**Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies**
**The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies**

Volume 3
Issue 2 *China Special*

Article 11

8-1-1999

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Recommended Citation
(1999) "Yongjin Zhang, China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and beyond," *Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 11.
Available at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol3/iss2/11

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# Yongjin Zhang, China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and beyond

**Abstract**
This book is a reinterpretation of China's international relations since 1949. Employing the notion and theory of international society, it offers a systematic examination of China's unique relationship with the society of states from its alienation in the 1950s and the 1960s to its political socialization and economic integration in the 1980s and the 1990s. It explores how such a unique relationship has shaped and is likely to shape Chinese foreign policy. This book provides an entirely new perspective for our understanding of forces influencing Chinese foreign policy behaviour.

Zhang, Yongjin. China in International Society Since 1949: Alienation and Beyond. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998. ISBN: 0312215401

**Keywords**
Yongjin Zhang, China, international relations, Confucianism

This book review is available in Culture Mandala: The Bulletin of the Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cm/vol3/iss2/11

## Centre Book Review

**Yongjin Zhang *China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and Beyond,* Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998**

Yongjin Zhang's *China in International Society since 1949: Alienation and Beyond* depicts Sino-global relations as a process of political socialisation and mutual legitimation over the past 50 years. The author's central contention is that: "The international relations of the People's Republic of China is a saga of the isolation-alienation-socialisation-integration of China in international society since 1949" (p. 244). The 'isolation-alienation' end of the socialisation spectrum concerns Western anti-Communist politics in the formative period of the PRC's socialist nationhood. As Zhang states:

> China's relative isolation was merely an expression of its alienation. . . . for more than two decades after the Korean War, the United States followed a multi-pronged strategy of diplomatic non-recognition, economic embargo and military containment against China. Such policies had a wide range of ramifications in alienating China from the American-dominated international system. (p. 71)

The other end of the spectrum, that of 'socialisation-integration', was ushered in by the momentous occasion of the PRC admission into the United Nations in 1971 and its *rapprochement* with Washington highlighted by Nixon's visit to China. The 1970s were thus a period of "mutual adjustment and mutual engagement between the PRC and the international system" (p. 72), with Deng Xiaoping's reformist era of the 1980s taking the process forward to "China's socialisation and its integration into the society of states" (p. 73). The 1990s, while not without integrative merit for China, especially in economic affairs, are still viewed as a period of incomplete socialisation. This is because of the heightened political attention accorded to human rights and democratisation in the American-led 'society of states'. China's endorsement of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1997 has helped, as has its greater participation in UN activities, from human rights to peacekeeping. However, Beijing's insistence on giving national sovereignty priority over human rights and its alleged abuses of those rights, "all make China increasingly behave like a deviant in the international politics of human rights" (p. 193).

As to the future, let us hope that the Western international social order does not use force to change once again China's normative and operational preferences. In this regard, it is worth pondering the dynamics involved in the past conversion, as distinct from present socialisation, of China:

> As post-Cold War international society is going beyond Westphalia in search of a new order, China still insists on the state-centred order with absolute sovereignty. Over a hundred years ago, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the West used guns to force China to accept the Westphalia order and diplomatic practices. It would be an arduous task for the West to persuade China at the turn of the twenty-first century to give up the order that China found so difficult to embrace in the first place. (p. 250)

The close of a century in which China resumed its honour after prolonged humiliation, represents an opportune time for Yongjin Zhang's book to appear, though China's incomplete socialisation are both a foreboding of possible punitive measures from 'international society' as well as a promise of a confident China which recognises the value of its own contributions to improving international society. After all, China is an acknowledged repository of cultural resources, a strategic lesson in survival (being a civilisation-state that has outlasted all others), and home of one of the greatest teachers the world has known - Confucius. In this regard, international society could well learn from China, not only instruct it.

Herein lies the problem with Zhang's *China in International Society since 1949,* a problem shared by most other writers of international relations texts in the Anglo-American intellectual tradition: there is a narrow disciplinary focus with scant regard for the validity of alternative vocabularies and conceptualisation. Admittedly, greater interdisciplinarity in international relations scholarship does not come easily when intra-disciplinary competition continues to structure argument. This is evident in Zhang's interest in comparing favourably the 'society of states' perspective with "both realist and liberalist explanations of Chinese foreign policy" (p. 248), without thought to how this 'society of states' model might compare with Confucianism (a philosophy on social and political harmony) or translate into the framework of Chinese politics. Even though Zhang is himself a Chinese who only recently - in the last decade - moved overseas into a Western academic setting, such is the power of the paradigm in which he must prove himself that all peripheral views are by necessity ignored. His academic socialisation appears even more successful than that of China's into the 'society of states'. For example, he criticises Chinese officials for not understanding arms control as the West does:

> The indiscriminate denunciation of almost all arms control initiatives short of actual reduction, and the indiscriminate use of 'disarmament' in all its addresses on international ACD [Arms Control and Disarmament] efforts, are evidence of an alarming gap in the understanding of the intellectual basis of the whole spectrum of international ACD initiatives. (p. 158)

When the 'intellectual basis' of arms control is explained, the 'gap in understanding' must surely qualify as a virtue:

> The basic concept of arms control, which is not always incompatible with and indeed sometimes requires quantitative increase and qualitative improvement of nuclear arms, was simply incomprehensible to the Chinese. (pp. 157-8)

'Inadmissible' might have been a more fitting substitute for 'incomprehensible'. The Soviets, too, were in their time criticised for their supposed intellectual failure to grasp (in order to institute) American nuclear deterrence theory. Recourse to an alternative schema of comprehending nuclear weapons doctrine was forced upon American strategists when it became apparent that their Soviet counterparts did not share their (often self-serving) notions of deterrence. This came from the Soviet insistence in the early years of the Cold War on preparing to survive a nuclear war instead of accepting the inevitability of assured destruction and, hence, the logic of deterrence. So there is a certain *deja vu* quality about arguments which depict the Chinese as unable, rather than unwilling, to grasp Western concepts of what constitutes nuclear deterrence and how arms control is to be approached.

Zhang's difficulty arises from his generally uncritical acceptance of the views of the more illustrious, Western-oriented, strategic theorists - such as Alastair Johnson - upon whom he relies for the logically unsustainable sections of his analysis, particularly the instance discussed above. When Zhang is not under the influence of venerable others, which fortunately occurs often enough to validate the book, he writes well and perceptively.