

# Socialization through Interregional Relations: EU's Normative Power in its Dialogue with China

Dealan Riga<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Liege, Law Faculty, Liege, Belgium  
 \*Corresponding author. Email: dealan.riga@uliege.be

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explain the resilience of EU-China strategic partnership despite growing salience of a systemic rivalry between both actors. The framing of China as a systemic rival to EU tends to be considered as a shift of paradigms in EU policy. Such a standpoint offer poor explanatory force for the remaining dialogue dynamics and its late outcome such as Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. This paper aims to reach an explanation by considering Eu-China socialization process. It relies on desk research and a diachronic discourse analysis of the socialization process; data collection encompasses EU policy paper and EU-China Annual Summit (EC-AS) joint statement. Findings of the analysis permit to consider systemic rivalry and strategic partnership as similar outputs of the same socialization framework. Furthermore, this research delivers a new analytical framework to comprehend systemic rivalry and its impact. This paper opens the floor for a research agenda focusing on normative power, instead of great power relations, to understand EU's foreign policy. Finally, it emphasizes that socialization processes precede materials realities in the building of foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Socialization, EU-China summit, EU foreign policy, Normative power.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The framing of China as a systemic rival in EU policy paper (EU, 2019) contrast with the long-standing strategic partnership and numerous agreement negotiations that has guided their relationship since 2003. It led to various speculations on the way this course alteration would impact EU policy regarding China. Indeed, a less naïve or more assertive EU approach to China may have huge consequences on global governance, international system and world trade. However, to comprehend such impact requires to know the genesis of systemic rivalry concept.

According to the official definition, systemic rivalry means: “promoting alternative models of governance (EU, 2019, P1)”. According to the existing literature, this definition may refer to various “alternative models” currently promote by Xi Jinping administration under the label “socialism through Chinese characteristics”. While some authors refer to Xi Jinping stranglehold on power (Economy, 2018), others prefer to consider geopolitical outcomes of Chinese external economy policy setting new threats, standards and stakes (Ikenberry, 2008; Macaes, 2018; Calder, 2019; Shambaugh, 2020). Such context shapes EU policy as it affects world representation of state decision makers, members of European Parliament (MEPs) and even other stakeholders of EU governance (Santander

& Vlassis, 2020; Maher, 2018; Ripoll Servent, 2014). Thus setting new trends for intergovernmental, interinstitutional and multilevel decision making.

Despite acute enlightenment about the coexistence of various narratives within the EU, those approaches tend to underline as shift of paradigms in EU policy. In a nutshell, China's challenge to EU reshapes its foreign policy from strategic partnership focus to systemic rivalry one. Such a standpoint offer poor explanatory force for the remaining salience of the strategic partnership and its late outcome such as Comprehensive Agreement on Investment or Geographical indications Agreement (EC, 2019b). This paper aims to fill this blind spot of the theory by answering the question: Why EU-China strategic partnership remain in place despite raising systemic rivalry concerns?

The answer could be spot through desk research and a diachronic discourse analysis of the strategic partnership thanks to EU policy paper and EU-China Annual Summit (EC-AS) joint statement. Findings of the analysis permit to consider systemic rivalry and strategic partnership as similar outputs of the same socialization framework. Focusing on EU normative power, this paper proposed a new perspective of the genesis of systemic rivalry. Furthermore, it enlightens that socialization process priors actor's materials realities in the building of foreign policy.

This research is composed of three sections. The first one give theoretical, methodological and empirical assumption used for the analysis. Then, it delivers the findings of the research in a discursive analysis of European Commission's policy paper (EC) and EC-AS joint statement. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the findings meanings for research agenda in EU foreign policy study.

## **2. EU-CHINA THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIALIZATION: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ASSUMPTIONS**

The 90's "ideational turn" deepened IR research agenda by offering concept such that underlines the importance of idea shared through social relations among actors (Onuf, 1989). Building on this framework various authors reflected on the way those ideas influenced state's behaviour (Wendt, 1992; Weldes 1996; Hopf, 1998). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) offer a major theoretical framework based on the concept of "norm". According to them, a "norm entrepreneur" manages to convince some states of the adequacy of its idea. Reaching a tipping point of norm follower enable what they call "norm cascade". This second phase a norm's life consist in: "an active process of international socialization intended to induce norm breakers to become norm followers (1998, P 902)". Therefore, socialisation process is at the core of norm's life cycle and a compulsory step to reach the final stage called "norm internalisation".

Despite consensus on the importance of socialization process, pioneer works fail to embrace a common definition of the concept. Thus, paving the way for a broad theoretical debate (Schimmelfennig, 2000; 2001; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink , 1999; Flockhart, 2005; 2006). For the sake of clarity, this paper will borrow Kai Alderson (2001) definition of socialization process: "the process by which states internalize norms arising elsewhere in the international system (Alderson, 2001, P 416)". To apply those theoretical outlook to our study, it is required to clarify three elements: Which norm should be taken into consideration for the scope of this analysis? Where does socializations process related to this norm take place? Who is EU's voice in those processes?

### **2.1. Free trade norm at the core of EU-China socialization**

China-EU bilateral and multilateral cooperation has deepened since their 1st summit. Therefore, various norms could fit an analysis of both actors socialization. For example, their dialogue on topics such as human rights, sustainable development, global governance and democracy could all be consider through socialization lens. However, this paper makes the choice to circumscribe the analysis to free trade norm relying on three arguments.

Firstly, the inaugural EU Commission paper addressing its relation with China: “China further strengthens links with European community (EC, 1975)” mainly consider trading elements. Moreover, the findings of annual summit examination reveal the crucial place of free trade in their dialogue.

Secondly, considering “norm life cycle” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) free trade and human rights might both be consider “cascade step”. As a proof we might consider OIs evolvement in those socialisation. While trade governance relies on WTO ruling (and Market Economy Statut (MES)), human rights governance is circumscribed by UNHRC recommendations. Interestingly, discourse analysis reveals that China role in global trade governance has involved in parallel of its socialization with EU, while in the mean times human rights consideration stagnate.

Finally, EU norm follower role in free trade is considered as the basic proof of its “actorness” (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006). Its normative power (Manner, 2002; 2006) in global trade governance undoubtedly represents a major contribution to its influence on international stage. On the other hand, back to 1998, China tendency as norm breaker of free trade norm was renown in academic literature as a major component of the China Threat Theory (Bernstein & Munro, 1997; Eikenberry, 1995; Roy, 1996).

## **2.2. Spotting the socialization in Eu-China dialogue**

Nowadays, EU and China socialize through various multilateral fora such as G20, WTO and ASEM. However, those meetings tend to focus on multilateral issues which represent only a portion of EU-China strategic agenda. Indeed, 2003 strategic partnership pave the way for numerous intertwined cooperation mechanism such as high-level people to people dialogue, EU-China civil-society roundtable, EU-China strategic dialogue and others committees. For the scope of this paper, EU-China Annual Summit (EC-AS) is the more interesting data to examine for three reasons.

Firstly, EC-AS gives the main guidelines for EU-China relations and set the agenda for the aforementioned dialogues (EEAS, 2021). As an example the first EU-China high-level people to people dialogue, held in Brussels in April 2012, was an outcome of 14th EC-AS (EEAS, 2012).

Secondly, EC-AS are among the only one to bring together highest representatives of both actors. Indeed, the summits are usually composed of the president of European Commission, EU High Representative (HR/VP), the president of European Council and China’s Prime Minister. This detail has its importance since China domestic policy tends to rely on a strong hierarchical organisation (Economy, 2018). Thus, as far as China is concerned, highest representative represent larger leeway in negotiations.

Finally, while sectorial committees or dialogues are purposed oriented, EC-AS is a general discussion platform addressing topic going from climate change to tourism via trade issues. Furthermore, those meetings are the only one to mention ongoing negotiation that might not end up into sectorial committees. In other word, EC-AS is the only discussion platform which relate all upcoming and discussed topics. For example, EC-AS joint press statement are among the only documents to contain clear provision about the negotiation of “Partnership and Cooperation Agreement” (EC, 2007) which have been left over since.

## **2.3. EU as a socializing agent : Spotting the voice in a multiple channels policy making.**

EU as a socializing actor rely on the assumption of EU capacity to exert external relations through interregionalism (Söderbaum, 2013; Hänggi, Roloff & Rüländ, 2005; Aggarwal & Fogarty, 2004). However, stating EU is an actor also imply to consider its particularities and to figure out: Who is EU voice in its socialisation process with China?

We may consider multiple voice channels to understand how states, institutions and various other actors' impact EU policy build up. However, based on article 221 of TFEU, we may assess that as far as foreign policy is concern, EU Commission holds the major role. Indeed, since 1998, EU Commission has been leading the dialogue with China under close scrutiny of the council informed by internal communications. Thus, for the scope of this article, inter-institutional, inter-governmental and multi-level inputs of EU external actions will be side considerations.

Therefore, EU Commission official communication to council (and parliament) will be considered as a white paper for action. In brief, those documents represent EU's goals toward EC-AS. On the other hand, this paper proposed to consider EC-AS joint press statement as the output of a socialization round. A diachronic analysis of those paper's convergence or divergence from 1998 (1st EC-AS) to 2019 (Systemic Rivalry outcome) will permit to spot socialization success and failure. In other word, convergence/divergence between EC internal communication goals and EC-AS joint statement will be considered as prove of socialization success/failure.

### **3. EU-CHINA SOCIALIZATION FAILURE AS CAUSAL VARIABLE OF SYSTEMIC RIVALRY**

The systematic analyse of EU policy papers and EU-China summit joint statements results in establishing three different socialization dynamics. The first one between 1998 and 2007 delivered a convergent dynamic setting the way for a socialization success. The second one, from 2008 to 2015, leads to the stagnation of the ongoing process generating a standby period. Finally, from 2016 to 2019, divergent trajectory of both paper pave the way for a socialization failure from which emerged systemic rivalry.

#### **3.1. 1998-2007: Socialization on the way, EU as socializer to push China's internalisation of world system norm.**

##### **3.1.1. Genesis: A partnership relying on WTO accession**

Prior first China-EU summit, EC set its strategy vis-à-vis China in internal communication (EC, 1995; 1998). In contrast to some authors view, EC was aware of China rise, as it underline the challenge bind to Chinese development since the first appendix of the paper. Furthermore, EC goals aims to address this challenge with concrete aims:

*"Supporting China's transition to an open society based upon the rule of law and the respect for human rights.*

*"Integrating China further in the world economy by bringing it more fully into the world trading system and by supporting the process of economic and social reform underway in the country (EC, 1998)"*

In other words, EU should play its socialising agent role for the norms of democracy, human rights and free trade. We should emphasize that while democracy and human rights remain poorly define, free trade consideration cover half of the document. Although the papers announced various objective, China's WTO accession priors all others. It seems coherent with academic literature which underlines the crucial role of IOs in norm diffusion (Finnemore, 1996; Kelley, 2004; Deacon, 2007). In brief, China's entrance in WTO should lead to boost its compliance to international trade rule and de facto to become norm follower of free trade. Thus, back to 1998 EC's diffusion of free trade norm rely in China integration to world trade system; what materialised in its accession to the WTO.

In the same vein, the three first EU-China summit are guided by WTO entry focus and offer weak insights about further elements of cooperation. China's accession to WTO in December 2001, modify EC needs to exert norm diffusion. Therefore, on the strength of its success, EC turn to a new agenda for

strategic cooperation. EU support to China's accession gradually turn to an assistance in domestic reform process to implement WTO rules (EC, 2003).

### 3.1.2. Socialization on the road: A partnership relying on a reform agenda

China's domestic reforms became the new common thread of EU-China relations. They are at the core of EC policy paper (2003): "A maturing partnership – shared interests and challenges in EU-China relations". EU supports to China's reform materialised in a strategic partnership proclaimed in EU-China 5th summit. Despite obvious change in the means of socialization, EC objective remains the same:

*"Europe thus has a major political and economic stake in supporting China's successful transition to a stable, prosperous and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles and the rule of law (EC, 2003)".*

China and EU enter a honeymoon period (2003-2007) during which the number of channels for cooperation and topics addresses will dramatically rise. The content of joint-statements overwhelmingly rose in these four years. The strategic partnership turn to a multichannel cooperation with numerous bilateral dialogue established through annual summits. Thus norm diffusion split in various mechanisms under scrutiny of EC-AS such as dialogue on: S&T, R&D or financial cooperation. Furthermore, the convergence between EC wills and ongoing practice enable those dialogue to generate formal agreement such as the China-EU maritime transport agreement and the custom cooperation agreement. Those effort remain in line with WTO regulation; the most blatant example is the launch of a sectorial dialogue on Intellectual Property Rights (align on TRIPS rules) in 2004.

The positive feelings both actors had in their relations is mentioned in the concluding remarks of their joint statements:

*"The leaders expressed their satisfaction with the excellent atmosphere and the substantial results achieved at this seventh summit meeting. They stressed their resolve to further expand and deepen EU-China relations, towards a rapidly maturing comprehensive strategic partnership between the EU and China (EC, 2007)".*

The relation reached its climax in 2007; two summits (9th & 10th) are organized on this year offering joint statements among the most prolific that has ever been. Numerous ongoing and new dialogues are addressed, but the most important point is probably the launch of a Partnership and Co-operation Agreement (PCA). EC and China discuss the possibility to consecrate their strategic partnership. In other words, PCA represent a new change of means for socialization with both actors recognizing that current framework might become insufficient for their common purposes. From an EC standpoint, it represents an opportunity as: "It will provide a single framework covering the full range and complexity of our relationship" (EC, 2006). Furthermore, EC stress the need that PCA be forward looking and reflect its priorities, which are in a nutshell: diffusion of international norms. However, in the following years, partnership will fade, and despite the optimism of 2007, PCA negotiation hardly take off since.

### **3.2. 2008-2015: Socialization stand by, rising concerns about China economic capabilities in light of its reform pace.**

From 2008 to 2011, we observed a stand by in EU-China relations. No policy paper cover this period and summit joint statements are empty shell. The only noticeable element was the launch of negotiations for geographical indications agreement in 2007. However, it basically reflects previous works in IPR dialogue. In the meantime, PCA negotiations start to lag. The main reason for those turmoil may be the drastic lose of EC leeway for its relation with China which is due to three concurrent elements. Firstly, in the midst of subprime crisis, EU faces its embedded structural weaknesses (Menéndez, 2013). In the meantime, Lisbon treaty implementation increases the number of veto



players for an agreement such as PCA. It also boosts interinstitutional requirements for international negotiations with a rising role of European Parliament (EP) (Ripol Servent, 2004). Finally, this period is marked by an electoral campaign to establish new MEPs blurring the future positioning of the newly empowered EP (BBC, 2009). In light of those elements, China could hardly be considered as a priority at that time. Furthermore, EC could hardly predict interinstitutional interest which may make negotiation successful.

From 2012 to 2015, EU and China reboot their strategic partnership and strive to “enter a new important stage of development” (EEAS, 2012). However, 14th and 15th summit were shy attempt for it, they are limited to the launch of new sectorial dialogues. Academic literature tends to explain those dynamics with China rise and Xi Jinping arrival. They refer to this period as a breaking point boosting “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and increasing China’s reluctance to “western norms” (Friedberg, 2018; Michalski & Nilsson, 2019; Ferenczy, 2019). Those acute insights tend to overlook intersubjective construction of collective identity. In other words, by pointing China “fault” they gloss over EC leading role in their relations. Furthermore, their theoretical framework offers poor explanatory force for the resilience of the strategic partnership. Indeed, 16th summit (EEAS, 2013) is marked by the launch of EU-China 2020 strategic agenda and Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) negotiations.

This paper refers to 2007-2015 period as a socialization “stand-by” one; where partnership lag are due to EC and China strategy changes. On the one hand, China claims for pay back regarding its reform agenda are getting more assertive especially regarding Market Economy Statue (MES) (EC, 2009; EP, 2015; CEPPII, 2016). On the other hand, new economic realities push the EC to shift from “problem prevention by reforms” strategy to “issue solving” one. As an example, CAI negotiations are launched in aftermath of exponential rise in Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) on EU single market (Merics, 2018). This outlook also permits to spot why EU-China 2020 strategic agenda proposed broad consideration around multiple topics but lack precise objective to adjudicate concrete evolvement of the strategic partnership. Although this document represents a new output of their partnership, its vagueness is mainly due to growing divergent view about dialogue priorities.

For the first time, new means proposed hardly reflect any concrete improvement to reach further steps of socialization. Both actors have their responsibilities, however this paper offers a new understanding of the strategy switch. Socialization standby doesn’t rely in EU concerns about China’s goodwill; it is rather related to the pace of Chinese reform. Between 2007 and 2015, EU has been confronted to the direct impact of China’s reforms’ slow pace. EC, and EU in general, realize that their chances to tackle problems prior they impact the internal market are weakening. This perspective is the most pertinent to understand the growing scepticism among EU stakeholders that materialised in 2015 with their refusal to grant Market Economy Statue (MES) to China (EC, 2015). MES refusal is an outcome of an interinstitutional bargain which would deserve a paper on its own. What is crucial for us, is the motivations lying behind this decision which could be spot in a European Parliament report (EP, 2016). It shows deep concerns regarding the evolvement of socialization which they considered being undermined by the slow pace of China reform in various fields such as dumping or technology transfer. In a nutshell:

*“(Parliament) Urges the Council and the Commission to engage China further through constructive dialogue aimed at encouraging China’s transition to the rule of law and respect for human rights and supporting its integration in the world economy (EP,2016)”*

### **3.3. 2016-2020: SEM Pay back failure and Socialization failure.**

The refusal to grant MES reshapes EU-China dialogue. Interestingly, EC position dramatically change in line with parliament report (EP, 2016). Its new socialization strategy, “Element for a new EU

strategy on China (EEAS, 2016)” rely on a more assertive, if not confrontational, tone. Indeed, it is among the first EC paper to call for:

*“Promote reciprocity, a level playing field and fair competition across all areas of cooperation”.*

*“There has been a lack of progress in giving the market a more decisive role in the economy in the key areas of concern to the EU. (...) which go against market opening and the principles of equal treatment and a level playing field (EEAS, 2016)”.*

Furthermore EC claims for the respect of rules-based international order, market openness, international standards and global governance (EEAS, 2016). In other words, China compliance to international trade norms isn’t sufficient for EU stakeholders. In the same vein, Cecilia Malmström underlines the limited implementations of China’s internal market reforms in her speech (EC, 2016). On the other hand, refusal to grant MES is considered as a serious drawback in bilateral relations by China. Indeed, China considers EU’s behaviour as deeply unfair in regards of article 15th of its accession protocol to WTO (Godement & Kratz, 2016). Leading Chinese leaders to reconsider their effort in such an absence of payback.

This “state of play”, lead to 18th and 19th EC-AS failure to deliver any no joint statement. China and EU divergent views on their partnership lead strong backlash in their dialogue. Instead of boosting socialization, EC more assertive strategy coupled Chinese view over its refusal to grant SEM generate the first ever blatant disruption of the socialization process. In its concluding remarks President of the European Council Donald Tusk underline common challenge such as applying common rules to globalization (Tusk, 2016). It is among the first time that EU representatives openly emphasize the failure of China to comply with international trade norms.

Twentieth annual summit end up on a joint statement that cautiously avoid any hot topic. Indeed, in the watermark of this document appear, for the third time in a row, the incapacity of EU-China to solve normative issues under annual summit framework. A month before 21st summit EC published in renowned policy paper: “Eu-China a strategic outlook” (EC, 2019), which consecrate EC multifaceted approach to China, using for the first time the concept of systemic rivalry.

#### **4. SYSTEMIC RIVALRY AS A SOCIALIZATION OUTPUT : A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS**

EU-China socialization diachronic analysis lead us to deny that “system rivalry” concept marks a shift of paradigms in EU policy. Strategic partnership and systemic rivalry are both outputs of an ongoing socialization by which EU attempt to promote China’s compliance to international norm. Strategic partnership is the product of a socialisation success based on deep convergence between EC objective and EC-AS outcome. On the other hand, systemic rivalry is the product of a socialization failure based on divergent view between EC objective and EC-AS outcome. However, none of these are guiding principles, they should be comprehended as a strategy to reach socialization goals.

Therefore, the coexistence of EU-China strategic partnership and systemic rivalry is due the evolution of the socialization process. They are different outcomes of a common dynamics. They coexist in the current multifaceted strategy of EU; which is only one out of many attempts to promote the same international norms. Indeed, Systemic rivalry rose through EC concerns about the impact of the slow pace of Chinese reform. Leading EU to acknowledge the requirement of a more assertive tone on some issue to boost China’s effort. China’s reluctance to this strategy shape the multifaceted approach where strategic partnership and systemic rivalry cover different topics to reach the same purpose. Thus, systemic rivalry does not imply the end of socialization but a new attempt for it.

Furthermore, this article underlines that the so call “alternative model” are not due to China’s action, but rather to China’s inaction in light of EC concerns. From that standpoint, this article paves the way for new theoretical consideration about China and EU relations; as socialization is still

ongoing, further analyses require to prior EC strategy focus rather than China-centred focus. In a nutshell, EU normative power construction is the cornerstone to comprehend its external policy.

Finally, by placing EU policy making at the core of its relations with China, this paper opens a research agenda related to EU black box. Since EU's normative power construction is accountable for its foreign policy, multiple channels inputs for its construction should be understand. A good starting point is CAI negotiations as it offers a case study composed of multiple stakeholders and veto players with regards to free trade norm concern. To dissect EU normative power build up is a bold objective, but it is the more relevant way to comprehend its relations with foreign states.

**Table 1.** Wrap up of EU-China socialization evolution

Socialization focus point	China's accession to WTO	China's reform to align to WTO rules	Fair trade consideration – problem solving	Call for reciprocity
Time period	1998-2002	2003-2007	2008-2015	2016-2020
EC-AS – EC trends	Deeply convergent	Deeply convergent	Slightly convergent	Divergent
Socialization evolvement over the period	Success	Success	Stand-by	Failure
Main socialization strategy	Annual summit	Strategic partnership	EU-China 2020 strategic agenda for cooperation	Multifaceted approach
Outcome of socialization	China integrate WTO	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement	Refusal to grant MES // 2020 strategic agenda	China as a systemic rival
Norm subject to the process	Free trade, democracy, human rights	Free trade, democracy, human rights	Free trade, democracy, human rights	Free Trade, democracy, human rights
EC guidelines	International integration	International responsibility	Concrete market concerns	Level playing field

(source: compiled by author)

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