

# **DRAGON-SLAYERS AND PANDA-HUGGERS – UNDERSTANDING CHINESE-AMERICAN INTERACTIONS FROM A LANGUAGE GAME PERSPECTIVE**

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## **Abstract**

Chinese-American relations constitute a complex web of interactions which displays signs of both cooperation and defiance. While fruitful military engagements are unthinkable because of the strong senses of mutual animosity, Washington and Beijing do their best to avoid a major breakdown in their economic relations. Such empirical diversity is not explored sufficiently by rationalist theories of International Relations because they are blind to the social context within which any interaction unfolds.

The thesis argues that an approach which is able to identify the social context is better equipped to make sense of such interactions. Building on the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game, the thesis demonstrates that any interaction is contingent on the meanings and understandings that the participants of the interaction construct through language. The usefulness of the language game approach is illustrated in two empirical chapters, one about the 2001 Spy Plane and the other about the so-called mergers and acquisitions interactions between Chinese and American companies.

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## Introduction

Chinese-American relations have occupied an eminent position within studies of world politics in recent years.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this is that the two countries' interaction has gone through significant changes in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the first two decades of the People's Republic of China, the relationship with the United States was mostly antagonistic due to obvious ideological reasons.<sup>2</sup> The first change came in the mid-1970s, when the efforts of the Nixon-Kissinger tandem's so-called ping pong diplomacy and China's willingness to open up to the world led to a stabilized, albeit loose, linkage of occasional friendship. The relationship then underwent another shift: the 1989 Tiananmen Square events shattered hopes of a long-during successful engagement between the two countries. The massacre reconfirmed fears that political and ideological differences constitute insurmountable obstacles. This realization coincided with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The two episodes eventually reinforced each other: as the global context provided by the Cold War disintegrated, the *ad hoc* amity of the US and China ended with the latter being consolidated into the new major threat to the liberal-democratic world.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese-American axis since then mostly followed this pattern of ups and downs. However, what has been dubbed the "world's most important bilateral relationship"<sup>4</sup> has in the meantime gradually expanded and become more multifaceted than ever before. Today, this relationship consists of multiple, distinct but overlapping loci of interaction where both sides can voice their political, economic and military concerns. What is somewhat puzzling

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<sup>1</sup> For a few seminal works within the literature on China, see David L. Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Washington, D.C.; Berkeley: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; University of California Press, 2009); Randall P. Peerenboom, *China Modernizes: Threat to the West or Model for the Rest?* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How It Will Happen and Where It Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Lawrance, *China Under Communism* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 88–93, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10054942> (accessed April 26, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Why We Must Contain China," *Time*, July 31, 1995, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,983245,00.html> (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Tom Evans, "China-U.S. Relationship Called 'Most Important' in World," *CNN*, April 24, 2013, [http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/11/16/china.us.relations/index.html?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/11/16/china.us.relations/index.html?_s=PM:WORLD) (accessed April 24, 2013).

about these interactions is that they display mixed signs of both cooperation and defiance. Illustrative in this regard is the fact that while truly fruitful military engagements are basically unthinkable because of the strong senses of mutual animosity,<sup>5</sup> both Washington and Beijing do their best to avoid a major breakdown in their economic relations, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global crisis. Thus, close cooperation in the latter case is perfectly feasible despite the deep hostility evidenced in the former.

The picture gets more interesting deeper within political, economic or military interactions. Among bilateral economic relations, for instance, such inconsistencies are also detectable. On the one hand, there are many disputes revolving around currency disagreements,<sup>6</sup> intellectual property rights,<sup>7</sup> and bilateral trade imbalances,<sup>8</sup> just to mention a few, which all evince significant strains. On the other hand, skyrocketing import-export rates or China's unimpeded purchasing of US government securities<sup>9</sup> prove that such frictions do not spill over to other areas of interaction, and that mutually beneficial interaction nevertheless remains a possibility. This seems to suggest that cooperation or defiance in one issue area is somewhat irrelevant – it does not predispose other issue areas to follow suit. Therefore, depending on the particular context, the two countries' behavior *vis-à-vis* each other tends to change.

This changeability gets most perplexing when such inconsistency can be identified not just among different issue areas, but also within a specific issue area. For instance, take

<sup>5</sup> Bill Gertz, "China's High-Tech Military Threat," *Commentary* (April 2012), <http://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/chinas-high-tech-military-threat/> (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See *The US-Sino Currency Dispute: New Insights from Economics, Politics and Law* (Centre for Economic Policy Research (CEPR), 2010), [http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/ct\\_publication\\_attachments/VoxEUKatiSuominenChineseExports.pdf](http://www.gmfus.org/galleries/ct_publication_attachments/VoxEUKatiSuominenChineseExports.pdf) (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> See Ka Zeng, *Trade Threats, Trade Wars: Bargaining, Retaliation, and American Coercive Diplomacy*, Studies in International Economics (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See Gary Clyde Hufbauer and Jared C. Woollacott, "Trade Disputes Between China and the United States: Growing Pains so Far, Worse Ahead?," in *European Yearbook of International Economic Law (EYIEL)*, Vol. 3 (2012), ed. Christoph Herrmann and Jörg Philipp Terhechte (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2012), 31–88, [http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-642-23309-8\\_2](http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-642-23309-8_2) (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Duncan Cameron, "The CNOOC Nexen Takeover: China Plays Chess, Harper Plays Checkers," *Rabble.ca*, December 11, 2012, <http://rabble.ca/columnists/2012/12/cnooc-nexen-takeover-china-plays-chess-harper-plays-checkers> (accessed April 25, 2013).

the Chinese companies' myriad efforts to purchase American firms operating in US territory. In the 1990s, China initiated the Go Global strategy<sup>10</sup> which stipulates guidelines for Chinese companies and firms to expand abroad. These attempts, which have intensified only recently, came to be known under the label of China's mergers and acquisitions (henceforth M&A) activities abroad, but every attempt and the subsequent negotiation process constitute a separate locus of bilateral engagement where the two sides do their best to get the most out of the deal. What is puzzling here is that although the parties involved do learn both from each other and from previous efforts, the outcome is nevertheless dependent mostly on the way the social interaction unfolds. Examples show that the pendulum swings from friendly collaboration through brittle business-making to outright refusal each time representatives of the two countries sit down to negotiate over a deal. Thus while the Chinese Dalian Wanda Group encountered no major obstacle purchasing the AMC Entertainment Holdings in 2012,<sup>11</sup> the Chinese Sany Group's attempt to take over a wind farm failed due to American political opposition which took the form of a presidential decree.<sup>12</sup> The question automatically arises: how was it possible that some M&A attempts progressed smoothly while others had a harder time reaching a positive conclusion? Or, what are the conditions conducive for a successful attempt, and what are the conditions leading to a debacle?

Such inconsistency sometimes slips out of the scope of attention of traditional theories of International Political Economy (henceforth IPE) and International Relations (henceforth IR). This is so because realism and liberalism more often than not describe the world as akin to a coin with only two sides. Instead of acknowledging the depth of interstate affairs, the two

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<sup>10</sup> *Going Global Strategy and Change Prospects and Challenges for Chinese Companies on the World Stage* (IBM Business Consulting Services, 2006), [http://www-935.ibm.com/services/multimedia/company\\_world\\_0529\\_en.pdf](http://www-935.ibm.com/services/multimedia/company_world_0529_en.pdf) (accessed April 7, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Alex Newman, "China Buys Hollywood Influence with Takeover of Top U.S. Cinema Chain," *The New American*, May 29, 2012, <http://www.thenewamerican.com/economy/markets/item/11537-china-buys-hollywood-influence-with-takeover-of-top-us-cinema-chain> (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Helman, "Obama Blocks China's Second-Richest Man From Owning Wind Farm Near Secret Navy Base," *Forbes*, September 29, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2012/09/29/obama-blocks-chinas-second-richest-man-from-owning-wind-farm-near-secret-navy-base/> (accessed April 25, 2013).

theoretical frameworks generally complement each other by squeezing world politics into an either/or sort of debate. Thus while the liberal terminology of economic interdependence, mutual gains and positive-sum games generally tends towards a more amicable representation of international relations,<sup>13</sup> realism's focus on anarchy and national interests would suggest that cooperation is severely limited because the world is populated exclusively by selfish states that are pursuing ways of domination for purposes of security and survival.<sup>14</sup>

This dichotomization is both reproduced in and ossified by studies of Chinese-American relations. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for instance, claims that China will pose no challenge to the world order if the country's economic and political integration in the international system proceeds smoothly.<sup>15</sup> His conclusion is that there is no reason to be alarmed. In contrast to this, John Mearsheimer argues that past examples provide ample evidence that great powers always upset the status quo, and that a rising China is certainly not going to be an exception in this regard.<sup>16</sup> In fact, both of them reduce a complex interstate reality to an abstract debate of explanations and predictions, which divides doves and hawks that are unwilling to abandon their academic home turf. Here, the question that takes precedence over everything else is whether engagement or containment is the most appropriate policy against China.<sup>17</sup>

This thesis intends not to contribute to this widely pursued academic tradition. This thesis instead argues that the empirical complexity displayed by Chinese-American relations in general and M&A engagements in particular lend themselves to a more social inquiry because realist or liberal argumentations are at odds accounting for such inconsistency, even

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997): 513–553.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1979).

<sup>15</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, *Clash of the Titans*, Foreign Policy Special Report, 2005, <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0034.pdf> (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy toward East Asia," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 46–47.



if the latter is admittedly more committed to understanding ‘changes’ in international relations than the former.

A realist or liberal take on this empirical puzzle would try to shed light on certain factors that must have caused a specific outcome. They would want to answer a why question. But one cannot start with the why question because it is necessarily secondary to what was possible under the circumstances or, in other words, in the context. The puzzle presented by Karin M. Fierke in her book illuminates this point: to name the death of someone a suicide or a murder depends first and foremost not on the motives (or causes in IR language), but on what was possible in the context.<sup>18</sup> Consider, for instance, a scenario in which the death resulted from gunshot. In this case, it makes no sense to talk about suicide if the old man’s hands were so crippled by arthritis that it was impossible for him to pull the trigger.<sup>19</sup> In other words, what is possible is necessarily a function of the circumstances, and this is why only by identifying the circumstances can one move on to answering the question of why.

How can the context be identified then? It follows from Fierke’s illustration that a prior establishment of scientific categories is not the appropriate way because it imposes a biased worldview on the event which is under investigation. Accordingly, identifying the case as a suicide operates on the assumption that the old man was in fact able to pull the trigger, but it is not certain before any investigation about the context is undertaken. Similarly, naming a Chinese-American M&A interaction a success before the context is established assumes that the outcome reflected to a certain extent both parties’ interests, but what counts as success (or interest, for that matter) for the researcher necessarily differs from the parties’ understanding of the expression within the specific context. This implies that our words do not reflect abstract meanings, they acquire their sense as they are put to use in everyday

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<sup>18</sup> Karin M. Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies: Critical Investigations in Security*, New Approaches to Conflict Analysis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

practice.<sup>20</sup> In fact, this was Ludwig Wittgenstein's major realization which contributed tremendously to the so-called linguistic turn in Western philosophy.<sup>21</sup> And this is why in order to establish the context of the Chinese-American M&A interactions, one has to look and see how the two sides bring their own meanings to the interaction through language.<sup>22</sup>

The thesis is guided by the following research puzzles: what are the dominant metaphors and language games informing Chinese-American interactions? And more specifically, how can the inconsistency displayed by Chinese-American interactions be accounted for? Such questions inform the thesis to the extent that it will go beyond positivist research paradigms, and take a linguistic approach to shed light on the social context within which the interaction under investigation unfolds.

In the first chapter, the thesis develops a linguistic approach built on the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game, as well as critically discusses rationalist/positivist paradigms in order to demonstrate why the former is more appropriate for investigating Chinese-American interactions than the latter. This chapter also clarifies the analytical apparatus necessary for undertaking such investigation, and advances some thoughts on the role of the researcher in accordance with a linguistic approach.

The second chapter is the first empirical/analytical part. The chapter takes the language game approach to shed light on some of the changing metaphors which were meant to be constitutive of Chinese-American relations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The chapter does not intend to present an exhaustive account of all the metaphors with which the two sides tried to understand their common game because that would exceed the boundaries of the thesis. Rather, the purpose is only to demonstrate the existence of such a discussion the aim of which was to embed the two countries' interaction in a familiar context.

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<sup>20</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, trans. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), § 43.

<sup>21</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*.

<sup>22</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 3.

The third chapter relies considerably on the metaphors explored in the second chapter, and zooms in on and makes sense of a concrete interaction which unfolded between the United States and China. The chapter explores the 2001 Spy Plane incident from the language game approach in order to demonstrate that the interaction proceeded from beginning to end according to the rules of a dynamic social context which was constructed by the meanings that the two parties brought to the interaction through language.

The fourth chapter discusses examples of Chinese-American M&A activities to demonstrate that the inconsistency identified in the introduction can be made sense of from a social perspective. Given the scarcity of material available on smaller examples of Chinese-American M&A interactions, however, the focus in the chapter slightly shifts compared to the third chapter, and will rather be on the broader context within which these interactions take place.

The thesis concludes by summarizing the main arguments of the paper, and discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the language game approach in order to present implications for research in the discipline of International Relations. By doing this, the thesis aspires to add a minor contribution to the work of a few scholars<sup>23</sup> within the discipline who so far drew on the linguistic insights of the later Wittgenstein.

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1; Martin Hollis, *Explaining and Understanding International Relations* (Oxford [England]: New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1991), 176–181; Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Studies in International Relations (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 33–52; Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*.

## Chapter 1 – The Language Game Perspective

This chapter introduces and explores a linguistic approach built on the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game, as well as critically discusses rationalist/positivist paradigms to demonstrate why the former is more appropriate for investigating Chinese-American interactions rather than the latter. In addition, the chapter clarifies the analytical apparatus necessary for undertaking such investigation, and advances some thoughts on the role of the researcher in accordance with a linguistic approach. In this effort, the chapter also functions as a literature review on the fundamental works in the discipline which draw on the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game.

### 1.1. Research in the Rationalist/Positivist Paradigm

As was mentioned in the second paragraph of the introduction, relations between the US and China have become a multifaceted web of interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The importance that scholars and decision-makers assign to this interaction translates into a lot of academic effort to understand and explain both what causes strains in the relationship, and predict how it evolves in the future. The way these analyses come into existence follows a well-known pattern. The selected phenomenon is more often than not approached as a puzzling event in world politics, one that requires a neutral observer who, armed with precise theoretical tools, can decipher and present its buried meaning for the otherwise uninitiated audience. In this endeavor, the scholar takes an unbiased position by standing outside of the phenomenon under investigation. This sterile environment is indispensable for the establishment of an objective diagnosis, which is then held up as representing the ‘truth’ of the matter. The result is a short snapshot of the world, which is advanced as the one neatly capturing a particular logic operating in the outside reality.<sup>24</sup> Building on assumptions, hypotheses and empirical evidence, this academic effort aspires to present as legitimate a

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<sup>24</sup> Karin M. Fierke, “Logic of Force and Dialogue: The Iraq/UNSCOM Crisis as Social Interaction,” *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 3 (2000): 334–337.

picture of the event as possibly, by disentangling the phenomenon's manifold causes and the actors' interests that are said to be at play. From the perspective of this thesis, there are a number of issues arising from this procedure that need to be discussed before proceeding. The following points concern the role of language, and the relationship between language and knowing.

Firstly, it is problematic that the outcome of these efforts is a description which operates with language in an instrumental way. The scholar's thoughts are articulated into words and phrases only for the sole purpose of referring to the material reality. The logic of discovery *à la* positivism insists that only by first grasping a firm understanding of our words and expressions is the researcher able to compare them with what is observable 'out there', which is how scientific knowledge is produced.<sup>25</sup> Informed by this picture logic of language,<sup>26</sup> rationalist theories such as realism and liberalism operate on the assumption that by squeezing language into fixed meanings one can approximate to reality.<sup>27</sup> As an illustration of this point, consider Michael D. Swaine's recent analysis about China's policies in the East and South China Sea.<sup>28</sup> Initially, he clarifies the concept of national interest of all parties implicated in the disputes, and then compares it with which country does what in the region. The fundamental problem with this approach, however, is that it builds on a preliminary configuration of scientific categories, such as national interest, which already constitutes a filter through which the scholar views the world. If the scholar assumes that China's national interest involves reclaiming some of the islands in the region, for instance, then the country's efforts to enhance its naval presence will necessarily be understood through and informed by

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<sup>25</sup> Karin M. Fierke and Knud E. Jørgensen, eds., *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation*, International Relations in a Constructed World (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 125–126.

<sup>26</sup> Karin M. Fierke, "Links Across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 46 (2002): 334–336.

<sup>27</sup> Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, eds., *International Practices*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 119 (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37.

<sup>28</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "China's Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas," *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace* (April 4, 2013), [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael\\_Swaine\\_-\\_Testimony.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael_Swaine_-_Testimony.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2013).

this filter. Under such circumstances, the fact that China has today more vessels operating in the sea will be explained in terms of the scholar's predefined concept of national interest, with an unsurprising conclusion that such maritime activity has to be because China wants those territories back. But contrary to the scholar's conviction, the outcome here is not the 'truth of the matter' but a reduction of reality because a real-life phenomenon is adjusted to the theoretical setup. The problem is not theoretical abstraction, but subjugation. The approach misses the point that any kind of scientific definition of concepts or notions necessarily constructs to a large extent what is seen, hence in this case the scholar can only see a segment of an otherwise complex issue. The example underscores the point that language predetermines the way reality is seen. Therefore, language cannot be just an instrument. Rather, it constructs reality.

Secondly, if one cannot stand outside of the language to compare it with what it purports to describe,<sup>29</sup> then consequently meanings and understandings cannot be assigned to real-life phenomena from outside of those phenomena. If language in fact constitutes reality then the scholar cannot externally attribute pre-configured properties to actors embedded in specific social surroundings. Instead, meanings and understandings are bound up in a social context in which they resonate. For instance, what turns out to constitute rationality is a function of the social context which is under investigation.<sup>30</sup> Michael Nicholson illustrated this argument with the following example: "Given a belief that I shall go to Paradise if I kill the enemies of England, the act of killing can be construed as rational when otherwise it would not be."<sup>31</sup> This case is most striking because killing usually does not figure on the list of rational acts, most probably because due to the serious societal consequences with which

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Kratochwil, "Constructivism: What It Is (not) and How It Matters," in *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences a Pluralist Perspective*, ed. Donatella Della Porta and Michael Keating (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82.

<sup>30</sup> Karin M. Fierke, "Constructivism," in *International Relations Theories. Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milya Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>31</sup> Karin M. Fierke and Michael Nicholson, "Divided by a Common Language: Formal and Constructivist Approaches to Games," *Global Society* 15, no. 1 (January 2001): 7–25.

such an act would be retaliated it is conceived as irrational, yet Nicholson presented a perfectly plausible context in which killing is in fact rational. (Although this example operates with the underlying assumption that it is rational to try to go to Paradise in the first place.) This shows that to assign meanings to a context without first exploring it misses the crucial point that any meaning is dependent on common values and norms.<sup>32</sup> These values and norms are in turn defined by the actors embedded in the social context as they come to interact with each other, and thus the identification of these shared understandings is a *sine qua non* first step without which the scholar later on cannot say anything meaningful about the context.

## **1.2. The Language Game Approach – Rules, Changes, Metaphors, and the Constitutive Nature of Language**

Furthermore, these shared understandings can be thought of as *governing rules*. If one accepts that actions and reactions are intelligible inasmuch as they resonate with the values and norms that are held collectively by those implicated in the same social context, then this means that there exists a set of social regulations or conventions according to which any behavior acquires meaning. To illuminate this point, consider the popular imagery of a man offering a woman a round-shaped piece of precious metal while kneeling in front of her. This is called a marriage proposal by a social audience which is familiar with the physical portrayal of a procedure leading up to what is known as engagement and wedding. The expression ‘proposal’ comes to the mind not because there is something inherently proposal-like about the act, but because there are certain meanings at disposal that are naturally assigned to what is observed. In this case, the collectively held understanding that a proposal looks like this not only makes the act meaningful but also governs our reactions. It informs the audience that it should cheer, clap and maybe congratulate the man and the woman instead of doing something else, and the man and the woman will know that this behavior is

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<sup>32</sup> Kratochwil, “Constructivism: What It Is (not) and How It Matters,” 86.

to be expected. The example illustrates that it is only by naming the phenomenon under observation an act of ‘proposal’ that all participants know how to go on in the situation.<sup>33</sup> The word ‘proposal’ embodies a whole set of social meanings and understandings which guide all actions and reactions taken within this particular social context.

The example also reconfirms the constitutive nature of language. ‘Proposal’ does a lot more than just simply capture what is seen. It arms the participants with social rules that are necessary to make meaningful moves in the context. If a bystander does not applaud, but instead offers his condolences to the man and the woman, then he is obviously unacquainted with what constitutes a meaningful move in such a context. Simply put, he fails to observe the social rules of a ‘proposal’. (For the sake of this argument the otherwise possible scenario that the bystander is just being ironic is not considered here.) He behaves as if he were attending a funeral because he does not know what a proposal looks like. This means that for him the expression ‘proposal’ is simply not intelligible. If it were, he could name the act of the man and the woman as such. But since he reacted as if a different social game was played, it indicates that he is unaware of the use of the word ‘proposal’. Here, the crucial point is that the rules that are governing a particular social context are contained in our language. Words do not encompass abstract meanings – they acquire their sense, and their only sense, as they immerse in everyday use. Or, as Wittgenstein put it, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”<sup>34</sup> To reveal them, one has to “look and see”<sup>35</sup> how language is put to practice. The question then is: what are the rules according to which a particular usage of language is competent?

Following this line of thought, this implies that meaning can never be dissociated from language; the two do not exist independently from each other. From a metaphysical point of view, there can be no meaningful differentiation between epistemology and ontology

<sup>33</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 21–23.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, § 43.

<sup>35</sup> Fierke, “Links Across the Abyss: Language and Logic in International Relations,” 347.



because questions about knowing are fundamentally about language.<sup>36</sup> If one embraces the view that the purpose of science is to discover meanings about the world, and that language is not a mere channel to the world but a social container of meanings, then the focus of scientific inquiry necessarily shifts to language. From the perspective of the linguistic turn, if science is concerned with the relationship (epistemology) between language and knowing ‘that which is’ (ontology), then this relationship is void because ‘that which is’ is in fact implicated in our language. Language does not act as an intermediary see-through structured between the world and the mind with the purpose of helping the scholar make sense of real-life phenomena. Language and knowing are integral, which is why it is illusory to think that in social sciences the scholar can somehow approximate to the essence of the phenomenon under investigation by sharpening as much as possible the meaning of his linguistic tools. This is of course not to deny the physical existence of phenomena. Rather, the point is that meanings and understandings about the world are bound up in our language, and thus there can be no “absolute standpoint”<sup>37</sup> from which language could be compared with the world. Instead, the scholar first has to look at the social parameters of the context within which the phenomenon of interest takes place.<sup>38</sup> Again, every social context is informed by specific rules allowing for different behaviors to obtain meaning, and thus the identification of these rules takes precedence over other issues.

The rules of each social game are prone to become resilient over time. If a social interaction with a given set of actors has been occurring for quite some time, the rules governing behavior tend to become rather ossified, and resistant to change. In such a case, actors know exactly what to expect from each other because the rules are stable.<sup>39</sup> They are stable because all actions and reactions within a particular social milieu constantly reproduce

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>37</sup> Adler and Pouliot, *International Practices*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Audie Klotz and Cecelia Lynch, *Strategies for Research in Constructivist International Relations*, *International Relations in a Constructed World* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 102.

them. Any move in a given context is meaningful, and thus possible, only by virtue of embodying the very rules of that game. Fierke claims that this is an unconscious activity because “the rules are lived rather than consciously applied.”<sup>40</sup> Actors are unaware that they simultaneously follow and express the rules of the social game. Peter Winch advances a compelling argument in this regard. He proposes that the activity of rule-following presupposes that there is someone else who in principle could pick up on the formula of the person who is said to be following a rule.<sup>41</sup> This means that there must be some observable expression of which rule anyone is supposedly following, which pushes him to argue that rule-following is indeed a somewhat conscious behavior. To underscore this point, Winch also emphasizes that rule-following is logically inseparable from making mistakes.<sup>42</sup> If one can identify a mistake in a social game, such as the inappropriate behavior of the bystander who reacted as if he were witnessing a funeral, then there exist some criteria according to which the rules of the social game can be delineated, hence identified. This reinforces his point that one is conscious when following a rule. The next paragraph will lend support to Winch’s argument, but what is more important to note here is that the rules of a specific game are bound to become tenacious because it is by them that any activity acquires meaning in a game.

However, this does not mean that the rules of a specific game, once established, cannot undergo fundamental shifts. In fact, social contexts are usually governed by numerous language games that are interacting with each other. These games are prone to change if some actor either refuses to comply with the rules of the game, or starts behaving as if another game were played.<sup>43</sup> Fierke in her book talks about the two strategies because they are tools with which an actor can politicize and denaturalize a dominant social game to transform it

<sup>40</sup> Karin M. Fierke, “Multiple Identities, Interfacing Games:: The Social Construction of Western Action in Bosnia,” *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 4 (December 1, 1996): 473.

<sup>41</sup> Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1990), 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>43</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 218–220.

into something else. Before discussing the two strategies a bit more in detail, the point should be made that the existence of such strategies lends more support to Winch's argument that rule-following is to a certain extent a conscious behavior. To be able to refuse to do something, one first needs an idea about what it is that one is refusing, otherwise one cannot refuse anything. Likewise, to be able to start behaving as if another game were played presupposes that one is somewhat aware of the game which one intends to alter by a new sort of behavior. Therefore, none of the strategies are possible unless one possesses some recognition of the rules of the dominant social game. On the other hand, it would be an overstatement to say that no social game is operational unless actors implicated in them are conscious about what they are playing. For instance, hardly anyone participating in a 'proposal' setting is ever so reflexive that he or she knows not only that this is just a social game, but also that it could very well be otherwise. Such consciousness is probably atypical of many everyday games because their familiarity makes it possible to proceed without much reflection. Therefore, in the end, rule-following seems more of a mixture of conscious and unconscious elements, the strength of which depends on each social context.

The notion of the two strategies is useful to understand how change becomes possible in a social context. Refusing to comply with the rules of a dominant game has an enlightening effect because it unveils that not everything is necessarily, or by nature, so in the given context. It shakes actors' conviction that the rules which navigate their behavior for quite some time are carved into stone, and that an alternative course of action is simply not possible. Similarly, acting as if another game is played involves proposing alternative rules to the same social context, which can lay bare the constructed nature of any truth claim contained in a dominant game. Fierke calls this "immanent critique"<sup>44</sup> because simply not observing the rules of the game automatically reveals the inherent subjectivity of any game.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 111–130.

What is at stake here is extremely important, especially in politics, because a sophisticated language game not only drives the behavior of the actors playing it but can also mesmerize them if they believe it to be true, which makes alternative games unconceivable, hence impossible. This is why language is obviously a form of power, and ways of exposing the rules of any game are foundational for change to become possible.<sup>45</sup>

Also characteristic of language games is that their genesis is sometimes contested. This is because when a particular social interaction appears as a novelty, its actors might approach each other with diverging views about what is to be considered part of the interaction's shared understandings. Consequently, at this stage no firm rules are established yet to govern any behavior in the context. There are only so-called interpretations and metaphors vying to become stabilized as rules.<sup>46</sup> The analysis done by Roland Paris on the Kosovo crisis sheds more light on this point.<sup>47</sup> He argues that the reaction of the United States to the 1999 humanitarian crisis in Kosovo was largely determined by which historical metaphor triumphed over the others. Relying on publicly accessible speeches and reports of various sources, he presented different metaphors that different politicians articulated to make sense of the event. Accordingly, some people claimed that the US should stay out of the conflict because the complexity of the crisis would probably lead to a protracted, Vietnam-like quagmire with no end in sight.<sup>48</sup> Others by contrast argued that Washington should be at the forefront of the battle against Slobodan Milosevic as the Europeans alone will not be able to deal with the new Adolf Hitler.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For an analysis on a major change in the international system, see Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, "Understanding Change in International Politics: The Soviet Empire's Demise and the International System," *International Organization* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 215–247.

<sup>46</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 31–42.

<sup>47</sup> Roland Paris, "Kosovo and the Metaphor War," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 423–450.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 443–447.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 440–443.

The two metaphors, respectively, were meant to be constitutive of the American reaction to the crisis. While the Vietnam-metaphor was supposed to discourage the political leadership from getting engaged, the Hitler-metaphor advocated an active US involvement in order to avoid another major conflagration on the European continent. The crucial point is that the novelty with which the context emerged made the American public resort to embedding it in more familiar experiences, such as the Second World War or the Vietnam War. The metaphors were necessary because they provided at least a partial understanding about what the US should do in the situation. They established a coherent framework of meanings within which it becomes clear who does what and why. This implies that naming the event in a particular way did not boil down to just cheap talk of politicians! The outcome of the “metaphor war” was foundational to the range of possible moves for the US in the Kosovo crisis.

Moreover, the two metaphors were equally intelligible to the broader public because each of them shares what Fierke calls a family resemblance with the Kosovo crisis.<sup>50</sup> They resonated with the audience because some features of the past experience could be detected in what was going in Kosovo too. This structural similarity<sup>51</sup> is indispensable for any metaphor to be able to make sense of a new interaction when there are no stable rules yet, or to challenge the dominant rules of an already ongoing social game.

Metaphors which share a family resemblance also constitute a grammar. If an interaction can be captured in terms of another metaphor, then that metaphor belongs to the same grammar with the metaphor which functions as the dominant rule of the game. For instance, the metaphors in terms of which China was conceived of after the collapse of the Soviet Union belonged to the same grammar because they were structurally alike. Some argued that China is similar to 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany; hence the country will probably

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<sup>50</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 31.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

provoke a major war in its region. Others claimed that China is more like the Soviet Union, and thus a long period of antagonistic relationship is to be expected. Both of the analogies were part of the same grammar, yet they implied different guidelines for how the US should design its foreign policies with regards to China. The Germany metaphor and the Soviet Union metaphor each shares a family resemblance with present-day China, which makes them part of the same grammar.

### 1.3. Conclusion

In sum, the purpose of this discussion was to introduce an analytical apparatus by presenting and illustrating some of the key aspects of a linguistic approach to international politics. The chapter first discussed the deficiencies of positivist research paradigms by demonstrating that the fixing of meanings of scientific categories does not result in an objective perspective on the event under investigation, but instead in an imposition of an abstract theoretical language with a biased worldview on a complex real-life phenomenon. This led to the realization that language cannot be just an instrument in the hands of the scholar, and that meanings and understandings cannot be assigned *a priori* to a context which is examined because they emerge out of social interaction. It was then demonstrated in the example of the ‘proposal’ that these meanings and understandings are contained in our language, and that they function as rules which govern the actors’ behavior in the context. The chapter then discussed that these rules tend to become permanent and stable over time because the more often a social game takes place, the more familiar actors will become about the rules governing the context, which makes the game ever less prone to be modified. It was noted that these rules can nevertheless change because actors can either refuse to continue to comply with them, or start behaving at a point as if another game were played. The chapter also introduced the notion of metaphors and grammars. Actors resort to metaphors, or interpretations, when a new interaction lacks firm rules, or when they want to challenge the

dominance of the rules of an ongoing game. Metaphors operate under the condition that they share a family resemblance with the present event in question because that is how they become intelligible to the broader public. Finally, it was pointed out that various metaphors together constitute a grammar.

## **Chapter 2 – Metaphors of Chinese-American Interactions**

In this chapter, the thesis takes a further step towards analyzing Chinese-American relations from the language game approach presented in the first chapter. Relying on media sources, official and non-governmental documents, political texts and speeches, it presents an effort to discern from these materials the major metaphors with which the United States made sense of their interaction right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chapter 3 will then analyze a concrete event from the language game approach.

### **2.1. A Relationship without Rules**

Relations between China and the United States intensified significantly after the Cold War ended. After having taken up an overwhelming portion of Washington's attention for half a century, Moscow slowly moved out of the crosshair as the year of 1989 set the stage for tectonic changes in the international system. The fall of communism in Eastern Europe along with the subsequent implosion of the Soviet Union marked the end of the bipolar structure. This event upset the stable foundations of the international system because the compass which for so long informed all kind of interstate behavior disappeared.

In the meantime, a rapidly growing China found itself in international limelight because of the troublesome Tiananmen Square massacre, which made the US gradually refocus its attention away from the former Soviet Union to China. Retrospectively, the fact that Beijing in such an international context became a high-priority topic of discussion in US policy circles seems only natural, but at the time both the end of the Cold War and the rise of China in fact caught many by surprise. This is why while Chinese-American interactions automatically accrued in importance, they nevertheless lacked any stable rules to govern the two countries' newfound game.

This historical moment of uncertainty did not go unnoticed by the American academic community. Michel Oksenberg in the summer of 1991 started his Foreign Affairs piece with



the following summary of the situation: “Sino-American relations are in disarray.”<sup>52</sup> Ross Munro later in September 1992 likewise pronounced that “American policy-makers don't have a clue about how to cope with the world's first economically successful Communist country.”<sup>53</sup> Even in the mid-2000s the nature of the interaction remained debatable. Robert Zoellick, for instance, wrote about the “cauldron of anxiety about China,” and the inevitable disorderliness which would come if “the templates of the past do not fit.”<sup>54</sup> Such concerns were fueled by what former US president George H. W. Bush called the enemy of America, instability and unpredictability.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, not knowing how to proceed with China was worse than knowing China to be a clean-cut enemy of the US. Therefore, to escape this uncertainty and circumvent the unfamiliarity of the situation was crucial at the time, and this is why different metaphors started to appear in the American discourse about China with the purpose of embedding the relationship in other, more familiar experiences.<sup>56</sup> To recap from the previous chapter, this is necessary so that actors already implicated in but still confused about the rules of the new game have an idea about “how to go on” in the new social context.<sup>57</sup>

## 2.2. Metaphors in the 1990s

There were many metaphors that appeared in the 1990s about Chinese-American relations. One of the earliest revolved around an analogy between China and the Soviet Union. The recent memories of the fight against Moscow made the experience of a long-lasting bipolar structure of right versus wrong so ingrained in American society that China

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<sup>52</sup> Michel Oksenberg, “The China Problem,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 1, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/46849/michel-oksenberg/the-china-problem> (accessed May 14, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ross H. Munro, “Awakening Dragon The Real Danger in Asia Is from China,” *Policy Review* (September 1992): 10, <http://www.unz.org/Pub/PolicyRev-1992q4-00010> (accessed May 14, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Robert B. Zoellick, *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?* (National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 2005), <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm> (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>55</sup> William Safire, “Hail to Unpredictability,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1990, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/02/26/opinion/essay-hail-to-unpredictability.html> (accessed May 15, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Fierke, *Changing Games, Changing Strategies*, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Fierke, “Logic of Force and Dialogue: The Iraq/UNSCOM Crisis as Social Interaction,” 342.

was to a certain extent bound to be framed in terms of the new Soviet Union. The metaphor became a powerful candidate to inform the two countries' interactions because China was reduced, regardless of its complexity, to possess widely comprehensible similarities with the Soviet Union. It was enough to be an officially communist country embracing socialist principles and a rising power in Eurasia for the metaphor to legitimately enter the discourse. Accordingly, Denny Roy in 1996 warned that if "China fulfills its expected potential, it will soon be a power in the class of [...] the Soviet Union."<sup>58</sup> The utterance of the name of America's 20<sup>th</sup> century archenemy invoked a set of familiar experiences with specific instructions as to how to tend towards another Soviet Union. Given the fresh reminiscences of the Cold War, it seems reasonable to believe that the metaphor resonated vividly with the broader American public.

Other studies tried to downplay the analogy between the Soviet Union and China, but eventually ended up amplifying the predominance of this vocabulary. Ross Munro in his 1992 article entitled "Awakening Dragon" hoped to depart from this correspondence by concluding that the similarities between the two polities do "not mean that China will replace the former Soviet Union as 'the new enemy'," <sup>59</sup> and that "we can learn little from our long struggle with Soviet imperialism."<sup>60</sup> Yet the title of the article already indicated that his argumentation would only embed the discourse about China even more in antagonistic terms. Later on, the 'Soviet metaphor' became to function as a standardized compass on the basis of which other metaphors and their policy instructions were measured. In fact, most studies from the early 1990s embraced the 'Soviet metaphor' as a reference point and a landmark expression, which further anchored discussions about China in Cold War discourse.

In addition, there was a concomitant threat component of the 'Soviet metaphor' which led many to the conclusion that the strategy of containment would have to be used against

<sup>58</sup> Denny Roy, "The 'China Threat' Issue: Major Arguments," *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (August 1996): 762.

<sup>59</sup> Munro, "Awakening Dragon The Real Danger in Asia Is from China."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

China. The discourse displayed widespread agreement that containment has paid off during the Cold War, which provided considerable historical legitimacy for George Kennan's strategy to be contemplated against China too. Certain scholars even argued that containment is a timeless strategy which is not bound exclusively to the Cold War. Charles Krauthammer in his 1995 *Time* piece pointed to the universality and historicity of containment by saying that it "is not a cold war invention. It is a principle of power politics going back centuries."<sup>61</sup>

Other studies also show that scholars tended to resort to well-known historical analogies as inexhaustible sources of metaphors. China has been conceived of as the "former sick man of Asia"<sup>62</sup> with a clear reference to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire whose glorious past is overshadowed by a dim present and future because of serious economic and social troubles. The emergence of China was also likened to the rise of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany because "China today is actively seeking to scare the United States away from East Asia rather as Germany sought to frighten Britain before World War I by building its 'risk fleet'."<sup>63</sup> In this metaphor, reminding the audience of the potentially catastrophic consequences of the failure to accommodate the ambitions of a powerful nation was used to underpin the weight of the metaphor in contrast to others. The history of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan was similarly advocated to inform Chinese-American relations. According to Nicholas Kristof, "almost nothing is so destabilizing as the arrival of a new industrial and military power on the international scene; consider Japan's history in this century."<sup>64</sup> This interpretation understood contemporary China in terms of 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan, as an expansionist aggressor which is likely to upset the status quo by provoking war in its region. Another interpretation was that of the "behemoth in the neighborhood,"<sup>65</sup> operating with a

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<sup>61</sup> Krauthammer, "Why We Must Contain China."

<sup>62</sup> Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 149–168.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Waldron, "How Not to Deal with China," *Commentary* 103, no. 3 (March 1997): 48.

<sup>64</sup> Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Rise of China," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 5 (1993): 60.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

portrayal of China as a primitive brute who is by nature incapable of civilized statehood in the world. Memories of Nazi Germany were also invoked by Denny Roy as he used the term appeasement to refer to the “predominant sentiment throughout the region.”<sup>66</sup> This depiction presented Asia as helpless Europe, China as Nazi Germany and Taiwan as Czechoslovakia, which suggested that serious military confrontations are probably just around the corner. John Mearsheimer painted yet another bleak picture of the future of Chinese-American relations based on the history of the United States. He argued that since the US established regional hegemony by aggressively pushing out the European powers of the Western hemisphere, there is no reason to believe that China would behave otherwise in its own backyard.<sup>67</sup> In sum, the metaphors were intelligible because they appealed to publicly accessible and comprehensible historical events which shared family resemblances with contemporary China. The purpose of the activity was to embed the fresh Chinese-American interactions in a familiar game so that actors implicated in the context know how to go on.

### 2.3. Non-historical Analogies

The majority of metaphors revolved around clear historical analogies, but China tended to be framed in antagonistic terms without any reference to a concrete event of the past. Short designations appeared with the purpose of illustrating what China is today, but were not substantiated the way the ‘Soviet metaphor’ was which advocated containment as a specific strategy for the game the two countries would play. These appellations are nevertheless important because they are recurring elements of the same discourse. For instance, the image of a fire-breathing dragon which has just awakened ready to spread his wings was mentioned in several instances.<sup>68</sup> Other expressions such as demon,<sup>69</sup> monster,<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Roy, “Hegemon on the Horizon? China’s Threat to East Asian Security.”

<sup>67</sup> Mearsheimer, John J., “China’s Unpeaceful Rise,” *Current History* (April 2006): 160–162.

<sup>68</sup> Zoellick, *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?*; Jasper Becker, *Dragon Rising: An Inside Look at China Today* (Washington, D.C: National Geographic Society, 2006); Peter Navarro and Greg Autry, *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon--a Global Call to Action* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall,

and giant<sup>71</sup> were and still are used as catchall phrases to refer to China in studies of Chinese-American relations. Not all of the studies which resorted to such pictures claim that China would bring chaos onto the world, but the language they use is symptomatic of the dichotomizing vocabulary which locks all analysis on the subject in an either/or sort of debate.

On the other hand, metaphors which operated with a less hostile view of China also made headway to inform Chinese-American relations. In general, they argued that the US will be able to educate China; hence the future is not yet carved into stone.<sup>72</sup> The skeleton of this depiction was provided by the hierarchical dichotomy of the student and the teacher in which the superiority of the latter allows for a reassuring sense of control over the subsequent course of events. The possibility remains in this case too that China is a menace to the US, yet this scenario is avoidable because Washington can engage and tutor Beijing on fundamental values and standards of normal statehood. Here, China is portrayed as a young newcomer in the international club of states whose identity is malleable with the help of an experienced master.

Though popular, this portrayal was also disputed by certain authors. Ross Munro calls it the old “We-can-change-China” myth,<sup>73</sup> while Robert Kagan claims it is wishful thinking that the US could navigate China.<sup>74</sup> These authors believe that such a metaphor is just a manifestation of an unhealthy supremacy-complex which is driven by America’s hubris and historical self-conception as a missionary state. The metaphor nevertheless lived on, and was

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2011); R. Edward Grumbine, *Where the Dragon Meets the Angry River: Nature and Power in the People’s Republic of China* (Washington, DC: Island Press: Shearwater Books, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> David L. Shambaugh, “Introduction: Imagining Demons: The Rise of Negative Imagery in US–China Relations,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (2003): 235–237.

<sup>70</sup> Christensen, “Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy Toward East Asia.”

<sup>71</sup> “China’s Economy: Is the Wakening Giant a Monster?,” *The Economist*, February 13, 2003, <http://www.economist.com/node/1576567> (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Robert S. Ross, “Why Our Hardliners Are Wrong,” *The National Interest*, 1997, <http://nationalinterest.org/article/why-our-hardliners-are-wrong-770> (accessed April 24, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Munro, “Awakening Dragon The Real Danger in Asia Is from China,” 15.

<sup>74</sup> Robert Kagan, “The Illusion of ‘Managing’ China,” *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/13/AR2005051301405.html> (accessed April 24, 2013).

reformulated in terms of China being a responsible stakeholder,<sup>75</sup> which emerged in the mid-2000s. It is a direct continuation of the student-teacher relationship because it also operates on the assumption that China is not by nature predisposed to challenge the international system, but is instead just an uninitiated apprentice who needs a talented guardian in order to become a decent member of the international club.

In general, such metaphors operated with a hostile view of China, yet this did not mean that China was never conceived of in friendly terms. The following snapshot of a debate which unfolded during the Clinton administration illustrates that some officials made sense of China in less antagonistic terms. In the discourse on China, the derogatory label ‘friends of China’<sup>76</sup> appeared to designate politicians who were perceived to be compromising US national interests because they collaborated with the Chinese. These officials jeopardized American interests by playing the game according to the rules of constructive engagement rather than containment. According to their critics, some of the treasons they committed against the US were the lifting of sanctions against China, the lack of punishment when Beijing ignored its commitments to non-proliferation, and letting the Chinese have a glimpse at America’s advanced weapon technology. Bill Clinton nevertheless stood up for the administration’s policy of constructive engagement. He was adamant that “seeking to isolate China is clearly unworkable,” and that engagement was “the right thing to do for our country.”<sup>77</sup>

Clinton’s critics were nevertheless unsatisfied with the administration’s China policy. As Kenneth Timmerman wrote, “China can continue to raid the cookie jar of U.S. high-tech despite its bad behavior.”<sup>78</sup> Secretary of Defense William Perry was one of the targets in the

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<sup>75</sup> Zoellick, *Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?*.

<sup>76</sup> Emma V. Broomfield, “Perceptions of Danger: The China Threat Theory,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (2003): 282–283.

<sup>77</sup> “Clinton Defends China Trip, Engagement Policy,” *CNN*, June 11, 1998, <http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1998/06/11/clinton.china/> (accessed May 27, 2013).

<sup>78</sup> Kenneth R. Timmerman, “The Peking Pentagon,” *The American Spectator* (April 1996): 25.

accusations, and the debate was about whether his policy of engagement is appeasement or not. Again, the dilemma was more than just a quarrel over terminology. The outcome was crucial because it defined policies significantly in both the US and China. This was evident in congressional aide William Triplett's serious concern about how Beijing would respond to the Clinton administration's foreign policy: "if the Chinese have gotten the idea that it [engagement] is appeasement, it is largely Perry's fault."<sup>79</sup> Since engagement and appeasement involve different policy prescriptions, to name the situation in one way or another had tremendous implications for both countries.

## 2.4. Conclusion

In sum, the purpose of this chapter was to present that many metaphors and interpretations appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to embed China in a familiar social context. While certain elements of this debate were surely left out because the space limitations do not allow for a more exhaustive picture, the goal was not to present a detailed account of the whole phenomenon, but to demonstrate the existence of a vivid public debate which involved a plethora of metaphors that emerged to provide the best 'code of conduct' for the US to proceed with China. Again, such metaphors were indispensable because the new game unfolding between the United States and China lacked the necessary rules to guide the two countries' behavior toward each other. Robert Kagan summarized probably the most succinctly that the question driving this debate has been one and the same ever since: "Which China is it?"<sup>80</sup> Is it the Soviet Union again, maybe imperial Japan, or worse, Nazi Germany? Is China a fire-breathing dragon looking to scorch the earth or a lovely big panda trying to hug everyone?

Since the Chinese reality is far beyond anyone's grasp, the only thing the metaphors of this 'baptism debate' could do is construct a China. This crucial aspect usually goes

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>80</sup> Kagan, "The Illusion of 'Managing' China."

unnoticed in the discussion, although some of the contributing authors realized that much more is at stake than just their academic credibility. Joseph Nye, for instance, hinted quite openly at the constitutive nature of the debate when he warned that the so-called ‘China Threat’ discourse might eventually become a “self-fulfilling prophecy.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, China will become a threat if the parameters of the game are so defined. To demonstrate that this is indeed the case, the next chapter will analyze a concrete event which unfolded according to a context constructed by the actors through language.

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<sup>81</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., “The Challenge of China,” in *How to Make America Safe: New Policies for National Security*, ed. Stephen Van Evera (Cambridge, MA: The Tobin Project, 2006), 77.



### **Chapter 3 – The 2001 Spy Plane Incident from the Language Game Perspective**

The incident started on 1 April 2001 when an American reconnaissance plane flying east of China's coast collided with a Chinese fighter jet which was tailing the plane to intercept it. While the crippled American aircraft with a crew of 24 managed to make an emergency landing on China's Hainan Island, the Chinese jet was destroyed in the collision and the pilot lost his life. The crew was subsequently detained by the Chinese authorities.

The incident led to a period of heightened tensions between the two countries for almost two weeks. It was cited by many scholars as one of the most serious crises in Chinese-American relations after the end of the Cold War, and the first major foreign policy test of the George W. Bush administration prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11. The purpose of the following analysis is to show that the incident unfolded on the basis of the changing social context, and according to the meanings and understandings that the two parties brought to the interaction through language. The incident was chosen as a case study because it involved an exceptionally intensive interaction process after the collision occurred, which makes the event suitable for an inquiry from the language game perspective.

This chapter undertakes an analysis of the so-called Spy Plane incident in 2001 from the language game approach. The analysis proceeds according to the following steps. In line with the language approach introduced in the first chapter, the context is established to demonstrate what rules guided the two countries' interaction prior to the incident. The argument is that the context defined the way China and the United States tended toward each other and how material capabilities were put to use both before and after the incident. The analysis then identifies language games that informed subsequent bilateral engagements to demonstrate that the outcome of the situation was dependent on how the two parties made sense of the event through language.

### 3.1. The Context of the Incident

The previous chapter already established that most metaphors tended to understand the Chinese-American game in antagonistic terms, which led to a dominant grammar of hostility ready to define interactions between the two countries. Chengxin Pan argues that there is also an “autobiographical nature”<sup>82</sup> of this antagonism because it was constructed by a discursive practice whose purpose was to reconfirm US self-perceptions as the “indispensable nation,”<sup>83</sup> the “city on the hill”<sup>84</sup> or “manifest destiny”<sup>85</sup> by understanding China as an enemy. Put differently, America’s self-constructed identity of a benevolent superpower translated into a hostile view of China after the Soviet Union ceased to exist, which defined to a large extent what was possible and reasonable to do in the two countries’ interactions.

The 2001 Spy Plane incident was preceded by the discursive build-up of hostility against China. In 1996, renowned China scholar Andrew Nathan warned that the Chinese believe their “policy of patience has failed,” and a “policy of coercion can succeed.”<sup>86</sup> Former US Ambassador to China James Lilley in 1999 enhanced this view by saying that “China is determined to improve the PLA’s [People’s Liberation Army] fighting capability,”<sup>87</sup> which could only be targeted at the United States and its regional allies. Also, Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro made explicit what was fundamentally undisputed for most observers: “China is seeking to replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia.”<sup>88</sup> Equally important, incidents of the 1995/6 Taiwan Strait Crisis were invoked as tangible evidence of an

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<sup>82</sup> Pan Chengxin, “The ‘China Threat’ in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 3 (July 2004): 313.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Andrew J. Nathan, “China’s Goals in the Taiwan Strait,” *The China Journal* 36 (July 1996): 89.

<sup>87</sup> James Lilley and Carl Ford, “China’s Military: A Second Opinion,” *The National Interest* (Fall 1999): 72.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, “The Coming Conflict With China,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 2 (April 1997): 19.

aggressive and irrational China which is willing to use force to devour Taipei.<sup>89</sup> Coupled with the metaphors outlined in the previous chapter, it should come as no surprise that according to James Lilley and Carl Ford “the name of the game for Taiwan, then, is deterrence.”<sup>90</sup>

This confrontational linguistic posture was detectable at the highest levels of the administration as well. After assuming office, George W. Bush immediately dropped Bill Clinton’s policy of treating China as a “strategic partner” by pronouncing China to be a “strategic competitor” of the United States.<sup>91</sup> Bush also sent an unambiguously hostile sign to Beijing by abandoning his predecessor’s ‘three No’s’ policy, which stipulated that Washington does not back Taiwanese independence, does not recognize a separate Taiwanese government, and does not support Taiwan in acquiring membership in international organizations.<sup>92</sup> Retrospectively, Andrew Nathan most probably captured the spirit of the coming age when he said in 1996 that “the prospects are for a worsening crisis.”<sup>93</sup>

So defined, the context became one of hostility prior to the incident. The hostility evidenced in language informed how the two countries would behave with each other. Accordingly, gathering intelligence about China’s military by a reconnaissance plane constituted a rational move because such sensitive information increases the likelihood of a US victory in the event of a military confrontation, a scenario that many authors contemplated as plausible in the context. Similarly, tailing a reconnaissance plane by fighter jets to scare it off appeared as an appropriate response because letting military secrets be exposed to the United States was constructed in the context as detrimental to Chinese interests. Therefore, spying in the context of hostility was a self-evident activity, to such an

<sup>89</sup> Chengxin, “The ‘China Threat’ in American Self-Imagination: The Discursive Construction of Other as Power Politics,” 321.

<sup>90</sup> Lilley and Ford, “China’s Military: A Second Opinion,” 76.

<sup>91</sup> Jia Qingguo, “One Administration, Two Voices: US China Policy During Bush’s First Term,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 6, no. 1 (August 23, 2005): 23.

<sup>92</sup> “Bush Reassures China,” *BBC*, March 23, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1236923.stm> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>93</sup> Nathan, “China’s Goals in the Taiwan Strait,” 93.

extent that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld embedded the incident in a language of normalcy: “surveillance flights were common and widely understood.”<sup>94</sup> He added: “we had every right to be flying where we were flying. They have every right to observe what we were doing.”<sup>95</sup> Similar understandings appeared in the media too: “it is common for jets to scramble to monitor reconnaissance flights.”<sup>96</sup> The report of the American Congressional Research Service also referred to the operation as “routine.”<sup>97</sup>

### 3.2. The Unfolding of the Interaction

This time, however, the activity transcended the boundaries of normalcy because a collision occurred, which sparked a debate about who was responsible for the accident. While Beijing attributed the cause to an abrupt maneuver by the US reconnaissance plane,<sup>98</sup> Washington put the blame on the “especially aggressive” Chinese “cowboy” who was “reckless,”<sup>99</sup> invoking the image of an irresponsible and inexperienced Chinese pilot. Hardly anyone bothered to problematize the guesswork that any reconstruction of the event was necessarily based on. US officials acknowledged that there was only limited evidence after the collision,<sup>100</sup> yet sophisticated narratives quickly made headway to inform the resolution of the diplomatic standoff.

The American discourse was meant to delegitimize the Chinese argument that the accident occurred because of a maneuver of the American plane. David M. Finkelstein argued that the Chinese “are the new kids on the block” without any experience about this

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<sup>94</sup> “Chinese Jet ‘Snapped in Two’,” *BBC*, April 13, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/1275404.stm> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Paul Richter, “Chinese Plane Flew Too Close,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 2001, <http://www.taiwandc.org/latimes-2001-01.htm> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Shirley A. Kan, *China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001: Assessments and Policy Implications*, CRS Report for Congress (Congressional Research Service, October 10, 2001), 1.

<sup>98</sup> “Second Pilot Recalls Collision of US, Chinese Planes,” *People’s Daily*, April 6, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/06/eng20010406\\_67053.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/06/eng20010406_67053.html) (accessed May 19, 2013).

<sup>99</sup> Richter, “Chinese Plane Flew Too Close.”

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

game which “was a familiar one to American and Soviet cold war intelligence planners.”<sup>101</sup> Here, responsibility was obviously on the player less acquainted with the rules of the spy etiquette. Robert Kagan and William Kristol also recommended Washington assume no responsibility because the accident “was the direct consequence of a deliberate Chinese policy” and it happened “despite repeated warnings by the United States that the new Chinese policy was dangerous.”<sup>102</sup> China brought about the accident because it “has become much more aggressive.”<sup>103</sup> China’s demand for apology was also discarded because it “has long been a favorite technique in dealing with anyone seen as an adversary.”<sup>104</sup> The demand for an apology should come as no surprise because it was “standard procedure,”<sup>105</sup> an argument which was meant to discourage Washington from seriously considering apologizing for the incident and accepting blame. Such were the understandings informing Washington’s diplomatic posture for the following days: insistence on the release of the American crew and absolutely no apology.

By contrast, China saw in the incident a sign of the US being a global bully who throws around its weight without respect to anything or anyone. In the Chinese Communist Party (henceforth CCP) mouthpiece People’s Daily then Secretary General Jiang Zemin said on April 4 that the US side bears full responsibility for the accident because the American aircraft “bumped into our plane, invaded the Chinese territorial airspace,” hereby violating international laws and practices.<sup>106</sup> On the same day, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao established that the “Chinese side is the victim,” and that Beijing has

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<sup>101</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “Collision with China: Military Analysis; ‘A Dangerous Game’,” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/03/world/collision-with-china-military-analysis-a-dangerous-game.html> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> Robert Kagan and William Kristol, “A National Humiliation,” *The Weekly Standard* (April 16, 2001): 11.

<sup>103</sup> “Beyond Hainan,” *The Economist*, April 12, 2001, <http://www.economist.com/node/574109> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> Fox Butterfield, “China’s Demand for Apology Is Rooted in Tradition,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/07/world/07APOL.html> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> “US Holds ‘All Responsibilities’ for Plane Incident, President Jiang,” *People’s Daily*, April 4, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/03/eng20010403\\_66688.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/03/eng20010403_66688.html) (accessed May 19, 2013).

“sufficient evidence that it is the US plane that violated flight rules by making dangerous moves, bumped into and destroyed our plane, and as a result the pilot is missing.”<sup>107</sup> Chinese opinion articles amplified this understanding: “the right and wrong of the matter are crystal clear,”<sup>108</sup> and that Washington’s denunciative attitude should come as no surprise because the “guilty party files the suit first.”<sup>109</sup> Such understandings clarified how the American and the Chinese government were supposed to proceed. Since the “gangster logic of hegemonism won’t work before the Chinese people,”<sup>110</sup> Washington should heed Beijing’s solemn demand for apology and assume full responsibility. Coupled with the memories of the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the Spy Plane incident was arguably understood in China as yet another sign of growing US belligerence.<sup>111</sup>

The diplomatic standoff nevertheless came to a thaw after both parties embraced a new kind of vocabulary. This came about because the broader context suggested from the start that neither Washington nor Beijing has a real interest in a protracted stalemate. Despite hawkish rhetoric during the election campaigns, the Bush administration, which assumed office shortly before the incident and did not have a clear vision about the new China policy,<sup>112</sup> strove to pass the first major foreign policy test without jeopardizing the stable relations with China that were inherited from the Clinton administration. This was evident in the more conciliatory tone of an administration official who three days after the collision said that top policymakers “understand it’s unusual for a United States plane to make an emergency landing on foreign soil, and we understand they needed time to sort through the

<sup>107</sup> “US Should Bear Full Responsibility for Plane Collision, FM Spokesman,” *People’s Daily*, April 4, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/03/eng20010403\\_66727.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/03/eng20010403_66727.html) (accessed May 19, 2013).

<sup>108</sup> “Query and Persuade US: Commentary,” *People’s Daily*, April 5, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/04/eng20010404\\_66813.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/04/eng20010404_66813.html) (accessed May 19, 2013).

<sup>109</sup> “Domineering Action and Hegemonic Logic,” *People’s Daily*, April 5, 2001, [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/05/eng20010405\\_66915.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200104/05/eng20010405_66915.html) (accessed May 19, 2013).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Peter Hays Gries, *China’s New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 110.

<sup>112</sup> Joseph Y. S. Cheng and King-Lun Ngok, “The 2001 ‘Spy’ Plane Incident Revisited: The Chinese Perspective,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 64.

implications and their response.”<sup>113</sup> This more amicable stance was amplified by another official as well who openly remarked that the PRC “can look for indications of weakness and indications of hostility. Calibrating it right is important.”<sup>114</sup> Such statements mollified the American hostility which was prevalent right after the collision, and opened up more space for cooperation in the two countries’ interaction.

Equally significant, the context was so that the Chinese leadership also did not want to see the issue becoming a protracted conflict. Secretary General Jiang Zemin was about to retire the following year,<sup>115</sup> and the 1995 Taiwan crisis and the 1999 Belgrade bombing already put enough dirt on his foreign policy record. Furthermore, memories of past crises reminded the CCP that the artificially fanned nationalism of the Chinese populace can get out of control and turn against the Chinese government in times of crisis,<sup>116</sup> which might have forced the CCP to show restraint in exploiting the Spy Plane incident for domestic political purposes. China’s upcoming World Trade Organization (henceforth WTO) accession provided another reason for Beijing to tone down anti-American sentiments because the country’s membership in the WTO was largely contingent on Washington’s will.<sup>117</sup> In sum, sufficient reasons were compiled for Jiang Zemin to lower the bar, which he did by explaining that there was nothing peculiar about China’s demand for apology because “it is normal for people to ask forgiveness or say ‘excuse me’ when they collide in the street.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Steven Mufson and Mike Allen, “U.S. Seeks to Avoid a Test of Wills; Clash of Cultures May Be Backing Sides Into Corner,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2001, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/70499203.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&date=Apr+4%2C+2001&author=Steven+Mufson+and+Mike+Allen&pub=The+Washington+Post&edition=&startpage=A.19&desc=U.S.+Seeks+to+Avoid+a+Test+of+Wills%3B+Clash+of+Cultures+May+Be+Backing+Sides+Into+Corner> (accessed May 20, 2013).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> “China Publishes Jiang Zemin’s Letter of Resignation,” *People’s Daily*, September 20, 2004, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/20/eng20040920\\_157559.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200409/20/eng20040920_157559.html) (accessed May 27, 2013).

<sup>116</sup> Gries, *China’s New Nationalism*, 108–113.

<sup>117</sup> Kan, *China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001: Assessments and Policy Implications*, 24–26.

<sup>118</sup> “Jiang Zemin: Crew Safe and Sound, US Arrogant Conduct Unacceptable,” *People’s Daily*, April 6, 2001, [http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200104/06/eng20010406\\_67002.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200104/06/eng20010406_67002.html) (accessed May 20, 2013).

The discussion above implies the following. In short, both countries accumulated strong reasons in the context to have an interest in reaching a consensus over the issue quickly and smoothly. As the Chinese have shown that they will make do with a less powerful expression, the United States seized the opportunity and made the meaningful move of offering regret and sorry to the loss of the Chinese pilot in order to defuse tensions. Note that neither regret nor sorry establishes unambiguously the location of the blame, yet both are clear indicators of solidarity. On April 11, US ambassador to China Joseph W. Prueher sent a letter to the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tang Jiaxuan in which he used the words “sincere regret” and “very sorry.”<sup>119</sup> On the same day, Bush expressed “sorrow for the loss of life of a Chinese pilot.”<sup>120</sup> This in turn redesigned the game to the extent that the US was not seen as a bully by China anymore. If the superpower shows willingness to partly assume responsibility for the incident by saying sorry, then understanding the US as a careless and arrogant hegemon holds no water anymore. According to Fierke, such moments feature the appearance of an inconsistency or anomaly which disrupts the pattern of interaction, requiring a reconstitution of the interaction on the basis of new meanings.<sup>121</sup> Something similar happened in this case too because room opened up for the interaction to be redesigned with a less confrontational flavor. Since Washington displayed signs of sympathy, the Chinese also changed their course of action and resorted to a less hostile rhetoric. Beijing realized that holding the airplane and its crew hostage is not appropriate anymore because what was reasonable to do was fundamentally redefined in the changing context. Consequently, after taking notice of the content of Prueher’s letter, Jiang Zemin issued a

<sup>119</sup> “US Apology Letter to China,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/11/china.usa2> (accessed May 18, 2013).

<sup>120</sup> “George Bush’s Spyplane Statement,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/11/china.usa1> (accessed May 20, 2013).

<sup>121</sup> Fierke, “Logic of Force and Dialogue: The Iraq/UNSCOM Crisis as Social Interaction,” 338–342.



speech on April 12 that “the Chinese government has decided to allow the US crew to leave China.”<sup>122</sup> With the context so redefined, the crisis was fundamentally over.

### 3.3. Conclusion

In sum, the chapter demonstrated that the Spy Plane incident proceeded from genesis until resolution according to the rules of a dynamic social context which was constructed by the meanings that the two parties brought to the interaction through language. Initially, reconnaissance activities were accommodated in a language of hostility which designed understandings about the two countries according to a collision course. After the physical collision of the two aircrafts broke news, the hostility was evident in the mutually exclusive accounts the two countries imposed on the incident. Hostility had a harder time informing the interaction because the initial indignations were gradually overshadowed by the two countries’ shared interest in finding a solution to the impasse in any way possible. Some ambiguity was discernible in the context, which allowed Beijing to introduce an anomaly by embedding its demand for apology in a less confrontational language. Consequently, room for Washington to tend towards Beijing in an alternative manner was created, which subsequently materialized in the neutral yet sympathetic ‘sorry’ letter of the US ambassador to China. Beijing responded to the move by accepting the letter and displaying willingness to release the American airplane and its crew in exchange. As a consequence, the context transformed to such an extent that an alternative game to the diplomatic stalemate became possible. This change eventually led to the peaceful resolution of the crisis.

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<sup>122</sup> “President Jiang Issuing A Speech,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, April 12, 2001, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/zyjh/t25024.shtml> (accessed May 19, 2013).

## Chapter 4 – Chinese-American M&A Activities from a Language Game Perspective

The previous chapter presented how a particular outcome can emerge as a result of a dynamic social interaction between China and the United States. The chapter demonstrated that the context which defined the parameters of the interaction can be identified in language. While the example of the Spy Plane incident constituted an episode of ‘high politics’, the present chapter discusses events of ‘low politics’ that are taken from the area of mergers and acquisitions between Chinese and American companies which are interacting in various industries. The chapter intends to further lend support to the argument that the outcome in each example was contingent on the changing social context, which was constructed by the meanings and understandings that the parties brought to the interaction through language.

### 4.1. The CNOOC-Unocal debacle

On June 23, 2005 the China National Offshore Oil Corporation (henceforth CNOOC) announced its proposal of a merger with the Union Oil Company of California (henceforth Unocal).<sup>123</sup> The proposal was understood within China’s Go Global strategy which was initiated in the mid-2000s with the purpose of sending Chinese businesses abroad to expand.<sup>124</sup> The strategy was legitimized by economic rationales. Via M&A activities Chinese companies help satisfy the Chinese economy’s appetite for natural resources, and also acquire precious technological know how to sophisticate their operation. Also, China’s 3 trillion dollars in foreign exchange reserves are best invested in tangible assets to avoid depreciation.<sup>125</sup> Since Unocal owned large reserves in Asia, it was understandable that CNOOC set its eye on the American company.

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<sup>123</sup> “CNOOC Limited Proposes Merger with Unocal Offering US\$67 Per Unocal Share in Cash,” *CNOOC Limited*, June 23, 2005, <http://www.cnooltd.com/encnooltd/newszx/news/2005/957.shtml> (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>124</sup> Jenny Clegg, *China’s Global Strategy: Towards a Multipolar World* (London; New York: Pluto Press, 2009).

<sup>125</sup> Cameron, “The CNOOC Nexen Takeover: China Plays Chess, Harper Plays Checkers.”

While driven by such economic considerations, Chinese mergers and acquisitions can inevitably be translated into political leverage abroad, a conviction which troubled many in Washington. CNOOC was aware of this and wished to mitigate concerns by referring to the takeover from early on as “friendly.”<sup>126</sup> CNOOC CEO Fu Chengyu emphasized that the “all-cash offer is clearly superior for Unocal shareholders,” and “good for America.”<sup>127</sup> But the Bush administration believed otherwise. Conservatives claimed that the proposal was a disgrace to the idea of free market and competition because 70% of CNOOC was owned by the CCP, which subsidized Chinese companies at a regular basis. Arguments about how a successful merger would impair US national interests prevailed, and by introducing administrative obstacles Washington eventually shut the door on CNOOC.

In reality, CNOOC had every reason to believe that the deal would go through smoothly. Unocal had been offered a merger by Chevron, another American company, some time before the Chinese proposal, yet Unocal showed honest willingness to negotiate with the Chinese company because CNOOC offered an unprecedented \$18.5 billion.<sup>128</sup> Economic circumstances also indicated that Washington would not really lose much. Though understood as a “large independent American oil company,”<sup>129</sup> Unocal was a small American oil company representing only 0.8 percent of US domestic oil production, which suggested that CNOOC “would not gain any real market power in world oil markets”<sup>130</sup> should the merger materialize. Fears that CNOOC would divert Unocal’s daily output of 58,000 barrels to Chinese markets also lacked substance because customers paid a much higher price in the

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<sup>126</sup> Russell Gold, Matt Pottinger, and Dennis K. Berman, “China’s Cnooc Lobs In Rival Bid To Acquire Unocal,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 23, 2005, <http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB111946772267766700,00.html> (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Leslie Wayne and David Barboza, “Unocal Deal: A Lot More Than Money Is at Issue,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2005, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/business/worldbusiness/24china.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/business/worldbusiness/24china.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0) (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Jerry Taylor, “CNOOC Bid for Unocal No Threat to Energy Security,” *Free Trade Bulletin* no. 19 (July 19, 2005): 1, <http://www.cato.org/publications/free-trade-bulletin/cnooc-bid-unocal-no-threat-energy-security> (accessed May 22, 2013).

US. Nor was Washington's worry about the country's energy security really warranted. Any gap in supplies is necessarily short-term because the global oil market is fungible, and therefore existing supplies are automatically redirected to fill the occasional gap.<sup>131</sup>

In sum, economic arguments emerged highly advantageous in the context, yet they fell short of delegitimizing political concerns that Washington started voicing after news broke about the Chinese proposal. Though initially shocked and "speechless" because of the proposal's exceptional size,<sup>132</sup> American politicians quickly gained conscience and started justifying steps which would make the Chinese abandon their proposal. Chairman of the House Resources Committee Richard Pombo recommended the Bush administration subject the proposal to serious scrutiny, and block the deal eventually if need be.<sup>133</sup> Democrat Nancy Pelosi referred to the bid as "compelling evidence of America's strategic energy vulnerability."<sup>134</sup> She was also worried that Unocal's 'cavitation' technology would "be used by the Chinese to do nuclear tests underground and to mask them so we would not ever be able to detect them."<sup>135</sup> Such concerns arose as natural given the discrepancies between the two countries' political systems. As Michael O'Hanlon pointed out, the bid "does raise questions about how much of the country we are willing to sell to a Communist country that we might be fighting someday." Similarly, Carolyn Bartholomew, representing the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission at a Carnegie Endowment event, invoked the

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<sup>131</sup> Gary Clyde Hufbauer, Yee Wong, and Ketki Sheth, *US-China Trade Disputes: Rising Tide, Rising Stakes* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2006), 50–51.

<sup>132</sup> Edmund L. Andrews, "Capital Nearly Speechless on Big China Bid," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/business/worldbusiness/24trade.html?\\_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=print&adxnnlx=1369145002-gDQxoOgCbGMB6LWHuv40zw&](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/business/worldbusiness/24trade.html?_r=1&adxnnl=1&pagewanted=print&adxnnlx=1369145002-gDQxoOgCbGMB6LWHuv40zw&) (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>133</sup> Edward M. Graham, *US National Security and Foreign Direct Investment* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 2006), 129.

<sup>134</sup> Nancy Pelosi, "Statement on Amendment to Block Chinese Bid to Acquire Unocal," *Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi*, June 30, 2005, <http://pelosi.house.gov/news/press-releases/2005/06/releases-June05-unocal.shtml> (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

broader context as a “starting point” for thinking about the bid.<sup>136</sup> She argued that since “the sun has really not been shining in this relationship for a number of years,”<sup>137</sup> it should come as no surprise that the proposal is not automatically welcome.

Such understandings informed the context of policymaking to the extent that Washington installed administrative hurdles in the Chinese proposal’s procedure within the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (henceforth CFIUS), which is an obligatory process examining the potential national security implications of foreign investments.<sup>138</sup> Since the bid was understood as a threat to US interests, the Chinese government felt the need to react and mitigate fears by naming the proposal a “normal commercial activity between enterprises.”<sup>139</sup> Yet, the response backfired because the CCP adamantly demanded “that the U.S. Congress correct its mistaken ways of politicizing economic and trade issues and stop interfering.”<sup>140</sup> Instead of defusing tensions, the language and the content of the message provided more evidence that the Chinese government was in fact controlling developments from behind the curtains. Later on, as Washington displayed no signs of thaw, CNOOC eventually surrendered and withdrew the bid on August 2, 2005. The Chinese company reiterated in the announcement the “purely commercial objectives” of the planned takeover, and emphasized that the withdrawal was a direct result of an “unprecedented political opposition,” which was “regrettable and unjustified.”<sup>141</sup>

The Chinese debacle left many wondering why the mutually beneficial deal did not materialize. The context was obviously such that the bid went against the grain in Washington, yet the idea that CNOOC simply tried to fry too big a fish also gained

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<sup>136</sup> *Dark Clouds on the Horizon: The CNOOC-Unocal Controversy and Rising U.S.-China Frictions* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2005), 3, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Bartholomew\\_Transcript\\_7-14-052.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Bartholomew_Transcript_7-14-052.pdf) (accessed May 22, 2013).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Hufbauer, Wong, and Sheth, *US-China Trade Disputes*, 48–50.

<sup>139</sup> “China Tells Congress to Back Off Businesses,” *China Daily*, July 5, 2005, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-07/05/content\\_457271.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-07/05/content_457271.htm) (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> “CNOOC Limited to Withdraw Unocal Bid,” *CNOOC Limited*, August 2, 2005, <http://www.cnooltd.com/encnoocLtd/newszx/news/2005/961.shtml> (accessed April 25, 2013).

prominence. Although CNOOC was a “bottomless pit of cash,” the Chinese company lacked a well-designed “game plan” and the “art of the deal” to cope with the complexities that such large-scale takeovers necessarily involve.<sup>142</sup> CNOOC nevertheless learned the lesson. After licking “its wounds”<sup>143</sup> for quite some time, the Chinese company successfully returned in 2012 with a more sophisticated, albeit similarly momentous, bid to take over Nexen, a Canadian oil company.<sup>144</sup>

## 4.2. Other Instances of Chinese-American M&A Activities

In the meantime, examples show that the Chinese company’s failure to take over Unocal did not mean that similar endeavors were bound to fail as well. This is because each example was embedded in its own social context where different circumstances informed the outcome.

After 2005, both the United States and China showed restraint with regards to M&A activities, which led to more successful interactions.<sup>145</sup> Fruitful engagements were made possible by two mutually reinforcing moves. On the one hand, Washington refrained from interfering politically too often in M&A proposals. On the other hand, China realized that smaller bids are more likely to avoid political attention. As a result, in 2007 China Investment Corporation encountered no major obstacle buying stakes in emblematic companies such as Morgan Stanley and Blackstone Group L.P.<sup>146</sup> Similarly, Sinopec, China’s biggest oil company, recently took over possessions of Chesapeake Energy. The lack of political opposition is puzzling because Chesapeake is the largest producer of natural gas in the United

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<sup>142</sup> “Why China’s Unocal Bid Ran Out of Gas,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, August 3, 2005, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2005-08-03/why-chinas-unocal-bid-ran-out-of-gas> (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Roberta Rampton and Scott Haggett, “CNOOC-Nexen Deal Wins U.S. Approval, Its Last Hurdle,” *Reuters*, February 12, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/12/us-nexen-cnooc-idUSBRE91B0SU20130212> (accessed May 21, 2013).

<sup>145</sup> Isabella Steger, “Cnooc’s Unocal Lessons,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2012, <http://blogs.wsj.com/deals/2012/07/23/cnoocs-unocal-lessons/> (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>146</sup> Karl Rusnak, “AMC Acquisition Largest-Ever Chinese Takeover of a U.S. Company,” *Economy in Crisis*, May 22, 2012, <http://economyincrisis.org/content/chinese-firm-buys-amc-entertainment-in-largest-ever-chinese-takeover-of-a-u-s-company> (accessed April 25, 2013).

States, and thus the takeover arguably has energy security implications for the United States. Also, the deal was about ownership over the “most-promising Mississippi Lime acreage,”<sup>147</sup> a stake which would arguably warrant the extraordinary attention of politicians, yet the deal was struck smoothly. The sale of California-based Complete Genomics to the Chinese BGI-Shenzhen also failed to trigger large-scale political opposition in the US. In December 2012, the CFIUS approved the deal despite concerns that the Chinese company could use “genomic data of American samples to some unknown nefarious end.”<sup>148</sup>

Other engagements led to similarly positive conclusions despite the sensitivity of the industry in which they unfolded. In May 2012, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (henceforth ICBC) was given a green light to buy into the Bank of East Asia U.S.A. (henceforth BEA). Though the approval arrived only two years after ICBC submitted the application, the negotiation processes faced no major challenges in general.<sup>149</sup> The absence of opposition makes the case particularly interesting because this was the first time a Chinese company successfully penetrated the American banking sector to such an extent that the ICBC gained an 80% controlling interest in the BEA. The reasoning behind the deal was obviously different this time. While CNOOC’s proposal was understood as threatening, this interaction was framed in mutually beneficial terms. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner, for instance, hailed China for having taken “important steps” by making concessions to US firms operating in China, which will create “greater opportunities for U.S. workers and companies.”<sup>150</sup> Arguments such as the target being “a small bank engaged in a relatively traditional set of commercial banking activities” also contributed to the smooth conclusion of

<sup>147</sup> Joe Carroll and Benjamin Haas, “Sinopec’s U.S. Shale Deal Struck at Two-Thirds’ Discount,” *Bloomberg*, February 26, 2013, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-25/sinopec-to-buy-chesapeake-oil-and-gas-assets-for-1-02-billion.html> (accessed May 22, 2013).

<sup>148</sup> Andrew Pollack, “Chinese Firm Is Cleared to Buy American DNA Sequencing Company,” *The New York Times*, December 30, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/31/health/chinese-firm-is-cleared-to-buy-american-dna-sequencing-company.html?\\_r=2&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/31/health/chinese-firm-is-cleared-to-buy-american-dna-sequencing-company.html?_r=2&) (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>149</sup> “Federal Reserve Approves Chinese Takeover Of American Bank,” *CBS*, May 9, 2012, <http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/05/09/federal-reserve-approves-chinese-takeover-of-american-bank/> (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

the bid.<sup>151</sup> From the Chinese perspective, the deal held symbolic value. It was evidence that even the banking sector, one of the politically most salient industries of any nation's economy, is open for business if China puts an appropriate offer on the table.<sup>152</sup>

Such acquisitions penetrated sensitive areas such as the banking sector and the energy security of the American economy, yet the political resistance evidenced in the CNOOC proposal was largely absent this time. What made this difference possible is the broader context within which the acquisitions unfolded. In the midst of a global economic crisis, it was both irrational and economically suicidal for American companies suffering from a poor financial condition to refuse China's capital-intensive M&A attempts. Overall, such concerns arguably weighed heavier in the equation, and eventually discredited arguments about the potential national security implications that Chinese takeovers would have.

The film industry presented another example where a Chinese takeover of an American firm was concluded successfully. In May 2012, China's Dalian Wanda Group's intention to buy American AMC Entertainment Holdings became public.<sup>153</sup> The deal warranted significant attention because the Chinese company offered 2.6 billion dollars, the biggest sum ever to change hands between a Chinese and an American company. The purchase was possible because the context was such that both companies' interests fell along the same line. On the one hand, the takeover would infuse AMC with badly needed cash. As a high-ranking executive pointed out after the announcement broke news, illustrative of AMC's deteriorating financial status was that even "the bulbs weren't changed, so films

<sup>151</sup> Danielle Myles and Lucy McNulty, "What ICBC's Approval Means for China-US Banking," *International Financial Law Review*, May 16, 2012, <http://www.iflr.com/Article/3029944/What-ICBCs-approval-means-for-China-US-banking.html> (accessed May 22, 2013).

<sup>152</sup> Keith Bradsher and Michael J. De La Merced, "China Woos Overseas Companies, Looking for Deals," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2012, <http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2012/12/11/china-woos-overseas-companies-looking-for-deals/> (accessed April 25, 2013).

<sup>153</sup> Michelle Kung and Aaron Back, "China's Wanda to Acquire AMC Entertainment," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303610504577417073912636152.html> (accessed May 23, 2013).



looked dim.”<sup>154</sup> Also, AMC’s competitiveness in the American market was on the decline as a direct result of the outdated infrastructure. Therefore, AMC’s management was “100% positive” that the company will finally be “run by someone with deep pockets.”<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, the takeover means Wanda can break into the US cinema market, and receive much needed “operational expertise” in the field.<sup>156</sup>

Some circumstances facilitated the agreement while others hindered the process. One of the important factors which smoothed the purchase was that Wanda was owned totally by private companies without any direct affiliation to the Chinese government, which made next to impossible for China bashers to impose a condemnatory understanding on the Chinese company.<sup>157</sup> The film industry was also seen as politically less relevant, which facilitated the delegitimization of US national security concerns as simply unreasonable in the context. Yet, this does not mean that opponents were entirely absent. Some explicitly called readers to “boycott AMC theaters” because “China can control and eventually own” one of America’s “true creator of wealth,” and the more than 5000 screens operated by AMC will before long become “powerful outlets for subtle propaganda.”<sup>158</sup> The Chinese government was also brought into the picture because Wanda’s chairman Wang Jianlin was a member of the CCP. Other commentators warned about China’s purposefully “aggressive expansion”<sup>159</sup> which aims to build up political influence abroad and to enhance the country’s nascent soft power by spreading its culture among a worldwide audience. The deal nevertheless materialized because such fears did not resonate sufficiently with the American public.

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<sup>154</sup> Paul Bond, “How China Ownership Could Impact America’s AMC Movie Chain,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 22, 2012, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/dalian-wanda-amc-purchase-analysis-impact-327897> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> “Why a Chinese Company Is Buying AMC Movie Theaters,” *The Week*, May 22, 2012, <http://theweek.com/article/index/228273/why-a-chinese-company-is-buying-amc-movie-theaters> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Bob Hall, “China’s Purchase of AMC Theaters,” *Economy in Crisis*, May 23, 2012, <http://economyincrisis.org/content/chinas-purchase-of-amc-theaters> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>159</sup> Newman, “China Buys Hollywood Influence with Takeover of Top U.S. Cinema Chain.”

However, US national security concerns triumphed in another case to such an exceptional extent that US President Barack Obama had to issue an executive order barring a Chinese company from owning and operating a wind farm next to a secret US military base.<sup>160</sup> The Chinese Ralls Corporation, which at the time of the proposal already possessed and operated a number of wind farms across the US, intended to take over another wind farm in the vicinity of the Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility in Oregon. However, the position turned out to be geographically too strategic for a Chinese company to be allowed to purchase. Commentators argued that since the Ralls Corporation is controlled by a member of the CCP's Central Committee, the company would exploit the wind farm's location by installing surveillance tools to gather information about the US military establishment nearby.<sup>161</sup> Fears about future spy activities gained prominence, yet the broader political context also suggested that the Chinese company's seemingly innocent plan is probably bound to fail. With the 2012 presidential elections just around the corner, Barack Obama took advantage of the proposal and barred it to falsify the American public's widely shared belief that the incumbent president compromises US interests by being soft on China, an argument which originated from his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney.<sup>162</sup> This political undertone was discernible in the language of the executive order. While the president's move "demonstrates the Administration's commitment to protecting national security," the overall message was nevertheless ambiguous because it emphasized that the "decision is specific to this transaction and is not a precedent,"<sup>163</sup> which was meant to dissipate Chinese concerns that the US is henceforth not open to do business with China. The Ralls Corporation nevertheless

<sup>160</sup> Helman, "Obama Blocks China's Second-Richest Man From Owning Wind Farm Near Secret Navy Base."

<sup>161</sup> "US Blocks Chinese Firm's Investment in Wind Farms," *BBC*, September 28, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-19766965> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>162</sup> "Chinaphobia: Obama Blocks Chinese Wind Farm over Nearby Drone Base, Citing 'National Security'," *RT News*, September 29, 2012, <http://rt.com/news/obama-chinese-wind-farm-288/> (accessed May 23, 2013).

<sup>163</sup> "Order Signed by the President Regarding the Acquisition of Four U.S. Wind Farm Project Companies by Ralls Corporation," *The White House*, September 28, 2012, <http://m.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/09/28/order-signed-president-regarding-acquisition-four-us-wind-farm-project-c> (accessed May 23, 2013).

sued the US president because the company was forced to divest itself of all US wind farms in its possession, not just the one operating in the neighborhood of the military base.<sup>164</sup>

### 4.3. Conclusion

In sum, the purpose of this chapter was to demonstrate the complexity of Chinese-American economic relations by focusing on specific examples involving Chinese and American companies that are engaged in M&A activities. The examples presented in the chapter underscore the overarching argument of the thesis that the outcome of a particular interaction is dependent on the social context within which the interaction unfolds. While some proposals failed due to political resistance, other takeovers proceeded smoothly because their context was such that political opposition was not a rational move to make. Of course, this does not mean that political opposition was entirely absent. Rather, it means that the objection against the takeovers came up short of informing the outcome because the idea of opposing the mergers did not correspond to the prevailing rules of the interaction, hence the reason for the lack of public support. The chapter also demonstrated that change in interactions can become possible through social learning. Lessons of CNOOC's debacle with the Unocal deal were well integrated by the Chinese companies, making them savvier in dealing with their American counterparts in subsequent attempts. Timeless rationalist arguments would be at odds accounting for this phenomenon because of its context-specificity.

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<sup>164</sup> "Chinese Private Firm Sues Obama over US Wind Project - China.org.cn," October 2, 2012, [http://www.china.org.cn/business/2012-10/02/content\\_26691087.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/business/2012-10/02/content_26691087.htm) (accessed April 25, 2013).

## Conclusion

Relations between China and the United States constitute an immensely complex network of various interactions which displays signs of both cooperation and defiance. On the one hand, military cooperation is basically unthinkable because of the mutual animosity evidenced between the two countries, and yet on the other hand economic engagements progress and prosper relatively smoothly. Such inconsistency is also characteristic of M&A activities which take place between Chinese and American companies. While certain Chinese attempts to take over American businesses fail due to political opposition, others materialize without any serious trouble. Rationalist theories such as realism and liberalism usually fail to grasp and make sense of this empirical diversity because they are driven by macro-theoretical considerations. While liberalism tends to establish a more amicable view of international relations by emphasizing ways of cooperation, realism paints a rather grim picture because the world is populated exclusively by selfish states.

This thesis argued that such dichotomies fall short of understanding instances of complex interstate affairs because they reduce and simplify them in order to identify universal causes and laws. This is why the thesis argued that a more social inquiry is warranted to understand examples of Chinese-American relations, one which can shed more light on the context within which each interaction unfolds. The analytical apparatus necessary to undertake such an investigation was set up according to the Wittgensteinian notion of the language game. Building on the language game perspective, the thesis demonstrated that language is not a mere instrument which is used to understand reality. Rather, language is constitutive of reality because linguistic expressions are vessels containing social meanings about the world.

To illustrate that this is indeed the case, the second chapter presented a brief overview of the metaphors in American public discourse that tried to make sense of how the US should

tend towards China. Metaphors were necessary because the context of the two countries' interaction changed dramatically after the Soviet Union collapsed. The subsequent chapters lent more support to the overarching argument of the thesis that one cannot make sense of any interaction in international relations unless the social context is sufficiently identified. The third chapter presented the 2001 Spy Plane incident from a language game perspective to demonstrate that the interaction unfolded according to the changing social context which was defined by what meanings the two countries attached to the incident through language. The fourth chapter further underpinned the argument that interactions are contingent on their own context, a realization which allows for the acknowledgement of empirical inconsistencies displayed by Chinese-American M&A activities.

In general, the thesis aimed to suggest that language has significant potential in studies of International Relations, yet this does not mean that the language game approach should be henceforth taken as an ultimate recipe for understanding interstate affairs. The approach which this thesis made use of necessarily suffers from certain shortcomings as any other in the discipline. Since the language game approach involves the refusal to look for universal laws and instead focuses on identifying the context of interactions that are already past, prediction as such becomes basically unfeasible. Therefore, establishing prognoses about future events remains to be pursued by rationalist theories of IR. Furthermore, the language game approach is also not parsimonious. While realism and liberalism can succinctly summarize their gist in a number of core assumptions, the focus on context and language predisposes the language game approach not to possess subtle theoretical underpinnings that could neatly capture its essence. Equally important, to look and see how language is put to use in various interactions necessitates social inquiry which is qualitatively different from how traditional positivist paradigms produce knowledge on the basis of hypotheses and empirical evidence.

The language game approach nevertheless has certain advantages compared to the ‘theories’ of IR. First and foremost, the strength of this approach lies in the realization that events of world politics are always historically dependent on circumstances. Unlike theories of IR, the language game approach can integrate the acknowledgement of the contingent nature of international relations, and thus appears to be better equipped to make sense of and reconstruct change from a historical/contextual perspective. The social sensitivity of the approach might also allow for morally better judgments in world politics. Equally important, the focus on context and language arms the language game approach with the ability to identify the inherent subjectivity of norms and values that inform social interactions because it focuses on how participants of the interaction construct them through language. In this sense, the language game approach also helps reconfirm the importance of social agency in international relations.

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