

Statement on the Dissertation:

“Identity as a Factor in the International Relations between the European Union and China”

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The dissertation undertakes a much-needed study of an important topic in contemporary international affairs – the role, place, and impact of identity in the relations between the European Union (EU) and the People’s Republic of China (hereafter China). This significance of identity politics on the interactions between China and the EU has gradually been gaining prominence over the past decade or so and it seems to permeate most of the current updates in EU’s policy toolkit – from its industrial policy to its aspirations for an “open strategic autonomy” in global life. Yet, while there has been a growing interest in the shifting patterns of relations between the EU and China, there is still a lack of comprehensive examination of the roles, practices, and impact of identity on these interactions. Such attention to identity assists the identification of a distinct and explicit set of aims and objectives. In this respect, the dissertation does an excellent job of filling an important gap in the literature on EU-China relations. It also clearly demonstrates the capacities and knowledge of Mr. Milanov. The dissertation illustrates convincingly his understanding of key frameworks, developments, and approaches. Mr. Milanov is clearly able to engage complex ideas, their histories and implications; at the same time, he is able to bring them to bear on the explanation of contemporary patterns of international politics. Therefore, my overall assessment is that the dissertation should be accepted with some minor revisions (which I have outlined below) and that Mr. Milanov should be admitted for the doctoral degree.

The following sections detail my assessment of the dissertation’s argument, its analytical and methodological structure, and several minor issues that Mr. Milanov may consider in the future development of his dissertation.

In order to assess the relevance, effects, and workings of identity on the interactions between Beijing and Brussels, the dissertation proposes an innovative analytical model

bringing together variables such as historical and cultural norms and values, political intentionality, actors' structural characteristics, and policy discourses and narratives. Such a hybrid analytical approach bares significant resemblances with the eclectic framework of analysis championed by Peter Katzenstein and Rudra Sil in their book: *Beyond Paradigms: Analytical Eclecticism in the Study of World Politics* (Palgrave, 2010). The analytical framework of the dissertation seeks to contribute meaningfully to the explanation and understanding of the effects of identity on China's relations with the EU more broadly. At the same time, the analytical framework developed in the dissertation provides an eloquent engagement with the relevant theoretical perspectives and approaches developed for engaging the international actorness of both the EU and China. Having said that, my only recommendation is that the analytical framework – while hybrid, should have been more explicit about its leaning towards the constructivist school of international relations. The majority of scholars and perspectives, which the dissertation relies on for its analysis (such as Ted Hopf and Alexander Wendt) are some of the more prominent proponents of constructivism in the study of world affairs. This is a minor point, but a more explicit contextualization of the constructivist leaning of the analytical framework of the dissertation will only enhance its coherence.

Methodologically, the dissertation strives to deploy a mixed-method approach which seeks to bring insights from qualitative and quantitative data, in order to gauge the dynamics, effects, and impact of identity on the interactions between the EU and China. Such comparative study is greatly enhanced by a meaningful concept definition of terms such as identity/national identity in International Relations theory and then engaging in process tracing the evolution of the notions of “Chinese” and “European” identity. It needs to be stated that such conceptual unpacking is necessarily cursory and abridged as the assessment of the complexities, nuances, and evolution of each one of those concepts is not at the heart of the dissertation's exploration. Having said that, the discussion and framing of the key concepts presented in the dissertation were convincing and demonstrated awareness of the nuances of both the concept of identity and its Chinese and European iterations. Perhaps, a point that could have been addressed in the context of the conceptual framework of identity – both in its international and

national variants – is a comparative assessment of cognate concepts such as power, leadership, status, etc. These cognate notions provide the traditional go-to toolkit in the explanation and understanding of the interactions between international actors. A contextualization of these cognate terms would assisted with focusing the analysis and would have enhanced the precision of the key concept of identity. This is particularly pertinent , especially, that the notions of hard and soft power, for instance, are being used as variables of identity; and the cognate terms of “strategic culture” as developed by Ian Johnston [cited in the dissertation on p.37] is used as a stylistic variation of identity.

In a further methodological move, the dissertation undertakes a set of detailed cases studies of issue areas (such as regional interactions and external outreach) or specific bilateral and/or multilateral relations (such as relations in international organizations and specific countries and parts of the world). This comprehensive parallel assessment of provided by the case studies furnishes a detailed and thoughtful assessment of the capacity of identity to shape, frame, and impact political outcomes in the relations between the EU and China.

As I have already indicated, while I find the dissertation’s analytical framework, approach, and methodology convincing, there one substantive comment regarding its argument that needs to be pointed. I am hopeful that this may provide a fruitful point of departure for the future analysis and development of the themes of this dissertation.

- Having in mind the topic and issues discussed in the dissertation, my expectation was that it would bring into conversation both Western (Anglophone and others) and Chinese (a divergent set of Sinophone) perspectives. And while the dissertation certainly reflects cognizance of the former set of scholarship, there is a dearth of the engagement with Chinese sources and/or scholarship drawing on Chinese perspectives and interpretations of the key concepts and variables in the dissertation. For instance, current conceptualization of China’s international identity are closely connected with the development of notion and practice of

yinlingzhe (leading power/leading country) over the past 15 years. The evolution of the concept of *yinlingzhe* has been central to the articulation of China's international outreach and its ongoing reframing of its strategic culture. It has also been reflected in the emergence of nascent schools of Chinese international relations (and much of this scholarship has already been translated and is available in English). For instance, the work of Qin Yaqing (whom the dissertation mentions in passing) has been central to the emergence of a "relational" approach to international politics (both in China and globally; most of his ideas have been collected in Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2018). Drawing on China's historical and current international relations, Qin argues that rather than through international identity, China's interactions with other international are more meaningfully explained through the different "roles" that China and its interlocutors adopt in the context of their relations. In this respect, identities are not formed prior to the moment of interactions, but they emerge in the very context of the relationship and change/develop in line with the roles that China and its partners undertake. Likewise, Yan Xuetong develops a "realist theory" of International Relations with Chinese characteristic (most of his ideas are collected in Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* [Princeton University Press, 2013]). Yan's theory of "moral realism" draws attention to the contradiction between China's identity as a "developing country" and its current aspirations of becoming *yinlingzhe* (leading power/leading country). The engagement with Chinese concepts, ideas, and frameworks of explanation would have significantly contributed to the evolution and development of the analytical framework of the dissertation and would have likely assisted the development of an innovative theoretical approach bringing together Western and Chinese perspectives and approaches.

However, as I have already outlined, this substantive comment is only a suggestion for the future evolution of the ideas developed by Mr. Milanov in the dissertation. In this

respect, I would like to commend the author for the detailed and thoughtful examination of the role played by identity in the development of the EU-China relationship.

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