

State Personhood in Ontological Security Theories of International Relations and Chinese

Nationalism: A Sceptical View

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Abstract: Ontological security-seeking, or the pursuit of a sense of existential security, has been proposed as an explanation for enduring international conflicts and other forms of state behaviour. This paper considers the concept of ontological security as it has been recently used in International Relations and applies it to the case of contemporary China. A state-as-actor variant of ontological security theory produces expectations inconsistent with China's observed conduct and, in addition, obscures relevant aspects of Chinese nationalism. These problems, it is argued, stem from the assumption of state personhood. Current formulations of the concept would be improved if they were revised to treat individuals rather than states as actors. Reifying the state and treating it as a corporate actor constitutes a significant departure from the original elaboration of the concept and ignores its location in a broader theory of modernity and globalization. The state is an evolving social institution and transformations brought to it are among the sources of individual ontological insecurity. The paper proposes another way of treating ontological insecurity, as a condition affecting situated individual actors who cope with the effects of late-modern globalization, and supports its plausibility with evidence from the Chinese context.

International Relations theory continues to wrestle with the question of how to account for the behaviour of corporate actors such as ethnic groups, classes or, more often than not, states.¹ The viability of some of the theoretical approaches potentially most relevant to explaining contemporary international relations, including theories of socialization, learning and persuasion, partly hinges on the resolution of these problems. Though it is widely acknowledged that extrapolating theoretical concepts from the individual level to states operating in an international system can be problematic, International Relations theorists continue to use and defend this approach. They often justify this theoretical position using a Friedman-style instrumental rationale: treating the state as a person is theoretically productive because it generates empirically supported hypotheses.² Like with other assumptions, however, the theories they generate often remain untested, thus creating situations in which a primarily deductive model of inquiry rests upon an instrumental resort to assumptions that

¹ Other, differently defined corporate actors include, for instance, diaspora groups.

² Milton Friedman, *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 14-15.

lacks the empirical tests necessary to establish its usefulness.³ Others who defend the approach of extrapolating from individual to state actors do so with reference to rival theories that use this approach or to a more general pragmatic defense of the practice, according to which it is both useful and intuitive to think of the state as a unitary actor.⁴ Without the empirical testing of theories, however, none of these justifications for assuming state personhood is fully satisfactory.

The evolving debates about how to model corporate actorhood are far-ranging and now engage a number of disciplines.⁵ Rather than offering a critique of or an alternative to prevailing models,⁶ this paper is broadly concerned with the conditions under which the theoretical extrapolation from individual to state can be more or less effective. Specifically, it addresses the problems that arise when concepts are imported to International Relations from other disciplines or social theories and then scaled up from individual to state without due consideration for their theoretical origins. In order to illustrate these difficulties, this paper will apply a theory that uses one form of this type of extrapolation to an empirical case. This paper therefore attempts a substantive or empirical criticism of one type of state-as-actor assumption, hopefully suggesting specific pitfalls to be avoided in the development of theories based on a state-as-actor assumption.

Among the newer variants of contemporary International Relations theory that treat the state as actor is Jennifer Mitzen's version of ontological security theory, which draws on Anthony Giddens's original development of this concept as applicable to individual persons. Both Giddens's concept and Mitzen's extension of it have been influential in International Relations and the study

³ Cf. Shapiro and Green's discussion of assumptions about actor rationality in the development of rational choice theory. Ian Shapiro and Donald Green, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 30-32.

⁴ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma" *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.12, No. 3 (2006), pp. 341-370.

⁵ While it is not feasible to relate here the different perspectives and points of contention in the debates about state personhood, it should be emphasized that these are on-going and remain important. Exchanges and different positions on this topic are related in, e.g., Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Forum Introduction: Is the state a person? Why should we care?" *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30 (2004), pp. 255-258; Alexander Wendt, "The state as person in international theory" *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 30 (2004), pp. 289-316.

⁶ E.g. Peter Lomas, "Anthropomorphism, personification and ethics: a reply to Alexander Wendt" *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 349-355.

of nationalism more generally. At first glance, the concept of ontological security seems to offer a potentially compelling account of contemporary Chinese foreign relations and other phenomena related to Chinese national identity. Though the China case should arguably be an easy one for a state-actor theory like Mitzen's, we in fact observe several significant departures from the predictions it generates.⁷ However, rather than to altogether discard ontological security as a concept, it is proposed that this idea can still illuminate important phenomena in international relations, but only after substantial modifications are brought to its current usage. Instead of taking a state-as-actor approach, we should assume that it is individuals, not states, who experience ontological insecurity. The analytical value of applying the ontological security concept as it was originally proposed by Giddens – with the individual as actor – to the case of contemporary China will be illustrated. This concept is relevant to the Chinese context and can help explain important observations with implications for international politics, such as routinized practices associated with nationalism. A third part will explore in greater depth why the individual-as-actor approach finds more empirical support than the state-as-actor one, proposing that the reason lies in the resort to the state-as-actor assumption itself, which obscures important aspects of how the state, as an evolving institution, affects individuals' sense of ontological security.⁸ I conclude that this contextual aspect of individual ontological insecurity is an integral part of Giddens's thought and that ignoring it

⁷ The method used here is similar to a theory-infirming type of case study, but one which is incorporated in a larger abductive design intended to create opportunities for theory development, e.g. Arend Lijphart, "Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (1971): pp. 682-693. Though it might be possible to generate and test competing explanations for why we observe both Chinese nationalism coexisting with pragmatic foreign policy conduct, the purpose here is to examine the implications of the China case for ontological security theory, as it is currently used and as it could be developed. The problem driving this discussion is therefore primarily theoretical, and empirical evidence about Chinese nationalism is introduced mainly insofar as it serves to illustrate some of the theoretical issues and to support the plausibility of the alternative approach suggested here. The heavier resort to empirics in this critique departs both from some of the discussion of state personhood that has taken place to date and from case-based approaches which attempt to lend support to one or another explanation of phenomena associated with Chinese nationalism.

⁸ The first part of this paper is concerned with how well the existing form of ontological security theory applies to the Chinese context. The second part proposes a different way of using this idea to study Chinese nationalism, focusing on a different actor. There is no dependent variable common to these two theories since one of them attempts to explain inter-state phenomena while the other tries to explain the behavior of individuals.

impoverishes the concept, failing to recognize its necessary dependence on the broader theory in which it originated.

Ontological Security Theory in International Relations

In his sociological analysis of high modernity, Anthony Giddens defined ontological security as a basic need of individuals consisting of “a sense of continuity and order in events, including those not directly within the perceptual environment of the individual.”⁹ “To be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life is some way addresses.”¹⁰ Ontological security is a prerequisite of agency and of self-identity, which Giddens defines as “the self as reflexively understood by an individual in terms of his or her own biography.”¹¹ This understanding of “self” is therefore a narrative which establishes the continuity of an individual’s existence as him or herself, and is in this way closely tied to ontological security. Self-identity is not simply given, but must be “routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.”¹²

⁹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 47. Giddens draws a distinction between practical and discursive consciousness, in which the former constitutes a necessary precondition to the latter and remains normally “bracketed” from it and in which the latter refers to a consciousness of which the content can be articulated by subjects.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 53 & 244.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 52; Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” pp. 341-370. For Mitzen, “role identities” enacted in the context of interaction and relationships sustain self-identity. Referring to security dilemmas and enduring rivalries, she writes that “there is an appropriative moment, where both states take on the identity that is embodied in the competitive routines and therefore become attached to the competition as an end in itself.” The co-constitution of the two states’ role identities in interaction is the process to which her ontological security approach draws attention, e.g. p. 360. Though the process is mainly interactive, the condition of needing ontological security is one which attaches to individual actors and affects their behaviour unevenly. In this paper, it is treated as a condition that has some structural roots but which is affected by individual actors’ particular properties (e.g. dispositions and experiences). These issues are discussed on the next page.

Jennifer Mitzen and others¹³ have explored the relevance of Giddens' concept of ontological security for the study of world politics. In particular, Mitzen has used this idea to develop a theory of routinized relationships between states that can shed light on enduring international rivalries.¹⁴ For Mitzen, ontological security is not only sought by individuals, as in Giddens's original articulation, but also by states.¹⁵ For both individuals and states, ontological security is necessary "in order to realize a sense of agency."¹⁶ In short, states, like individuals,

need to feel secure in who they are, as identities or selves. Some, deep forms of uncertainty threaten this identity security. The reason is that agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Where an actor has no idea what to expect, she cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends. Since ends are constitutive of identity, in turn, deep uncertainty renders the actor's identity insecure. Individuals are therefore motivated to create cognitive and behavioural certainty, which they do by establishing routines.¹⁷

While all actors satisfy the need for ontological security by routinizing their social interactions, they vary in their mode of attachment to these habituated behaviours: "some actors rigidly repeat routines, while others participate more reflexively."¹⁸ Actors who are very attached to their routines will reproduce these ontological security-providing behaviours even if they compromise their physical security. Thus, in Mitzen's application, this approach offers a new explanation for very persistent conflicts between security-seeking states.¹⁹

For Giddens and to some extent Mitzen, the variation in actors' degree of routinization depends on their level of basic trust (their trust in "the continuity of others and in the object-world"),

¹³ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics,"; Jennifer Mitzen, "Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: habits, capabilities and ontological security," *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2006), pp. 270-285; Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1998), pp. 226-255; Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security," *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No. 5 (2004), 741-767; Eli Zaretsky, "Trauma and Dereification: September 11 and the Problem of Ontological Security," *Constellations*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2002), pp. 98-105; Brent Steele, "Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 519-540.

¹⁴ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics," p.342.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

which in turn depends on, among other things, the character of social relations at the formative stages of life or other experiences that generate existential anxiety.²⁰ Actors with healthy basic trust can engage in creative thought and, most importantly, will reflexively adapt their behaviours to new information. A healthy level of basic trust is, therefore, a prerequisite of learning.²¹ It allows an actor to engage in complex forms of learning, processes that entail responding to new information flexibly by modifying conduct rather than retreating into habituated behaviours.²² For Mitzen, actors with healthy modes of attachment to their routines will also be capable of pursuing “higher-order” goals, such as “sociation, development and self-esteem.”²³

In contrast, actors lacking healthy basic trust will exhibit a “blind commitment to established routines.”²⁴ This compulsiveness is “born out of unmastered anxiety, which lacks that specific hope which creates social involvements over and above established patterns.”²⁵ Even when routines are physically harmful, to break from them can cause actors’ great, paralyzing anxiety, as in the example of physically abused women for whom this constitutes a barrier to ending unhealthy relationships.²⁶ “Because routinized social relations stabilize our identities, individuals become attached to the self-conceptions their routines support, regardless of their content.”²⁷ A generalized state of anxiety can come to be replaced by specific symptoms: rigid patterns of behaviour that “swallow up” the underlying anxiety.²⁸ Again, this condition contrasts sharply with basic trust,

²⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 242. Following Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p. 350, I take a dichotomous view of the “basic trust” variable. Though this part of the discussion treats basic trust as a disposition of actors, “trust” more broadly understood might also be affected by situational factors or circumstances (rather than just the “dispositional” ones identified here). For the purposes of this discussion of ontological security, however, the focus is primarily on basic trust type as a more lasting and profound characteristic of agents which affects their conduct across different situations.

²¹ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p.350.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p.347.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 43.

which is related to creativity, or “the capability to act or think innovatively in relation to pre-established modes of activity.”²⁹ Trust type is therefore an important factor affecting behaviour.

This focus on the idiosyncratic sources of actors’ conduct carries implications for the status of the theory when it is extended to state actors. The identification of trust type as elaborated here amounts to a judgement about the specific properties of the actor being studied.³⁰ This situation affects whether Mitzen’s theory should be considered primarily structural, as some have suggested, or as one that accords importance to agents, as it is treated here. If Mitzen’s theory is interpreted as structural, in other words, offering a way of understanding patterns of behaviour without reference to states’ dispositions but through the structuring effect of their interactions, then the focus on actor-specific kinds of trust is problematic.³¹ But this is probably not a helpful way of understanding Mitzen’s theory since, when she argues that interaction leads to the appropriation of role identities by states, she seems to presume states with low basic trust in the first place. The interactive processes compelling the attachment to a set of competitive routines (and identities) that generate enduring rivalries could not be expected to have the same effects on states with healthy trust, who should be able to more effectively resist this type of self-harming role appropriation. Thus, there is reason to believe that “trust type” is an important component of Mitzen’s theorizing, and that it would be relevant to consider it here. More importantly, if the theory were stripped of its focus on agent properties, it would lose much of its capacity to explain why behaviours are routinized in some cases but not in others – in other words, variation in behaviour across actors or cross-situational consistency in a given type of actor’s behaviour. Because the need for ontological security is a constant across actors, it cannot explain why some actors will rigidly adhere to routines

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁰ Cf. Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” pp. 350-351.

³¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point. There seems to be some ambiguity in how to understand the theory, which is “interaction-based” but also considers agent-specific “mode of attachment” to be an important factor, e.g. Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p. 343. Ultimately, it remains unclear to me if the coherence of a unitary state-as-actor approach can be sustained unless trust is made to be the result of only interaction.

while others will reflexively adapt their conduct.³² Interaction, understood as having structuring effects, underdetermines whether and how actors will appropriate routines.

Thus, a different interpretation of Mitzen's theory is adopted here, according to which the theory is not intended to be purely structural, but instead considers explanatory factors to consist in structures *and* the properties of units. This view retains a focus on the explanatory potential of individual trust type as a "variable." More importantly for the argument advanced below, it also implies that we cannot make use of the ontological security concept to explain behaviour without looking at processes occurring at the level of the state, since the sources of variation in trust type are found at the unit level.³³ In more general terms, it is difficult to sustain an application of the ontological security concept to states' social relations that does not in some way consider variation in states' properties (either across states or perhaps within states over time), a process which entails examining state-level processes rather than treating states as ontologically primitive units. The important point here is that, if we accept this second view of Mitzen's theory, then we can seriously consider the role of agent-specific factors such as type of trust. A first step in applying the theory to concrete cases is then to examine the variation in this feature across actors.

As we have seen, an actor's trust type is important in the first place because it shapes the means by which actors satisfy their ontological security needs. These means often include routinization, but other ways of coping also exist. For instance, Catarina Kinnvall argues that collective identities can help individual persons who feel vulnerable and experience existential insecurity reaffirm a threatened self-identity.³⁴ Some collective identities, she argues, are more attractive in this regard than others. Specifically, "nationalism and religion supply particularly powerful stories and beliefs because of their ability to convey a picture of security, stability, and

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Moreover, variation in trust type over time may be found in system-wide changes to the nature of units, which would still require an analysis of units themselves and thus preclude the viability of an approach that reifies the state. This is discussed further along.

³⁴ Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism," p. 742.

simple answers.”³⁵ The fact that collective identities are involved in individual efforts at mitigating ontological insecurity suggests an important problem with extrapolating the concept to corporate actors, as will be explored below.

In sum, a state-as-actor variant of ontological security theory generates some predictions about how states with different degrees of basic trust will behave in their interactions with others. Actors with healthy basic trust will show rational deliberation, learning and adaptation to changing circumstances. Actors affected by low basic trust will instead rigidly repeat routines that stabilize their relationships to others. They will be unlikely to learn new behaviours and their capacity for creativity will be lesser. They will also fail to reflexively self-monitor and update their biographical narratives.

China’s Ontological Security, Basic Trust and International Behaviour

In order to avoid tautology, an actor’s degree of basic trust must be established without reference to their behaviour. In other words, it must be possible to specify *a priori* an actor’s “type,” as having either rigid or unhealthy basic trust. Where, then, do we look for determinants of basic trust? For people, writes Giddens, basic trust is shaped by formative experiences during infancy. For instance, the infant’s routinized interactions with a primary caretaker help develop basic trust that will have consequences spanning the individual’s entire life, while traumatic experiences, at this important early stage or later on, have the opposite effect.³⁶ By analogy, we can surmise that, for states-as-persons, traumatic social encounters and other experiences, such as major wars or other disruptive events, especially if they are related to the founding or constitution of these states, will undermine their basic trust and leave them in a state of ontological security-seeking. This condition will, in turn, translate into a strong attachment to routinized behaviours.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ E.g. *Ibid.*, 342.

According to such an approach, the history of the Chinese state-as-actor suggests that it should be a relatively straightforward case of unhealthy basic trust and ontological insecurity. Historians and political scientists studying China, from Ssu-yü Teng and John Lewis Fairbank onward, have stressed the profound civilizational rupture that China experienced with its first “encounter with the West.”³⁷ The traumas associated with subsequent colonization and exploitation shattered China’s self-understanding as the beneficent “Middle Kingdom” and exposed as illusory its long-held beliefs about the pacific nature of its external environment and its own place within it.³⁸ These processes can be understood as having led to a deep form of existential crisis that, while being in a sense ‘acute,’ has also been sustained over generations.³⁹ The numerous upheavals experienced by the Chinese civilization during the 20th century, especially the most recent Tiananmen Square Massacre and ensuing international isolation, can no doubt count among the major disruptions to China’s sense of a continuous “biographical” narrative. As Chih-yu Shih recounts, the issue of outwardly oriented self-representation has also “been intrinsically related to China’s domestic institutional array”:⁴⁰

One witnesses the change of China’s self-image from a ‘socialist China’ externally allied with the Soviet Union and internally embodied in central planning and land reform, to a ‘revolutionary China’ externally antagonistic toward both superpowers and internally plagued by the Cultural Revolutions, and then to an ‘experimental China’ externally lauding independence and internally praising decentralisation. The most recent shift is toward a ‘normal China’ externally looking for partnership and internally enforcing economic reform. All these changes have required a new theory of the world.⁴¹

³⁷ Ssu-yü Teng and John K. Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West: a documentary survey 1839-1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); cf. Peter Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Peter Hays Gries, “Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a ‘China Threat’ Inevitable?” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2005), pp. 235-65; Peter Hays Gries, “China’s ‘New Thinking’ on Japan,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 184 (2005), pp. 831-850; discussions of nationalism under Deng and earlier include Michel Oksenberg, “China’s Confident Nationalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65 (1986/7), pp. 501-523; John K. Fairbank, “China’s Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 47 (1969), pp. 449-463; John Cranmer-Byng, “The Chinese View of Their Place in the World: A Historical Perspective,” *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 53 (1973), pp. 67-79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ E.g. Peter Gries, *China’s New Nationalism*; Gilbert Rozman, “China’s Quest for Great Power Identity,” *Orbis* (1999), pp. 383-402.

⁴⁰ Chih-yu Shih, “Breeding a reluctant dragon: can China rise into partnership and away from antagonism?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), p. 757.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

While this series of redefinitions certainly suggests the capacity for identity change, because these historical changes have required fundamental and often violent reconstitutions of the Chinese state and sweeping reassessments of the international environment, they should be understood as traumatic disruptions rather than reflexive developments of China's self-identity. The resulting sense of existential anxiety about its own self-identity and the nature of its environment should make of China an ontologically insecure actor with rigid basic trust.

The condition of unhealthy basic trust which prevents China from quelling its existential anxiety and ontological insecurity should, according to the theory, compel China to engage in routinizing behaviours as a means of achieving a stable self-identity and a sense of ontological security. More specifically, we should expect ontological insecurity to prompt the reinforcement of an existing identity through routinized relationships. A state locked into this type of condition should systematically reproduce similar forms of behaviour with other actors as a means of stabilizing its identity. We should observe constant patterns in the state's behaviour, including rigid, inflexible positions on international issues; a persistent loyalty to states with which it has routinized friendly or cooperative relations; and lasting animosity, hostility or rivalry with states that it is used to regarding as threats. Empirical observations disconfirming this hypothesis would include the absence of such patterns and, in their stead, change over time, flexibility in the state's responses to different situations, adaptation and learning.⁴²

These predictions for a state with rigid basic trust are not supported by a number of studies of Chinese foreign policy. Recent analyses of China's behaviour in the context of international organizations and its responses to foreign representations of its economic and political rise suggest that China is in fact capable of the learning, creativity and reflexive self-monitoring that is expected of ontologically secure actors with healthy basic trust. Though China's external relations remain a

⁴² Cf. Alastair Iain Johnston, "Learning versus adaptation: explaining change in Chinese arms control policy in the 1980s and 1990s," *The China Journal*, Vol. 35 (1996), pp. 27-61.

hotly contested matter and general conclusions are elusive, for the purpose of supporting the preliminary argument developed here, a selection of specific patterns in China's international behaviour in some important areas of its foreign policy will be used to demonstrate the need to reconsider the expectations outlined above.

Examples of behaviour inconsistent with that of a state affected by rigid basic trust and profound existential anxiety are found in China's participation in international organizations. Scholarship in this area has considered the different substantive areas of international governance in which China's participation has evolved, inching over the years closer and closer to those affecting the core elements of statehood, as well as the "depth" of China's internalization of the international norms underpinning practices within these institutions.⁴³ These processes have proceeded in tandem with substantial changes since 1989 to China's understanding of the U.S.'s hegemonic influence in international institutions and involvement in North-East Asian security arrangements.⁴⁴ Specifically, many note that, in matters of regional security, China has gone from being "very suspicious of, and to some extent hostile toward, the [U.S.'s paramount] role in Asia" to more recently a view that the United States has "vital and legitimate" interests in the region and plays a "positive and constructive role for peace and stability in the region."⁴⁵ With respect to both the U.S.'s regional role and multilateralism more generally, China has shown profound changes in its attitudes and conduct.

An example illustrating this evolution in China's behaviour in the context of inter-state organizations is found in Alastair Iain Johnston's recent work on China's socialization to the

⁴³ Marc Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions: Alternate Paths to Global Power* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Allen Carlson, "Helping to Keep the Peace (Albeit Reluctantly): China's Recent Stance on Sovereignty and Multilateral Intervention," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (2004), pp. 9-27; cf. Wang Hongying, "Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: The Limits of Socialization," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2000), pp. 475-491.

⁴⁴ This change in understanding, most notable since 1998, is discussed at length in Jing Huang, "China and America's Northeast Asian Alliances: Approaches, Politics, and Dilemmas," in Michael Armacost, ed. *The Future of America's Alliances in North-East Asia* (Stanford: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2004), pp. 237-249.

⁴⁵ Jing Huang, "China and America's Northeast Asian Alliances," pp. 240-242; Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions: The ASEAN Way and International Relations Theory" in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds. *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 107-162; also David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2004/5), pp. 64-99.

Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), which demonstrates China's capacity to internalize new understandings and norms of conduct through sustained interactions with other actors.⁴⁶ Johnston's study focuses on China's socialization into this institution by means of persuasion, a process he finds has been conducive to developing China's new "habits of cooperation."⁴⁷ China's increased participation in informal discussions aimed at consensus-seeking, the so-called ASEAN Way, for instance, constitutes evidence of a generally improved "comfort level" with qualitative multilateralism.⁴⁸ Johnston also finds that China has internalized the concept of "mutual security," a development that signals a profound shift in its substantive understanding of the regional environment and that has translated into a changed position on specific issues, such as ARF-led preventive diplomacy.⁴⁹ Mindful of how it is perceived by other regional actors who explicitly wish to "socialize" it, China has deliberately adapted its behaviours to restructure relationships with them.⁵⁰ Rather than rigidly clinging to routines, as we would expect from a state with unhealthy basic trust, China's diplomacy has demonstrated adroitness and flexibility and, more importantly, the espousal of new norms of conduct and even new goals in the region. From an agent perspective, the processes involved in this redefinition of relationships and self-identity can be called complex learning. Moreover, as Johnston notes, persuasion of the type observed in the ARF context is likely to occur when the persuaded is "highly cognitively motivated to analyze counter-attitudinal information,"⁵¹ a condition which is incompatible with the predictions for the rigid basic-trust type of actor. The "socialization of

⁴⁶ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," pp. 124-141; cf. David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia," pp. 64-99.

⁴⁷ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," pp. 124-126. Johnston is specifically concerned with showing how behaviour has changed through socialization, as distinct from two mainstream IR explanations: 1) through material rewards and punishments which exogenously change an actors preferences; and 2) changes to domestic distributions of power which result in new state preferences, discussed on pp. 107-125

⁴⁸ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," pp. 131-137; cf. Amitav Acharya, "Ideas, identity and institution-building: From the 'ASEAN Way' to the 'Asia-Pacific way'?" *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1997), pp. 319-346.

⁴⁹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," pp. 133-137.

⁵⁰ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," p. 126; e.g. ASEAN's perceptions of China are discussed in Allen Whiting, "ASEAN Eyes China" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (1997), pp. 299-322.

⁵¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Socialization in International Institutions," p. 117.

China”⁵² to the ARF and other international organizations noted by Johnston and others therefore suggests the type of sociation, learning and development that the theory expects only of states with healthy basic trust.

This inconsistency between China’s putative maladapted type and its conduct toward other actors is further indicated by changes to China’s self-representations or, in other words, to the discourses through which China describes and explains itself and its circumstances to other actors. Returning to Giddens’s formulation of ontological security, we are reminded that an important component of actors’ behaviour in the high modern period is the capacity to reflexively self-monitor and engage in reconstructions, re-orderings and developments of their “biographical” narratives, including of their relationships to others.⁵³ While these means of producing and reproducing self-identity and identification are typical of individuals in our epoch, healthy basic trust is a precondition for them: actors with low basic trust are unable to engage in this type of self-identity development.⁵⁴ For Giddens, this inability is a form of neurosis, which often leaves individuals paralysed by and entrapped within their identity-affirming routines. Extending the analogy with the individual, we should expect that states with rigid basic trust will not be able to engage in this type of reflexive self-identity change.

China, however, provides one of the most striking examples of a state’s deliberate attempt at changing its self-identity and its relationships of identification with other states. Yong Deng, for instance, describes at length the processes by which China has endeavoured to counter “China Threat theory” by articulating alternative representations of its identity, reputation and role in the international system.⁵⁵ China threat theory refers to “foreign attributions to China of a harmful,

⁵² Cf. Marc Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions*; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Treating International Institutions as Social Environments,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45 (2001), pp. 487-515; a contrasting take is found in Wang Hongying, “Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy.”

⁵³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 40-45.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Yong Deng, “Reputation and Security Dilemma: China reacts to the China threat theory” in Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert Ross, eds. *New Approaches to the Study of China’s Foreign Policy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

destabilizing, and even pernicious international reputation.”⁵⁶ According to Deng, Beijing has taken stock of realist theories of international relations which posit the tragedy of the security dilemma and, specifically, of realist theories that emphasize the probability of war occurring when rising powers challenge established hegemons.⁵⁷ China is thus aware of the security dilemma that it will confront “if its threat image abroad and material capabilities grow simultaneously.”⁵⁸ Citing suggestive findings from the literature on the democratic peace and on security communities, Deng notes that one process through which threat image can be altered or overcome is social identification.⁵⁹ States that identify with each other are less likely to perceive each other as threatening and are therefore less susceptible to the constraining effects of the security dilemma, while the opposite is true for states that do not share any sense of identification. This type of consideration lies at the source of Beijing’s hypersensitivity regarding China threat theory and its consistent efforts to contest and undermine it.⁶⁰

China’s “strategy” for reducing the influence of China threat theory includes several representational and other tactics. Probably chief among these is equating China threat theory with an outdated “mentality of Cold War-style power politics” and advocating that great powers take a less alarmist approach more suited to current realities in statements to external audiences.⁶¹

2006), pp. 186-214; also discussed at length in Zha Daojiong, “Comment: can China rise?” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 775-785; and William A. Callahan, “Forum: The Rise of China: How to understand China: the dangers and opportunities of being a rising power,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31 (2005), pp. 701-714; Wang Hongying, “National Image Building and Chinese Foreign Policy” in Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang, eds. *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), pp.73-102.

⁵⁶ Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma,” p. 186, also William Callahan, “Forum: The Rise of China: How to understand China,” pp. 270-271, and William A. Callahan, “National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism,” *Alternatives*, Vol. 29 (2004), pp. 199-218.

⁵⁷ Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma,” pp. 187, 189-91; Zha Daojiong, “Comment: can China rise?;” Chih-yu Shih, “Breeding a reluctant dragon.”

⁵⁸ Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma,” p. 187.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

A second tack involves repeatedly offering reassurances to foreign listeners of China's peaceful intentions and its satisfaction with the status quo world order.⁶² The clearest example of this type of representation is found in Beijing's "peaceful rise" discourse, a series of pronouncements about the uniqueness of the phenomenon of the growth of China's influence over global economic and political processes that serves specifically to differentiate China from earlier rising powers that provoked wars.⁶³ In a survey of official "assessments and policy designs" since the late 1990s, Jing Huang finds that this discourse is indicative of a new understanding of the international environment and concludes that it is supported by substantial changes to China's practices, which show a more actively engaged, "cooperative and patient" China.⁶⁴ Deng and Huang's accounts of Beijing's strategies find support in Chih-yu Shih's analysis of Chinese academic responses to China threat theory, in which he finds that "the introduction of IR theories to China one after another – first realism, then liberalism and most recently constructivism – has directly affected how Chinese represent themselves, internally as well as externally."⁶⁵ Shih argues that "the self-representation of China in terms of 'peaceful rise' suggests the influence of liberal theory and ideology as an alternative to realism" in Chinese thought.⁶⁶

A third and related discursive tactic by which China attempts to mitigate the effects of "China threat theory" and a possible security dilemma involves its use of new self-representations that help cultivate its legitimacy to, acceptance by and identification with key international audiences, especially international institutions, developing countries and major powers.⁶⁷ For instance, China has renewed expressions of solidarity with the developing world⁶⁸ and begun to

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ E.g. Zha Daojiong, "Comment: can China rise?" pp. 775-776.

⁶⁴ Jing Huang, "China and America's Northeast Asian Alliances," pp. 239.

⁶⁵ Chih-yu Shih, "Breeding a reluctant dragon," p. 774.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Yong Deng, "Reputation and the Security Dilemma," p. 187.

⁶⁸ Allen Carlson, "Helping to Keep the Peace (Albeit Reluctantly)," p. 25; Peter Van Ness, "China and the Third World: Patterns of Engagement and Indifference" in Samuel S. Kim, ed. *China and the World: Chinese Foreign Policy Faces the New Millennium* 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview, 1998), pp. 151-170.

emphasize its intention to act as a “responsible power” through efforts at coordination with other major powers.⁶⁹

In responding to China threat theory in this manner, China has proceeded with the awareness that “a state’s reputation determines how other states judge its international character and gauge its intentions.”⁷⁰ Grasping the consequences of an unmitigated security dilemma, China reflexively, self-consciously resists the narrative ascribed to it externally with its own redefinition of its identity, reputation and relationship to other states. This pattern of discourse indicates the type of reflexive self-monitoring that should be observed by a state actor that has healthy basic trust.

China’s “socialization” into international institutions and its attempt to redefine its role and reputation in order to intervene in the processes that could lead to a security dilemma suggest that it has the self-awareness and critical distance from its routinized behaviours necessary for reflexive interventions. Rather than a neurotic or pathological attachment to routines, China has shed historically ingrained patterns of behaviour which many foreign observers thought it was very unlikely to abandon only a few years earlier.⁷¹ These developments are not consistent with the profile of China as a low-trust, ontologically insecure actor unable to shed identity-sustaining habits.

Though this discussion casts doubt on the state-as-actor approach, the concept of ontological insecurity as such remains relevant to international relations and, more specifically, to Chinese foreign relations. Despite the inconsistencies discussed above, the argument developed here does not suggest that conditions of rigid basic trust do not obtain in China. Instead, I argue that a broad range of practices do in fact bear out the predictions associated with the ‘rigid basic trust’ actor-type and ontological insecurity. These behaviours, however, can only be observed and explained if we abandon the state-as-actor assumption that underlies the current use of the ontological security

⁶⁹ Chih-yu Shih, “Breeding a reluctant dragon,” p. 755, also Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma,” pp. 186-214.

⁷⁰ Yong Deng, “Reputation and the Security Dilemma,” p. 191.

⁷¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, “Socialization in International Institutions,” p.134; Jing Huang, “China and America’s Northeast Asian Alliances,” pp. 238-242.

concept in International Relations. A more fruitful approach, it is proposed here, regards Chinese nationalism, including the discourses and practices constituting and sustaining it, as reinforcing a self-identity that attaches to individuals rather than states.⁷² “Deepening” the notion of ontological security such that its referent once again becomes the individual person reminds us that corporate entities, including states, arise from collective identities which are involved in individuals’ efforts at coping with ontological insecurity in the first place. This next section will explore how ontological insecurity attended by low basic trust is a condition which, while experienced on a societal scale, translates into daily practices of nationalism that are often local rather than national, informal rather than official and performed by individual citizens rather than a state “person.”

Ontological Security and Chinese Nationalism

It is argued here that the concept of ontological security can make the greatest contribution to the study of international politics if it retains its relationship to globalization and institutional change, as it was originally expressed by Giddens.⁷³ A development of Giddens’s insight is found in Kinnvall’s work, which draws our attention to the domestic level of analysis and individuals’ experiences by proposing a relationship between collective identities and individual ontological insecurity. She argues that structural changes brought about by globalization have left individuals vulnerable to feelings of existential anxiety, which they often seek to satisfy by reaffirming a threatened self-identity.⁷⁴ Because religion and the nation provide especially compelling narratives about a group’s continuity over historical time and thus allow for a sense of stability, they are identity constructions which form powerful poles of attraction for ontologically insecure actors.⁷⁵

⁷² Mitzen does not claim that ontological security at the state level is incompatible with ontological security at the individual level.

⁷³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 2.

⁷⁴ Catarina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism,” p. 742.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

“Going back to an imagined past by using reconstructed symbols and cultural reference points”⁷⁶ is a response to the destabilizing effects of changing patterns of global economic and political integration.

For Giddens and Kinnvall, modern globalization’s most important consequence has been the collapse of time-space distantiation and the expansion of mechanisms that disembed social relations from their traditionally specific locales, leaving individuals feeling uprooted and uncertain.

“[T]he globalization of politics and economics is being felt as time and space are being compressed and as events elsewhere, real or imagined, are becoming increasingly localized. A globalized world is for many a world devoid of certainty, of knowing what tomorrow holds.”⁷⁷

Since it is premised on a stable understanding of these basic aspects of existence, ontological security is upset by this reorganization⁷⁸ and “the search for constant time- and space-bound identities become[s] a way to cope with the[se] effects of modern life.”⁷⁹

In addition to these direct consequences for individuals’ sense of existential certainty, globalization, because of its particular nature as a process driven by an ideologically economic logic, has had effects on the shape and form of the modern nation-state. One of the most important of these is the hollowing out of the state’s earlier functions of providing individual economic security and stability.⁸⁰ The weakening of public welfare programs is an example of these transformations. For Kinnvall, such changes to the nature of the modern state have exacerbated not only individual material insecurity but also individual existential uncertainty, creating an authority vacuum that has since been filled by nationalist movements, which in some cases compete with the state for the individual’s loyalty.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 744.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 742.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 743; Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism*, p. 743.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Thus, while Kinnvall obviously takes the individual rather than the reified state as the relevant actor, her argument remains centrally concerned with collectives in general and with the state in particular. Unlike Mitzen, however, Kinnvall treats the state as a *structure* subject to changes resulting from globalization which are themselves among sources of individuals' ontological insecurity. Insofar as it examines the consequences of global structural changes for the state and the domestic sphere, Kinnvall's analysis shares more affinities with the "second-image reversed" literature in International Relations than with a state-as-actor variant of ontological security theory.⁸² In treating the nation-state as a modern structure undergoing the epochal changes emphasized by Giddens, Kinnvall remains more faithful to his original theory about challenges to self-identity in the late-modern period than Mitzen. To treat the state as an actor affected by ontological insecurity is to strip Giddens's approach of its concern for the historical evolution and specificity of institutions – including the institution of the state – and of their impact on *individuals'* self-understandings and sense of existential security. The modification that Mitzen brings to ontological security in scaling it up to the state level fails to acknowledge the dependency of this concept on the rest of Giddens's theory, of which the central focus are the unique conditions of modernity and globalization.

Sharing Kinnvall's concern with the evolution of the nation-state under conditions of threat to ontological security, Jef Huysmans finds that "ultimately the legitimacy of the state rests on its capacity to provide order – not a particular content of order but the function of ordering, of making life intelligible."⁸³ For instance, a state's security policy is related to ontological security, since it "orders social relations – introduces a level of certainty – objectifying the abstract fear of death through enemy construction."⁸⁴ When an actor's enemies, dangers and threats multiply and cannot

⁸² E.g. Peter Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed: International Sources of Domestic Politics," *Comparative Politics and the International Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (1995), pp. 129-160.

⁸³ Jef Huysmans, "Security! What do you mean?" p. 242.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

be coherently perceived or organized, this actor finds themselves in a “permanent state of crisis and urgency” in which their “trust in the capacity to keep threats at a distance crumbles.”⁸⁵ As a consequence of this ontological insecurity, “the legitimacy of the political agencies which identified themselves as mediators between life and death, as the managers of *Angst* [e.g. states] could face a ‘fundamental’ political crisis.”⁸⁶ Huysmans depiction prompts us to think about the modern state as being a provider of ontological security to its citizens: where it fails in this role, its purpose is undermined. This view is consistent with Jim Marlow’s argument that one of the major aspects of modern governmentality is the implicit provision by governments of “a significant background element of the ‘intertext’ (an intersecting web of discursive semblances) of present day ‘ontological security.’”⁸⁷ A similar position is found in Eli Zaretsky’s comment on the “historicity” in Giddens’s thought about modernity, an insight which he develops through an analysis of 9/11 as a traumatic event which he claims de-reified the modern institution of the state.⁸⁸ The common threads that link these propositions have to do with the ontological function of the modern state (in the most direct sense, as a provider of ontological security to individuals) and the structural challenges to this role that have emerged during the late-modern period.

What, then, are the implications of this discussion for the earlier analysis of China’s international behaviour? Following the state-as-actor approach, China presents a likely case of rigid basic trust, a condition which should make it strongly attached to a static, historically oriented self-identity manifested in and reinforced by a routinized and inflexible foreign policy. Instead, we have seen that China-the-actor has shown a significant degree of flexibility, learning and reflexivity in its social relations during the post-Cold War period. Insofar as the state-as-actor approach carries “predictions” about the behaviours of a state with rigid basic trust, the China case disconfirms them.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Jim Marlow, “Governmentality, ontological security and ideational stability: preliminary observations on the manner, ritual and logic of a particular art of government,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2002), p. 242.

⁸⁸ Eli Zaretsky, “Trauma and Dereification,” pp. 100-101.

However, the China case also suggests that, rather than abandoning the idea of ontological insecurity on account of these weaknesses, IR should retain a re-conceptualized version of it. The alternative approach to ontological security introduced in this next section, which remains more faithful to Giddens's original conception and draws on the insights of Kinnvall, Huysmans and Marlow, draws our attention to a different set of concerns closer to the experiences of the contemporary Chinese individual. If, as Kinnvall suggests, the nation provides an especially attractive collective to identify with because of its capacity to help provide a simple, reassuring sense of continuity and stability in one's self-identity, then we should observe individuals attempting to satisfy their need for ontological security by engaging in routinized practices that reaffirm this particular aspect of their identity. Moreover, we should also see the Chinese state aid and abet these behaviours in an effort to act as a provider of ontological security to its citizens. This section considers empirical evidence for the plausibility of such an approach.

Just as the condition of rigid basic trust can be said to obtain at the level of the unitary state-as-actor, it can be argued that it also pervades the societal level.⁸⁹ As studied by William Callahan and others, the policies of far-reaching and deep economic reform and China's subsequent integration into the world economy brought about a "crisis of communism" which was later exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Though in China this ideological crisis did not bring about the disintegration of the state as it did elsewhere, it was profoundly disruptive and as a result of it "understandings and self-understandings of the People's Republic of China have shifted from communism to nationalism."⁹⁰ As Callahan and Peter Gries note, while international observers often emphasize the narrow, top-down aspect of this nationalism, closely equating it with statism

⁸⁹ Though there is no space to discuss them extensively here, there are domestic conditions that could plausibly be interpreted as constituting an environment in which individuals' sense of ontological security is affected negatively. Of conditions specific to China, one could note the acute social dislocation resulting from the economic reforms undertaken first in the 1980s and accelerated in the 1990s, as well as the upheaval that ensued from the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre.

⁹⁰ William Callahan, "National Insecurities," p. 201.

and elite manipulation, China's nationalism is in fact primarily a grassroots or mass development.⁹¹ There is an abundance of scholarly research on the content and tone of Chinese nationalism stressing the popular espousal and promotion of nationalist views.⁹² In the following paragraphs, examples are offered to illustrate some of the nationalist habits and customs that arguably provide ordinary Chinese with a reinforced sense of self-identity and ontological security.

In Suisheng Zhao's survey of different nationalist discourses and practices, a distinction is drawn between those found at the state, elite-intellectual and societal levels. The "bottom-up populist sentiment against foreign pressures" located at the societal level finds expression in a wide range of practices that impact the lives of ordinary people. For the most part, these include the consumption of popular movies, television shows, posters, cartoons and, especially, books and magazines denouncing affronts to Chinese interests and dignity by, over and above all others, the United States and Japan.⁹³ An oft-noted example of such consumption practices is found in the best-selling series of "Say No" books of the mid-1990s (e.g. *China Can Say No*, *China Can Still Say No*, *How China Can Say No* and *Behind the Scene of Demonizing China*).⁹⁴ Nationalist practices also include the regular expression and discussion of nationalistic and variously "patriotic" positions in forums such as (government-sanctioned) web bulletin boards and letters to editors of online newspapers and other publications.⁹⁵ Among these have been expressions of support for China's military exercises in the Taiwan Strait during the 1995-1996 crisis and other commentary on

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202; Peter Gries, "China's New Nationalism."

⁹² Peter Gries, "China's New Nationalism,"; William Callahan, "National Insecurities,"; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Suisheng Zhao, "Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior" in Suisheng Zhao, ed. *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 66-88; Yong Deng, "Escaping the Periphery: China's National Identity in World Politics," in Weixing Hu et al. eds. *China's International Relations in the 21st Century: Dynamics of Paradigm Shifts* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2000), pp. 41-70; Michel Oksenberg, "China's Confident Nationalism."

⁹³ Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Suisheng Zhao, "Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior," p. 67; Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p. 125-128.

⁹⁵ Cf. Allen Whiting, "Chinese Nationalism and Foreign Policy After Deng," *The China Quarterly* Vol. 142 (1995), pp. 295-297.

reunification with the island, as well as hard-line positions on relations with Japan and the U.S.⁹⁶ Other popular cultural trends have also been associated with Chinese nationalism, such as the wave of “Mao Fever” in the 1990s, during which it became fashionable for ordinary young Chinese to collect memorabilia and other representations of Chairman Mao Zedong and historical events associated with the founder of the People’s Republic.⁹⁷

Another particularly striking practice to constitute contemporary Chinese nationalism is the popular commemoration of China’s humiliation through the routine, institutionalized observance of various “National Humiliation Days.” Observing these dates usually entails customs such as not working and visiting historical sites that commemorate China’s troubled history.⁹⁸ As William Callahan stresses in his study of this phenomenon, these practices are primarily cultural and form an integral part of the lives of ordinary people.⁹⁹

In Callahan’s view, practices of humiliation remembrance underscore the extent to which national insecurity is an important component of Chinese nationalism.¹⁰⁰ Popular national humiliation discourse centres about China’s historical experiences of suffering, usually emphasizing the long “century of humiliation” (1839-1949) that began with the Opium war. “The discourse recounts how at the hands of foreign invaders and corrupt Chinese regimes, sovereignty was lost, territory was dismembered, and the Chinese people were thus humiliated.”¹⁰¹ It is, however, also a mode of nationalist thought that involves a “very active notion of history and recovery,” stressing China’s moment of overcoming these historical weaknesses at the founding of the People’s Republic and reminding of the continued need for its citizens to engage in corrective behaviours that will ensure such debasements are not experienced again.¹⁰² In this sense, “the narrative of

⁹⁶ Suisheng Zhao, “Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior,” p. 67.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ William Callahan, “National Insecurities,” p. 208.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰² William, Callahan, “National Insecurities.”

national salvation depends upon national humiliation; the narrative of national security depends upon national insecurity.”¹⁰³ The commemoration of this painful national history serves the function of reaffirming national identity and, in that manner, becomes a part of individuals’ self-narratives. “Humiliation is thus one of the modes used to draw ethical boundaries between self and other, between domestic and foreign.”¹⁰⁴ These distinctions, however, are not clear-cut: “with humiliation it is often the (former) self that is ‘othered’.”¹⁰⁵ This humiliation discourse, as used by the state and ordinary people, cements the individual’s belonging to a group whose boundaries are defined by a historical account and which carries specific requirements for their behaviour. Thus, while national humiliation discourse and commemoration by all accounts instrumentally serve the state-building goals of current political elites, they can also be understood as a routinized mode of behaving and thinking that consolidates personal self-identity and helps individuals cope with ontological insecurity. The fixation on historical humiliation can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to impose a degree of structure on an otherwise overwhelming cognitive environment.¹⁰⁶ The rigid adherence to a specific self-identity associated with membership in the nation and the failure to reflexively redefine narratives about self, at least insofar as identification with the nation is concerned, are consistent with expectations about actors trying to cope with ontological insecurity.

Taking a comparative perspective on national humiliation discourses across different countries, Callahan finds that the national humiliation discourse forms a specific “mode of nationalism” that is closely associated with modern state-building projects. The routinized re-living of the historical experience of humiliation helps establish the transition from China as an empire to the constructed modern nation-state that it is today.¹⁰⁷ As with cultural consumption practices, the sense of civilizational – hence, existential – continuity and order created in this manner provides a

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Catarina Kinnvall, “Ontological Security and Religious Nationalism,” discusses the cognitive strains imposed on individuals by late globalization.

¹⁰⁷ William Callahan, “National Insecurities,” p. 207.

sense of ontological security via individuals' identification with the national narrative. A related process seems to be at work in state discourse about the larger cultural area known as "Greater China," which Callahan finds has also been "deployed to address a 'crisis' – whether the crisis is of geopolitics, global capitalism, or identity."¹⁰⁸ The Chinese state's vacillating role in encouraging national-humiliation discourse and other nationalist practices (while at the same time managing these such that they remain within politically unthreatening limits)¹⁰⁹ thus recalls Marlow's and Huysmans's suggestions that the provision of ontological security – i.e. an "ontological function" – inheres in the *raison d'être* of the modern nation-state. Such a take is consistent with Marlow's suggestion that this ontological function is part of 'governmentality' under the conditions of high-modern globalization. Re-enacting elements of the narrative of humiliation in actual practices provides an identification with the national group that keeps profound self-doubt and 'chaos' at bay.

From the perspective of international relations theory, these aspects of Chinese nationalism suggest at least three specific problems with treating the state as a person-like actor. First, various studies of the routinized discourses and practices that make up Chinese nationalism show that they are not uniform across domestic groups. For instance, those associated with political elites and intellectuals are not the same as those used and performed by students and other less privileged members of society. This differentiation suggests that the individual's experience of ontological security and their resort to specific coping mechanisms are conditioned by their degree of conventional, social and economic security, as well as other social, ideological and cultural factors. These circumstances are, in turn, related to the changing nature of the contemporary Chinese state and the complex, uneven impact of these changes on Chinese society. At all of the different levels of Chinese society, nationalism and ontological insecurity carry observable and distinct consequences for China's relations with other states. These differences cannot, however, be

¹⁰⁸ William Callahan, "Forum: The Rise of China: How to understand China," p. 272.

¹⁰⁹ Discussed at great length in Peter Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, and Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction*, and "Chinese Nationalism and Pragmatic Foreign Policy Behavior."

accounted for by an approach that treats China as a unitary actor with a single, coherent role identity and require instead a focus on sub-state actors and their relationship to the state itself.

Moreover, an approach that characterizes states as subjects of ontological insecurity will not be able to account for the sources of this condition, nor for their historical specificity. For Giddens, ontological insecurity is a condition produced by the structural changes associated with late-modern globalization, including transformations to the nation-state itself. In the case of China-the-actor, it is not merely its 'biography' as a traumatized actor with low basic trust that can provide us with a clue to its contemporary conduct. If it were, then we could explain its behaviour as a consequence of its history of traumatic *conventional* security relations and without reference to its *ontological* security. The condition of ontological security is best understood as a product of contemporary systemic conditions, not reducible to specific experiences of interaction within a dyad of state actors or to events in the life history of a single state actor. These systemic conditions impact the party in question not only experientially (as in by specific marking events), but, more profoundly, also change its nature, constituting and reconstituting it into new forms of actor. These destabilizing changes to the 'substance' of selfhood or agency are the necessary basis for a claim about ontological insecurity, as opposed to one about insecurity born from specific experiences in the actor's life (what we might think of as a 'psychological' or dispositional insecurity) or about insecurity from more conventional sources, such as a well specified external threat. While these other understandings of security are important, the concept of ontological insecurity loses some of its meaning and analytical value-added if it used to refer to them. In an approach that distinguishes between these different aspects, the conduct of the Chinese state is best understood as that of a complex institution with multiple forms of internal and external relations and whose functions are adapting to a rapidly changing world that places individual citizens' sense of existential security under increasing strain. This condition is illuminated by Giddens's concept and helps explain some of the phenomena observed in the contemporary Chinese foreign relations. Though here I have

argued against an approach that treats states as units, this point is also relevant for theorizing states as corporate actors. It implies that, if one were to develop a theory in which states have ontological security needs, it would have to be a theory that examines the changing nature of statehood and state agency rather than one that treats states as pre-theoretically given units.

Another problematic aspect of treating the state as actor lies in the assumption that states can “routinize” any type of behaviour, including the most risky and extreme. In Giddens’s original formulation, processes through which self-identity – and ontological security – are maintained include daily practices, such as habits of bodily control and other simple, routinized social interactions, many of which are so ingrained that they are taken for granted.¹¹⁰ In this sense, these processes are not merely close to the daily experiences of ordinary people, they are part and parcel of them because they create the conditions which underpin more deliberated forms of action. The omnipresence of such routines in daily life is what endows them with this constitutive function for individual agency. It follows from this that the social relations and forms of self-identifying to which we impute similar ontological security-providing roles should also be found in actor’s daily lives. In other words, they should be ‘routines’ in the ordinary sense of the word. In Mitzen’s state-as-actor approach, however, ontological security-seeking is used to explain security dilemmas, which are dynamics that unfold as escalating spirals and are often characterized by crises and violence.¹¹¹ These interactions are therefore removed from the more “mundane” forms of social behaviour that Giddens identifies as producing ontological security. Mitzen, however, claims that over extended interactions, states “appropriate” the identities embodied in their competitive routines, such that these come to be taken for granted in a sense similar to the one advanced by Giddens.¹¹² In contrast, the argument proposed here remains more closely attuned to Giddens’s focus on the quotidian and the taken-for-granted by stressing the role of cultural practices and other behaviours

¹¹⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 35-69.

¹¹¹ Cf. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30 (1978), pp. 167-214.

¹¹² Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” p. 360.

that are often a part of the daily lives of individuals. This makes more plausible the proposition that the practices discussed here come to be naturalized such that they, in turn, contribute to individuals' ontological security.

Conclusion

A frequent way of theorizing international relations involves scaling inter-personal theories up to the level of the inter-state system. It is well acknowledged that this extrapolation will often be useful, but that there are also reasons to question and specify the conditions under which it will be difficult. One of the circumstances which can make problematic the anthropomorphic treatment of the state is when the logic of the original theory, as applied to the individual, relies heavily on features of the domestic environment that are very different from those of the international system. This problem affects the extrapolation from individual-level theories that explain actors' behaviours as driven by their need to maintain ontological security, since the institution of the state, including its specific features and transformations, plays a role in shaping how individual persons meet their ontological security needs. This helps explain why theories that impute ontological security-seeking to state actors encounter problems when discussed with reference to specific cases.

This paper has used the case of China to examine the condition of ontological security first as it pertains to China, the unitary state-as-actor, and then as it applies to individuals within the Chinese state. These considerations of the idea of ontological security have suggested that China-the-actor manages to cope with the condition of ontological security by retaining a reflexive distance from its routinized behaviours. Despite the fact that it has the makings of an actor with rigid basic trust, China-the-actor does not show a strong attachment to routinized behaviours but rather demonstrates the capacity to engage in the redefinitions of its self-identity, learning and sociation expected of actors with healthy basic trust.

Following the discussion of China-the-actor that indicated some potential weaknesses with a state-as-actor approach to ontological security, a second section considered the condition of ontological insecurity and rigid basic trust with reference to individuals. The expectations of theorists of ontological security who stress the appeal of nationalism for actors confronting existential anxiety found support in the cultural practices and discourses adopted by Chinese citizens, including consumers of nationalist popular media and observers of national humiliation commemorations. This suggested that the phenomenon of Chinese nationalism, as integral to daily life, can be partly understood as a response to ontological insecurity and unhealthy basic trust at the individual level. It also suggested that the ambiguous role of the Chinese state toward nationalism should be considered in light of the contemporary nation-state's role as a provider of ontological security to individuals.

This discussion acknowledges that Mitzen's ontological security approach has made a very important theoretical contribution to the study of international relations – its importance provides the rationale for applying the theory to the China case in the first place – and therefore does not advocate an outright rejection of attempts to theorize ontological security at a collective or group level. It may be plausible to argue that corporate actors have a need for ontological security, and the social relations that satisfy it, analogous to those of the individual. However, such a theory should consider explicitly that corporate actors such as states also fulfil evolving functions of ontological-security provision to individuals and should specify the relationship of ontological security at the corporate level to its “counterpart” at the individual level.

Though it has been argued here and elsewhere that domestic expressions of nationalism in China have not deeply compromised its conduct of a “pragmatic” or “adaptive” foreign policy,¹¹³

¹¹³ The question of what processes allow China to maintain a “pragmatic” foreign policy while showing signs of strong externally directed nationalism at home is important and has been studied elsewhere by scholars using approaches different from the one used here. The discussion offered here suggests that attempting to study the relationship between

nationalism remains significant for the study of Chinese foreign relations. China's societal nationalism does provoke foreign policy consequences, especially when it leads to protests against or other expressions of negative sentiment toward foreigners living in China or other countries. Explanations of such occurrences typically represent the Chinese "state" as manipulating popular nationalism in order to shore up regime legitimacy. But these accounts miss the grassroots character of nationalism and obscure how some forms of nationalist cultural practice can in fact serve ordinary individuals' own need for a sense of existential security and a stable, anchored identity. They also miss the more complex relationship of the modern Chinese state to nationalism. Rather than a duping ideology deployed in the service of political elites' narrow objectives, *some* forms of nationalism supported by the Chinese state also respond to the genuinely felt ontological security needs of a population undergoing destabilizing domestic change and integration with the rest of the world. In this sense, the Chinese state is performing an ontological function arguably characteristic of the high-modern nation-state. While none of this exonerates the Chinese state from supporting pernicious forms of nationalism, it implies that we should take more seriously the idea that some types of nationalism can serve benign social needs.

The individual-level phenomena ignored by a state-actor approach are also important because, in some sense, studying them more closely can shed light on the relationship between personal ontological security needs and the identity-reinforcing function of nationalist practices. In contrast, an approach that treats nationalism as a disposition of unitary state actors is not sensitive to a very wide range of sub-state behaviours which, though not initially manifest in a state's foreign policy, can generate or perpetuate a very strong societal attachment to a specific national identity and external posture. In states where an authoritarian government cannot effectively manage

individual and group-level ontological (in)security is not helpful, since for now ontological (in)security is not usefully thought of as a group phenomenon. See note no. 7.

nationalism, such a situation can carry important international consequences. Even in the case of China, there is some evidence that events are taking a turn in this direction.¹¹⁴

Beyond the direct and indirect consequences of nationalism for Chinese foreign relations, students of world politics should be concerned with the issues raised by this case because it represents one instance of a broader set of transformations to the nature of states, as both domestic and international actors. To attach the concept of ontological security to a reified state is to miss the broader connection in Giddens's thought between globalization, institutional change and ontological security needs. To take the state as given is to miss the incidence of globalizing forces upon this institution and its changing form and functions, including the provision of ontological security. The state should be understood not as subject to ontological insecurity but instead as one of the structures involved in individuals' efforts at managing it. State-supported nationalism is an important manifestation of the relationship between the ontological security-seeking individual and the state that such an approach can help us understand.

¹¹⁴ E.g. Peter Gries, "China's 'New Thinking on Japan.'"