



## **Toward a new relational ontology in global politics: China's rise as holographic transition**

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# Toward a new relational ontology in global politics: China's rise as holographic transition

Chengxin Pan\*

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*School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University,  
75 Pigdons Road, Waurin Ponds VIC 3216, Australia*

*\*Email: [chengxin.pan@deakin.edu.au](mailto:chengxin.pan@deakin.edu.au)*

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## Abstract

The theoretical challenges for international relations (IR) posed by China's rise cannot be adequately addressed at a mere theoretical level. Predicated on a Cartesian/Newtonian ontology that assumes a mechanistic world made up of discrete, self-contained parts (e.g., sovereign nation-states), mainstream IR theories offer limited understanding of China's rise. In this article, I propose an alternative, holographic relational ontology. Drawing upon recent IR scholarship on relational ontology and holographic ideas in quantum physics as well as traditional Asian thoughts, this 'new' ontology posits that the world exists fundamentally as holographic relations, in which a part is a microcosmic reflection of its larger whole(s). As a part of various wholes in global politics, 'China' is thus never an entity in and of itself, but holographic reflections of them. Its rise is best understood as a phenomenon of holographic transition, in which characteristics of those larger wholes are being enfolded into what

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is known as 'China'. Thus, both the 'China' challenges and 'China' opportunities, rather than some inherently 'Chinese' properties, are products of China's holographic relations. This ontology has broader conceptual and methodological as well as policy implications for IR in East Asia and beyond.

... every entity, however fundamental it may seem, is dependent for its existence on the maintenance of appropriate conditions in its infinite background and substructure. The conditions in the background and substructure, however, must themselves evidently be affected by their mutual interconnections with the entities under consideration.

– David Bohm (Nichol, 2003, 24)

## 1 Introduction

The rise of China has posed a number of pressing questions: Can it rise peacefully? What does it mean for global governance and the rules-based liberal order? Will it seek regional or even global dominance? And can it avoid the so-called Thucydides Trap? In the ongoing debate, at one level is an influential perspective informed by realism, and particularly by offensive realism (Mearsheimer, 2001, 2010) and power transition theory (Organski, 1961; Organski and Kugler, 1980). It argues that the tragic consequences of previous power transitions, from the Peloponnesian War to the two World Wars, do not bode well for China's rise in the 21st century (Tammen and Kugler, 2006; Lai, 2011). A second perspective, following (neo)liberal institutionalism, social constructivism, and/or the English School, argues that China's rise, taking place in a liberal international order, is subject to socialization into international society. As a result, there is a high probability of its peaceful rise and status-quo orientation (Johnston, 2003; Zheng, 2005; Kang, 2007; Ikenberry, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Zhu, 2008; Buzan, 2010; Clark, 2014).

These, of course, are just two broad perspectives within an extremely diverse and still-growing body of literature. At this juncture, one wonders what else can be added to the debate on China's rise. To some, the debate should now focus on more rigorous empirical testing of existing competing perspectives (Kang, 2003/2004; Chen, 2012, 71).

But to others, the rise of China precisely demands the search for a new vocabulary (Kavalski, 2014) as well as the development of international relations (IR) theories, particularly from Chinese perspectives (Zhao, 2009; Qin, 2009; Qin, 2010). While such empirical and theoretical emphases have merit, in this article I argue that we need to probe deeper by rethinking the *ontological* foundation upon which the China debate and indeed much of mainstream IR theorizing have been based.

The existing ontological foundation rests on a classical Cartesian/Newtonian worldview, which has not only heavily shaped the development of modern science, but also influenced the ways social scientists understand human society. In the IR context, this ontology assumes that the international system is made up of largely self-contained (though possibly interdependent and/or potentially socializable) units such as sovereign states, each possessing certain essential and distinctive identity and occupying a more or less clearly demarcated territorial space. With the China debate so far largely silent on the issue of ontology (with the possible exception of Zhao Tingyang's and Qin Yaqing's works, e.g., Zhao, 2006; Qin, 2009), China's rise has been framed primarily within this conventional ontological thinking.

Yet, the 'rise of China' provides both a good opportunity to question this dominant ontological metanarrative and an empirical case for exploring the promises of what I call a 'holographic relational ontology'. Building on but going further than the relational turn's emphasis on relations and relationality, the holographic relational ontology identifies a particular type of relationality between parts and whole. Drawing on the holographic principles in quantum physics that each part contains information about the whole, this holographic ontology in the IR context sees the world as a hologram in which each state is a situated holographic microcosm of that world. This insight allows us to see 'China' in a different yet more dynamic and less singular light.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, it will briefly examine how the Cartesian/Newtonian ontology has informed the IR discipline in general and the study of China's rise in particular, which is followed by a survey of some alternative ontological reflections from poststructuralist, relational, and emergent perspectives. Second, proposing a holographic relational ontology, I develop concepts such as holographic transition in order to shed new light on international relations. Next, turning to China, I examine how its rise is more than another classic

example of power transition or straight-line Westernization, but a case of complex holographic transition. This means that the challenges and promises commonly associated with China are better understood as holographic reflections of the multiple worlds with which China is inextricably bound up. The final section concludes that the holographic ontology allows a fresh perspective on how to better understand and deal with profound global challenges of a holographic nature.

## 2 The Cartesian/Newtonian ontology in IR and its discontents

Ontology ‘lies at the beginning of any inquiry’ (Cox, 1996, 144). A particularly influential ontology in both natural sciences and social sciences in the West has been a Cartesian/Newtonian worldview and ontology (Capra, 1999, 22; McMullin, 2001; Heylighen, Cilliers and Gershenson, 2007). Two characteristics often define this ontology: ‘the whole is nothing more than the sum of its parts, and ... each part is a discrete phenomenon being isolable from the whole and being a fundamental constitutive element of the system’ (King, 1994, 52; see also Bousquet and Curtis, 2011, 45).

This ontological foundation, referred to as ‘substantialism’ in sociology (see Emirbayer, 1997), allows both natural and social scientists to define their objects of study as intrinsically independent units whose relations, treated as a derivative phenomenon, are mechanistic and compositional in nature. IR has not been immune from this ontological stance (Zanotti, 2013). If anything, the Newtonian ‘geographic division of the world into mutually exclusive territorial states ... has served to define the field of study’ (Agnew, 1995, 379).

With some exceptions (Callahan, 2004; Breslin, 2005; Agnew, 2010; Pan, 2012; Ling, 2013; Garlick, 2016), mainstream IR theories have to a large extent dominated the study of China’s rise (Garlick, 2016, 287), both in the West and China. Despite the heated China debate, what is seldom questioned is the ontological starting point of China as a separate, atomistic entity, be it a rising authoritarian power, a quintessential Westphalian state, a distinctive civilization, or a civilizational state. While often such terms are used for analytical convenience, there is no denying that their unquestioned usage does betray a deep-seated Cartesian/Newtonian ontological position about China’s being.

Ontology conditions the way we both conceptualize and practice power relations in world politics (Stout and Love, 2015, 448–449). In the China context, the Cartesian/Newtonian ontology helps set the parameters for understanding what China is, where the China challenges come from, who is responsible for those challenges, and how they should be dealt with. For example, both Barrack Obama's 'Pivot to Asia' policy and Donald Trump's trade sanctions on 'Chinese' imports hinge on the ontological assumption of China as a self-contained actor who is responsible for the China challenge, hence the main target of their policies.

Given that ontology is never far removed from IR theory and practice, there has been growing interest in ontology in IR (Hay, 2011, 461; Wight, 2006; Odysseos, 2007; Zanotti, 2015). For the purpose of this article, I focus on some critiques of the dominant Cartesian/Newtonian ontology in the IR theory literature, which can be grouped into three broad and sometimes overlapping categories: (i) poststructuralist (discursive) ontology; (ii) relational ontology; and (iii) emergent ontology.<sup>1</sup>

The poststructuralist (discursive) ontology is an umbrella term that encompasses critical constructivist, critical geopolitical, feminist, as well as poststructuralist reflections on ontology. Sharing an anti-foundationalist position, these perspectives argue that things and phenomena such as regions, states, sovereignty, anarchy, security, interests, identity, gender, and norms are not objective entities or objects out there, but socially constituted through language and discursive practice in (gendered) power relations (Ashley, 1988; Wendt, 1992; Peterson, 1992; Walker, 1993; Agnew, 1994; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Campbell, 1998; Dalby, 2003). Their contingent being cannot be understood outside of meaning, interpretation and discourse (Bleiker, 2002, 25). Sometimes called a discursive ontology (Hansen, 2006, 17), it treats language, symbols, discourse, and intersubjective meaning as ontologically fundamental (see Klotz and Lynch, 2007, 16).

Whereas poststructuralism emphasizes an ontology of things as *discourse*, a relational ontology focuses on things in *relationality*. Relational ontology has a long history in philosophical inquiries such as Martin

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1 Patrick T. Jackson (2011) defines three non-positivist ontologies: critical realism, analyticism, and reflexivity. I consider, however, the first two 'non-positivist' ontologies to be not substantially different from the positivist or Cartesian/Newtonian ontology.

Heidegger's notion of 'Being-in-the-world' (see [Odysseos, 2007](#)) and in sociology ([Donati, 2011](#)). Its growing popularity has led to a 'relational turn' in recent critical IR scholarship ([Jackson and Nexon, 1999](#); [Bousquet and Curtis, 2011](#); [Shih, 2016](#)). Drawing from relational sociology, [Jackson and Nexon \(1999, 301\)](#) suggest that social interaction should be treated as 'logically prior to the entities doing the interacting'. In part to challenge the conventional constructivists' re-reification of agent and structure as essential, preexisting entities such as in Wendt's (pre-quantum) structural constructivism,<sup>2</sup> Qin Yaqing turns to traditional Chinese cultures for a relational ontology of interconnectedness, without which things, persons, and events would not exist ([Qin, 2016, 36](#); [Qin, 2018](#); [Zhao, 2009, 10, 15](#)).

A third type of ontological intervention comes from emergent ontology. An important concept in philosophy, emergence refers to the phenomenon of emergent properties existing at the level of 'an emergent whole', but irreducible to the properties of the parts at the sub-level ([Wight, 2006, 110](#); [Heylighen et al., 2007, 120](#)). As a particular iteration of relational ontology ([Heylighen et al., 2007, 121](#)), this notion has begun to gain traction in IR ([Wight, 2006](#); [Joseph and Wight, 2010](#); [Kavalski, 2015](#); [Wagner, 2016](#)). The idea of complex systems with emergent properties challenges Newton's closed systems ([Wight, 2015, 67–68](#); [Heylighen et al., 2007, 121](#)). And yet, some forms of the emergent ontology may be best described as a 'reformed' Cartesian/Newtonian ontology insofar as they lack a social emergent ontology about the 'parts', which remain as parts, ontologically separable from one another as well as from the emergent whole, unaffected by the latter except at the level of 'behavior' ([Heylighen et al., 2007, 122](#)).<sup>3</sup> This largely unidirectional emergent ontology is characteristic, for example, of Waltz's structural realism ([Waltz, 1979](#)). Employing an emergent ontology at the systemic, but not state, level ([Wight, 2015, 62–63](#)), Waltz explains state *behavior* rather than its *ontological* connection with the system. Thus, even as Waltz seeks to rectify unit-level reductionism,

2 For a critique of structuration theorists along this line, see [Jackson and Nexon \(1999, p. 295\)](#).

3 The systems approach espoused by Morton Kaplan and Karl W. Deutsch in the mid-20th century emphasized relations among nations, but it similarly treated relations as consequential mostly for state behavior, rather than from an ontological perspective.

his ‘structural realism’ remains wedded to an individualist, hence Newtonian, ontology (Ashley, 1984; Wight, 2006, 75). Wendt (2015, 33) addresses this structuralist shortcoming through the notion of quantum emergence, which argues that ‘agents and structures are both emergent effects of practices’. In this quantum emergent ontology, the identity of parts cannot be separated from the whole (Wendt, 2015, 257). Thus, ‘parts and whole are “*co-emergent*,” rather than only the latter emerging from an ontologically prior base of the former’ (Wendt, 2015, 257, *italics in original*).

A main contribution of these alternative ontological stances lies more in their critical *challenges* to the dominant Cartesian/Newtonian ontology than in articulating a clear alternative. In relational sociology, for instance, beyond ‘a clear belief in the importance and centrality of relations ... there is no consensus or coherent research program’ (Eacott, 2018, 32). Poststructuralists such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault are mostly interested in ‘undermining’ existing ontologies (Choat, 2010, 130), which has led some to argue that poststructuralists have yet to elaborate an explicit social ontology of their own (Wight, 2006, 82; Howarth, 2013, 22). While these non-Cartesian/Newtonian ontological reflections all believe that the world exists in relationality, it remains unclear how exactly relationality exists and in what sense. Going beyond these important ontological reflections, I now explore a more specific relational ontology through holographic insights from both quantum physics and traditional Asian thoughts.

### 3 The promise of a holographic relational ontology

#### 3.1 *What’s in a part? Introducing a holographic relational ontology*

Holography is a Nobel Prize-winning method of producing a type of three-dimensional image that is called hologram (derived from the Greek words *holo*, meaning ‘whole’, and *gram*, meaning ‘to write’, Bohm, 1980, 183; see also Pitts, 1995, 294–295). In a hologram, ‘each part mirrors the whole, such that one could reconstruct the whole from any of the parts’ (Wendt, 2006, 201). Though the holographic relationship between parts and wholes is not the only type of relationality or



the only way of conceptualizing it, holography helps shed light on a specific yet fundamental facet of relational ontology.

The holographic principle has been confirmed in quantum theory. The picture of hadrons described by the bootstrap theory, for example, indicates that ‘every particle consists of all other particles’, though ‘consist’ here cannot be understood ‘in a classical, static sense’ (Capra, 1999, 295–296). In fractal geometry, holographical ontology finds expression in ‘self-similarity’ or ‘self-scaling’, a phenomenon of fractal shapes or patterns repeating themselves at descending scales, ‘so that their parts, at any scale, are similar in shape to the whole’ (Capra, 1996, 138; see also Bohm and Peat, 1987, 152–156). The fractal holographic phenomenon, widely observable in plants, mountains, rivers, coastlines, lightning, blood vessels, and so forth, ‘lies much closer to the forms of nature than do the circles, triangles, and rectangles of Greek geometry’ (Bohm and Peat, 1987, 154).

Outside quantum physics, systems theory, and fractal geometry, holographic ideas have existed in many traditional cultures (Capra, 1996). In Mahayana Buddhism, cosmic holographic consciousness is conveyed through the metaphor of Indra’s net. Within this net is ‘a network of pearls, so arranged that if you look at one you see all the others reflected in it. In the same way, each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object and in fact is everything else’ (Sir Charles Eliot, quoted in Capra, 1999, 296). In China, there exists a strong philosophical tradition of systemic and holistic thinking (Liu, 1990, 115–117; Kaptchuk, 1983, 7). According to Mencius (2003, Book VII, Part A, 145–146), ‘All the ten thousand things are there in me’ and ‘a man [*sic*] who knows his own nature will know Heaven’, meaning that humanity and heaven are holographically resemblant and interlinked (*tian ren he yi*). Meanwhile, traditional Chinese medical practices such as acupuncture and palmistry are based on similar ideas that various parts of a body such as ears, feet, and hands mirror the structure of the whole body (see Liu, 1990, 305–309).

The holographic whole-parts relations differ from the Cartesian/Newtonian compositional and structural relations of preexisting, autonomous parts. According to the holographic relational ontology, from the outset a part as a microcosmic whole owes its very existence, identity, and characteristics to its whole. The ‘inertia of a material object’, as physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach, a critic of Newton’s

theories of space and time, observes, 'is not an intrinsic property of matter, but a measure of its interaction with all the rest of the universe' (quoted in King, 1994, 55). This ontology highlights the holographic mutual implication and co-emergence between the whole and its parts, a type of relationality existing between, for example, plants and their seeds, chicken and egg, and *yin* and *yang* (Byrne and Callaghan, 2014, 144; Ling, 2014, 96–97).

That the whole is in its parts is best understood in an *informational* sense (considering that the production of holographic photography involves the movement of information). Perhaps not coincidentally, holography in Chinese means 'whole information' (*quanxi*). By nature, information does not belong to or stay in one place; it is to be shared, communicated, and interrelated. It is through (infinite) informational interconnectedness across both space and time that 'our sense experiences, nervous system, and brain are understood as continuous with the whole of the material world' (Nichol, 2003, 79). In the social world, which cannot be reified as ontologically separate from the natural world, informational interconnectedness depends especially on language, ideas, and discourse.

The implication of information of the whole in its parts is what I call *holographic transition* or *holographic emergence*. Holographic transition is an ongoing process in which a part, which must have already been holographically emblematic of its whole(s), continues to reflect and internalize the information of its evolving whole(s), consciously or unconsciously (more likely both). David Bohm (1980, 251) calls this process *enfolding*, whereby 'information... concerning the entire universe of matter [is fused] into each region of space'. Given that there exist multiple wholes (or 'multiverse', see Ling, 2018) which in turn contain sub-wholes as well as parts (which themselves are wholes of still smaller parts, and so on), a part's holographic transition is necessarily a very complex process and outcome, rather than a linear, homogenizing and one-off transformation in the image of a particular part of that whole, such as the West. While China's holographic transition certainly involves Westernization, it cannot be reduced to it. For 'the West' itself is a holographic part (or more precisely, parts), rather than a universal whole (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Holographic relations and holographic transition exist in both a spatial and a temporal sense. A part is thus not only a holographic

representation of its multiple worlds in spatial terms, but also a reflection of its temporal wholes, meaning that it is a product of its traditional linkages as well as its contemporary spatial entanglements. Consequently, even within apparently the ‘same’ whole, different parts necessarily have divergent rather than identical informational and discursive connections, which may account for inevitable variations and contingencies in holographic transition in the world.

### *3.2 International relations as holographic relations: implications for theorizing and methodology*

Until now, despite increasing attention to relationality in the social sciences and emerging interest in quantum theory in IR (Der Derian, 2013; Wendt, 2015), holographic relationality remains understudied (Milovanovic, 2013, 1). Wendt’s book (2015) briefly examines the state as a holographic system. But in his own words, that book ‘is all philosophy’, rather than IR (Wendt, 2015, 2). Yet, holographic ontology provides a new and exciting way of theorizing IR and doing IR research. As Wendt and Duvall (1989, 55) note, social ontologies ‘have conceptual and methodological consequences for how theorists approach those phenomena they seek to explain’. From the holographic relational ontology, I draw the following conceptual and methodological implications for IR in general and for understanding China’s rise in particular.<sup>4</sup> These implications do not amount to a full-fledged *theory* on China or IR; rather, they intend to exemplify some broad promises of ‘quantum theory as an interpretive tool for the social sciences’ (Der Derian, 2013, 583n7). In this spirit, I hope this can help generate further research in this still largely uncharted terrain.

First of all, to the extent that international relations contain parts (such as states) and wholes (such as international society and the global economy), their relations are holographic relations. As such, states (or non-state actors for that matter) are not fixed or essentialist things with their *own* intrinsic properties. We can still talk about states and their characteristics, but to make good sense of them, we need to

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4 It must be pointed out that the following methodological implications are meant to be illustrative, rather than exhaustive. A holographic relational ontology also underpins the basic principle of literature reviews in research and such methodological devices as metaphor, analogy, autoethnography, case study, and survey in the social sciences.

look at their holographic roots in their wider worlds and understand how such entanglements enable a state to become ‘the way it is’, not as an essential being, but always as holographic becoming. All states necessarily emerge from, and contain information of, multiple worlds, and in this sense, their relations are not merely *inter*-national relations or foreign relations. With world politics grounding in a holographic ontology, it is possible and indeed imperative to perceive and practice IR in a more dynamic, holistic, and cooperative way. ‘Foreign policy’ as a concept, no doubt befitting a Cartesian/Newtonian ontology of self and Other, may give way to global public policy of empathy and shared responsibility in dealing with challenges arising from such holographic relations.

Poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist IR literature has usefully deconstructed the essentialist, binary oppositions of identity/difference, self/Other, inside/outside, and West/Rest. But the holographic ontology provides a new perspective on why such dichotomies are fundamentally untenable given their inevitably common holographic entanglements. This does not mean that all states are like-units (Waltz, 1979). The world is not an ideal-type holographic system within which each part equally shares the same properties of their holographic whole.

Second, insofar as holographic relations in global politics are constituted largely through informational and discursive connections, discourse analysis can help trace the lineage and genealogy of norms and ideas which make global society hang together. Thus, in a methodological sense, the holographic relational ontology has much in common with the poststructuralist discursive ontology. Yet, while the latter sees things as constructed by discourse, it says little on the being of discourse itself. The holographic relational ontology, on the other hand, treats discourse as existing *in* as well as constitutive *of* holographic relations. The holographic relational existence of discourse, implied in notions such as *discursive formation* and *intertextuality* (Merrell, 1991, 193; Pitts, 1995, 302–303), can explain why discourse cannot be attributed to a single author and why it (and its associated power effect) appears at once to be everywhere and nowhere. Thanks to their holographic ontology, discourse and power go capillary (Foucault, 1980, 142).

Third, given the existence of holographic relations in both spatial and temporal terms, understanding a part requires paying attention to both its holographic relationality in/with the past as well as in the

present, so as to avoid both ahistorical analysis and historicist determinism. History is not destiny in that we are not bound by ancient hatred or have to mechanically repeat time-honored great power tragedy, but nor is it something which we can completely transcend (aka the ‘End of History’). We are a holographic part of space and time, our ontological wholes. Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, knew too well his country’s historically situated holographic ‘identity’:

[T]he history of India is a long history of her relations with the other countries of Asia. Streams of culture have come to India from the West and the East and been absorbed in India, producing the rich and variegated culture which is India today. At the same time, streams of culture have flowed from India to distant parts of Asia. If you would know India, you have to go to Afghanistan and West Asia, to Central Asia, to China and Japan and to the countries of South-East Asia (Nehru, 2011, 315).

In short, while Cartesian/Newtonian-inspired theorizing favors ‘simplifying’ (Waltz, 1979, 6), holographic ontology highlights a strong quantum characteristic of complexity, uncertainty, and indeterminacy about global life. Instead of a teleological process of homogenization, holographic transition is more multifaceted and dynamic. Moreover, scholarly discourses are part and parcel of holographic relations in IR, and rather than merely a neutral analytic tool independent of the world they describe, they are an inherently participatory factor in how holographic relations take shape and evolve. Consequently, holographic reality is necessarily protean and complex, and our theorizing effort ought to reflect it accordingly.

## 4 China’s rise as holographic transition

### 4.1 *China in the world and the world in China*

From a Cartesian/Newtonian ontological standpoint, it is easier to understand what ‘China in the world’ means than to grasp how the world is also in China. But it is crucial to understand the latter equation since otherwise we see only a partial picture of China’s ontological

being. China *qua* China is always a dynamic constellation of relations, and the holographic relational ontology affords us a fresh perspective on the holographic nature of those relations which together constitute what we see as 'China's rise' today. Indeed, I argue that the rise of China is a prime example of how China is being transformed through its ongoing holographic entanglements with the world.

To highlight China's contemporary rise as holographic transition does not mean that China was not a holographic being before. Rather, China's rise represents a significant new phase of it, which has yet to be more fully examined. In this section, I sketch out a first-cut account of China's rise in holographic terms. From the beginning, 'China' may be seen as a self-conscious holographic project, modeling itself on *tianxia* (All under Heaven). With that holographic self-imagination, it was open, for example, to Buddhist influence from India. Under the rule of the Mongols, China was introduced to Islamic and Persian medicine. It is noted that in their study of China, French scholars started to unravel India and Central Asia (Chandra, 1998), meaning that inside the so-called 'China' there were traces of Indian and Central Asian cultures. Tu (1994, 4) thus likens 'Chinese culture' to 'a majestic flowing stream', arguing that many 'great outside influences altered this stream at various points'. But the terms 'stream' and 'outside influences' still do not go far enough in conveying the inherently holographic nature of China's being/becoming.

In fact, the term *China* (*Zhongguo* in Chinese) is largely absent in traditional Chinese canons. For example, it exists neither in the Confucian classic text *Analects* nor the Daoist text *Daodejing*, whereas by contrast the word '*tianxia*' appears 23 and 60 times respectively. As Rey Chow (1998, 6) points out, the obsession with *China* and *Chineseness* among Chinese intellectuals was largely a product of recent world history, which itself testifies to China's modern holographic emergence in the Eurocentric world of nationhood and nationalism (see also Zhao, 2005, 8, 13–14).

Given that China has always been a holographic part of its changing worlds, it is no longer adequate to cast its contemporary rise merely in terms of change in *power balance*; it must also be an ongoing process of holographic transition, emergence, worlding, or enfolding. The existing literature has made much about a rising China with increasingly global presence (Shambaugh, 2013; Wortzel, 2013). Yet, the same

literature continues to treat China in ‘national’ terms (for a critique, see [Pan, 2014](#)). While China’s rise has no doubt cast a large shadow on the world, its ability to do so is precisely due, at least in part, to its changes within ([Zhang, 1992](#), 428), many of which reflect the effects of its global connections. That is, China not only has gone global, but also many elements of ‘the global’ have simultaneously gone inside ‘China’, thus creating a further globalized China ([Zweig, 2002](#); [Zhang, 2003](#); [Pan, 2009a](#); [Carlson, 2015](#)). In this ongoing process of mutual implication between ‘China’ and its multiple worlds, China is never confined to, or merely defined by, itself. In this sense, [Aihwa Ong \(2005, 18\)](#) is right that ‘When a book about China is only about China, it is suspect’. To understand China entails considering its global holographic relations.

At first sight, the notion of China as a holographically global state flies in the face of its reputation as a stubbornly Westphalian state, impervious to (especially political) change hoped by the West ([Mann, 2007](#)). But as noted earlier, holographic transition is never meant to be mere Westernization. If we look only for rapid change in China mostly in our own image, we are likely to overlook or downplay China’s opening up to the wider worlds and to their goods, resources, capital, science and technology, information, norms, cultures, fashions, crises, challenges, among other things. Emanating from these extensive relations is not the intensification of two-way transactional flows in trade, investment, people, and ideas between an otherwise static China and the rest of the world, but a China that has been simultaneously transformed in the *complex* images of its multiple worlds. Such holographic transition, by no means always positive, can be illustrated through the holographic nature of the ‘Chinese’ economy, the ‘Chinese’ state, and ‘Chinese’ society.

The ‘Chinese’ economy is perhaps China’s holographic transition par excellence. Since the beginning of China’s open-up policy, the economy has been gradually transformed into a world economy writ small, so to speak. In 2016, China’s total imports and exports reached \$4.1 trillion, compared to \$20.6 billion in 1978. It now ranks as the largest trading nation in the world, with its trade as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) at 40.7% in 2015 ([World Bank, 2016](#)). According to the United Nations, annual foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to China grew from \$2 billion in 1985 to \$128 billion in



2014 (Morrison, 2015, 14), when China overtook the USA as the top destination for FDI for the first time since 2003 (BBC, 2015). By mid-2012, 436,800 foreign-invested enterprises (FIEs) had been set up in China (Xinhua, 2012). In 2014, FIEs in China accounted for 45.9% and 46.4% of its exports and its imports, respectively, and their share in China's high-tech exports was even higher (Morrison, 2015, 13; see also Pan, 2009a, 17). What these figures reveal is not only increased interdependence between the Chinese economy and the world economy, but also the deepening transformation of the former as a holographic part of the expanding global supply chains and production networks (Pan, 2009a). Ranging from computers to smart phones, many so-called 'Made-in-China' products are in fact made by numerous transnational corporations and suppliers. It has become difficult to 'speak of... China as a single economic unit', or to attach 'an accurate national label' to 'the goods and services now produced and traded around the world' (Ohmae, 1995, 12–13).

Despite the Chinese leadership's deliberate avoidance of labelling the economy as 'capitalist', there is no denying that market capitalism is now part and parcel of it. In the words of Long Yongtu, China's chief representative in its World Trade Organization (WTO) accession negotiations, 'China's economy must become a market economy in order to become part of the global economic system' (quoted in Pan, 2009b, 136). In this process, FIEs and the ideas and norms they represent have played a key role. Consequently, their presence and penetration in China has brought not only higher environmental standards, increased awareness of social corporate responsibility, and modern business management practices to their Chinese partners, but also inappropriate worker relations, corrupted practices and anti-competitive behavior (Enright, 2017).

As the private sectors of the Chinese economy grow, even the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), now welcoming private entrepreneurs into its ranks, could not be immune from being holographically affected. Indeed, the very ideas upon which the CCP was first founded came from Europe. Today, internal CCP reforms continue to be influenced by the multiple worlds, including Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Central Asia, and a variety of non-communist states in Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America. As a result, 'the CCP itself is evolving into an eclectic hybrid, composed of bits and



pieces of a wide variety of systems' (Shambaugh, 2008, 296). Similarly, Wei Pan argues that China's political regime is a mixed regime which has drawn upon 'the Chinese tradition of civil service via examination and the Western tradition of legalism and liberalism' as well as 'the experiments of Hong Kong and Singapore polities' (Pan, 2003, 3).

The CCP's holographic transition mirrors a similar process concerning the change of the Chinese state. As some 'state transformation' literature demonstrates, the Chinese state has been transformed into a 'regulatory state' as a result of 'changes in political-economy relations, particularly class formation and the political strategies of socio-political forces' in a new global environment (Hameiri and Jones, 2016, 78). Yet, as a holographic being, the Chinese state defies any single labels, for it bears closer resemblance to something of what Michael Mann (1993, 75–82) describes as 'polymorphous'. In the words of Linda Weiss (2012, 38), a polymorphous state is 'internally a non-unitary configuration whose various components have crystallised at different points in time, obeyed different rationales, experienced often separate histories, and become linked to different constituencies, domestic and international'. Thus, it is not self-contradictory to claim that China is at once a neoliberal capitalist state, a developmental state, a competition state, a regulatory state, a mercantilist state, and a party-state. Its polymorphousness testifies precisely to the holographic nature of a Chinese state in transition.

Such a holographic transition is both enabled by and reinforces the transnational flows of people, ideas, and discourses at the societal level. For instance, between 1978 and 2015, more than 4 million Chinese students went overseas to study, and during the same period more than half of them returned (Ministry of Education, 2016). There were 397,635 international students from 202 countries and regions around the world studying in China in 2015 (Zhang, 2016). In 2010, at least 600,000 expats were working or living across China (Zhou and Elsinga, 2015). The city of Yiwu, a globally connected small merchandise hub, is now home to about 10,000 foreign business people from 85 different countries, working for over 3,000 foreign trading companies (Chen, 2015, 38). It is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on the scales, drivers, structures, processes, and complex mechanisms of such holographic people-to-people linkages, but suffice it to say that in these processes have emerged both the 'transnational capitalist class' and

‘transnational public intellectuals’ (Sklair, 2001; Carlson, 2015). Their interests, ideas, and discourses help weave and sustain the holographic networks between China and its worlds. Shambaugh and Ren (2012, 37, 39) reveal that almost all major schools of IR theory can find echoes in China. A sociology-of-knowledge analysis of such traveling theories may well tell a fascinating story of their holographic entanglements. As a result, when we talk about China’s rise, we should not just focus on its rise in power or capabilities, but also on its holographically transformed economy, politics, society, and people, as well as their implications for rethinking China’s IR.

#### 4.2 *Realist and liberal theorizing of China revisited*

A China that holographically emerges out of the contemporary globalized world cannot be adequately understood by theories that are still based on the Cartesian/Newtonian ontology. In opening up a new ontological perspective, this article now turns to a brief examination of why mainstream IR theories, particularly realism and liberalism, need to be rethought. First, realism, and power transition theory in particular, have almost completely overlooked China’s *contemporary* holographic transition. Analysts from those perspectives continue to see the rise of a Germany-like great power, but the world in which China has been rising has largely moved on from the one in which Nazi Germany emerged. The current international system is more ‘regime-intensive’ than the period during which Europe and the USA came into prominence (Lanteigne 2005, 32). Western theorists may have good reason to draw upon past European and American experiences to fear China creating its own ‘Monroe Doctrine’ or falling into the ‘Thucydides Trap’ (Allison, 2015). What they fail to adequately appreciate is the whole from which China has emerged is now quite different (Wang, 2013).

The holographic relational perspective does not necessarily mean that China’s rise or ‘Chinese’ relationality will be peaceful (Shih, 2016, 687). Hard power still matters in contemporary world politics, and realism remains part and parcel of China’s strategic thinking. Hence, despite the existence of a holographic world, if Chinese leaders behave as if they live in a Cartesian/Newtonian world of mechanistic relations, then the above-mentioned fears of China may be warranted. Nonetheless, two points are worth noting here. One is that there is

some Chinese recognition, at both scholarly and official levels, of the world as a cosmopolitan whole (e.g., in terms of ‘the community of common destiny’), and of the notion that there is something of each in the other (*ni zhong you wo, wo zhong you ni*) (Xi, 2015). Whether Chinese foreign policy (e.g., Belt and Road Initiative) will live up to such rhetoric remains to be seen, but at least such understanding seems to be absent from previous rising powers. Another point is that China’s holographic relational being is by definition relational and reciprocal, and thus depends on how other great powers behave toward China. This is because how its significant ‘Others’ behave constitute part of China’s holographic whole. It would be more difficult for Beijing to behave differently if other powers continue to adopt a zero-sum, non-holographic way of understanding and dealing with China.

Second, while liberal scholars do pay close attention to China’s transformation and socialization (Economy and Oksenberg, 1999; Johnston, 2008), they also fail to recognize that its transformation/socialization is fundamentally *holographic*, rather than linear or uni-directional. Some liberal thinkers are right that it would be illogical and extremely difficult for today’s China to overturn the international capitalist order (Ikenberry 2008); after all, China is already a holographic part of that order. Still, many tend to misconstrue China’s holographic transition as reducible to Westernization or democratization in Western image (Gilley, 2004; Hutton, 2006; Kristof, 2013), while forgetting that the sources of holographic influence on China are global, rather than merely ‘Western’. The global whole in which China exists and evolves includes also the ‘non-Western’ world as well as ‘Chinese’ history and tradition, and to ignore those connections and their complex impact on China is to miss a significant aspect of China’s holographic relations in the world.

Furthermore, even as China has absorbed many ‘Western’ influences (bearing in mind that there is nothing pure Western to begin with, as Hobson [2004] points out), such outside influences, once transmitted into China, may undertake further local holographic transition of their own by taking on some ‘Chinese’ characteristics (Pan, 2012, 116–117). Also, as China’s power grows and its relations further expand (such as through the Belt and Road Initiative), it is certain to once again become a major source of holographic transition for other countries, just as it once was, particularly through its tributary system, in which the

participation of the ‘barbarians’ was in part to ‘come and be transformed’ (*lai-hua*) (Fairbank, 1942, 132). Thus, China’s rise is both an object and an agent of holographic transition. For this reason, it cannot be understood as a simple return to a Sinocentric world order or a Chinese world without the West (Katzenstein, 2012; Barma, Ratner and Weber, 2007). After all, what is ‘Chinese’ is always already and will continue to be a holographic reflection of its wider worlds, including the West.

To sum up, both the ‘identity’ of China and its implications for the world are inherently complex, dynamic and indeterminate. They do not fit neatly with the realist or liberal grand theorizing of China’s rise as either revisionist or conformist. As holographic transition, China’s rise defies such binary scenarios of either a hegemonic challenge to the Western-dominant order or a linear integration into it. With China unable to meet the liberal expectation, there has now been growing disillusionment with, and renewed realist fear of it in recent years (Pan, 2012, Chapter 7; Campbell and Ratner, 2018). Without doubt, China’s rise does pose many profound challenges, whether economically, politically, normatively, or environmentally. But such challenges, despite their apparent ‘Chinese’ symptoms, often have their holographic origins *in* the worlds. Thus, without denying Chinese responsibility or agency, to effectively deal with those challenges requires us to see them less as uniquely Chinese problems than as global and holographic challenges. Global problems demand global public policy and cooperative solutions. As such, for the Trump administration to focus on ‘Chinese’ imports, for instance, as the cause of the USA’s job-loss problem misses the point. Similarly, any attempts to contain China are unlikely to be effective given that China’s very being has been embodied and embedded in holographic relations with the global whole, with which we are all inextricably entangled and implicated.

## 5 Conclusion

The basic starting point of this article is that the obstacle to better understanding China’s rise is not primarily theoretical or empirical, but ontological. Specifically, mainstream IR theories, informed by the Cartesian/Newtonian ontology, continue to see China’s rise as the rise of another self-contained actor, with its own identity, power, challenges,

and/or opportunities. Questioning this ontological framework, this article has proposed a holographic relational ontology. From this perspective, China's rise is not only a matter of power transition, but also a process of holographic transition into the multiple worlds, economically, politically and socially. As a consequence, the various challenges associated with its rise are best understood and dealt with from a holographic standpoint.

This ontological rethinking calls into question both the realist and liberal theorizing of China's rise.<sup>5</sup> Focusing almost exclusively on the implications of China's rising power, the former fails to take into account its holographic transition in the contemporary world. The latter, on the other hand, sees China's rise either as a more or less linear and teleological process of 'Westernization', or no political change at all. Both fail to come to terms with the complexities and indeterminacies of China's holographic re-emergence. This article does not claim to offer a new theory of understanding China's IR. Instead, it has gestured toward an alternative approach that goes beyond the Cartesian/Newtonian ontology. As such, if it has not presented a clear alternative picture of China that can be easily understood in conventional Cartesian/Newtonian terms, that is because China's holographic entanglements do not lend itself to such a caricature.

Beyond China, the implication is that the world is not a grand chessboard, with countries as single self-bounded chess-pieces vying for power in a zero-sum game. Rather, it resembles a boundless holographic web, with each part of the web in one way or another mirroring the complex whole. As global challenges loom, transnational interconnectedness deepens, and a myriad of issues interact in unpredictable ways, it is now time to take the worlds' holographic existence more seriously.

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5 It is worth noting that both the realist and liberal worldviews in the West have been holographically represented in China. The failure of Chinese realists and liberals to see China in holographic terms is part of the broader ontological problem.

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