IR publications, there is no longer a single unified orthodox framework but a variety of sometimes competing, sometimes complementary views that all contribute to the formation of a distinctive “Chinese” perspective on world politics.

In general, Chinese area studies journals (for example, *European Studies*) do not follow a distinctive “Chinese” approach. Chinese IR publications, by contrast, have a clear “national” connotation, even though many Chinese scholars see themselves as working within the tradition of mainstream IR theories such as realism or liberalism. Their research notes and articles reflect China’s domestic constellations and national core interests as well as its position and status in international politics.

China’s core IR journals evaluate the partnership between the EU and China from two points of view:

- 1) Starting from the assumption that the financial crisis has triggered a reshuffling of power capacities in international politics, they envision a nonunipolar future world order. In this model, Europe is constructed as a Western alternative to the US; it will take on a major role in world affairs but won’t be able to take the lead. Chinese scholars disagree over the question of whether the “new” world order will essentially look like the “old” one (one superpower [US], many great powers) or will be defined and reconstructed by the rising non-Western powers (BRICS).
- 2) They have begun to include the progression or stagnation of the EU’s integration process into their thinking about international politics. The formulation of a heptapolar model, in which the EU/Europe is only represented by its most influential member states, illustrates a realist, pragmatic turn in Chinese IR calculations.

The Chinese IR publications discussed in this paper reveal the ongoing reevaluation and re-conceptualization of China’s views and interpretations of the international system and its structuring principles. This shift has so far not been documented in China’s official political statements, as these continue to utilize the “old” terminology (multipolarity, democratization of international politics). However, at the level of political ideas, new concepts and visions have been introduced that might shape China’s foreign policy with regard to the EU (and the world in general) in the years to come.

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