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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Ford Foundation and the development of international relations in China

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Abstract

Current explanations of Sino–American relations are dominated by realist and liberal understandings of world politics, neglecting crucial transnational actors that complexify Sino–American relations. In contrast and drawing from internationally informed Gramscian hegemony theory, and on extensive archival work, we offer an alternative complex multidimensional transnational account. By researching the Ford Foundation's activities in China and the United States, specifically its contribution to the development of the international relations (IR) discipline in China, we break new ground and show that Ford was key in profoundly shaping Sino–American relations, especially by developing transnational knowledge networks. These transnational elite networks simultaneously integrated China into the LIO and had unintended consequences, particularly in encouraging Chinese counter-hegemonic dynamics that challenge the LIO from within. Our approach indicates a richer complexity of Sino–US relations than extant theories, suggesting that the future trajectories of this strategic relationship are uncertain and do not fall neatly into an inevitable war or peaceful interdependence binary.

Keywords: China IR; competitive-conflictual cooperation; contested hegemonic transition; hegemony; transnational elite knowledge networks; China–US relations

Introduction

Napoleon Bonaparte's prediction about China has come to fruition,¹ a seismic shift in global dynamics promoting discussions about the implications of China for the liberal international order (LIO). The dominant discourse revolves around the question of whether this 'risen China' will dismantle or operate within the LIO.² This debate has become narrower still as a geopolitical zero-sum contest. IR scholars have examined the mechanisms that facilitated China's rise, exploring various actors' roles. Many critics of China's rise argue that its integration was 'the worst strate-

¹Shaun Breslin, *China Risen? Studying Chinese Global Power* (Bristol University Press, 2021).

²Rush Doshi, *The Long Game* (Oxford University Press, 2021); John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs*, 94:1 (2018), p. 17.

gic blunder;³ enabled by US liberal elites' 'strategic naivety'.⁴ We argue that Ford and other liberal elites played a long game – a war of position – to gradually shift Chinese elites' ideas, institutions, and approaches to the world, away from revolutionary Marxism–Leninism towards integration into the liberal order. Complementarily, Chinese elites had agency and closely monitored and shaped Ford's influence.⁵ Ford was neither co-opted by nor controlled Chinese elites but occupied a liminal ambiguous space in a complex, if authoritarian, system.⁶ Ford is adept at negotiating reform-oriented engagement within a variety of regimes, including hostile right-wing American administrations and 'anti-American' foreign states.

For realists, an anarchical international system compels China to pursue survival and strive for regional hegemony.⁷ Offensive realists expect revisionist state elites to challenge the dominant power, viewing its ascent as an outcome of strategic decisions made by national elites, within the context of systemic pressures. The Chinese moral realist IR scholar embedded in Ford's extensive elite networks, Yan Xuetong, emphasises that state leadership is the crucial explanatory factor for understanding a rising power's ascent.⁸

For liberals, China's ascent was possible through selective integration and socialisation into the US-led LIO,⁹ because if Russia and China could be made "more like us" they would be less likely to mount revisionist challenges.¹⁰ China leveraged the LIO to promote its 'development into a global superpower',¹¹ even as China's own economic modernisation was fundamental.¹² Ikenberry argues that the result of China's integration and socialisation would be a win for both China and the United States.¹³

These perspectives, while valuable, exhibit three primary shortcomings. First, they are imbued with internalist views suggesting world politics can be explained by a society's domestic characteristics alone.¹⁴ Hence, China's rise was possible due to elites' 'policy choices', overlooking how external actors and structures shaped, enabled, and conditioned policy choices. Although realists highlight the international system's anarchical nature as shaping state policy, their perspectives do not transcend internalist narratives.

Secondly, mainstream literature is entrenched in state-centric thinking.¹⁵ State-centric realism and neoliberalism fail to offer a comprehensive explanation of the evolution of Sino–US relations. The state-centric paradigm creates a division between domestic and international politics, hindering the examination of reciprocal relations between these two spheres, impeding a holistic study of politics.¹⁶ Thirdly, mainstream literature often presents a linear understanding of China's rise,

³ John J. Mearsheimer, 'The inevitable rivalry: America, China and the tragedy of great power politics', *Foreign Affairs*, 100:6 (2021), p. 51.

⁴ Chris Ogden and Mark Bhaskar, 'The power of unintended consequences: Strategic naivety, China and the end of the US empire', *Political Quarterly*, 94:3 (2023), pp. 420–427.

⁵ A. J. Spiers, 'Organizationally homophily in international grantmaking: US-based foundations and their grantees in China', *Journal of Civil Society*, 7:3 (2011), pp. 305–31; Priscilla Roberts, 'Orchestrating and mediating New China's international reintegration: The US think tank cluster in the 1980s', in Priscilla Roberts (ed.), *Chinese Economic Statecraft from 1978 to 1989* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 389–435.

⁶ Silvia Menegazzi, *Rethinking Think Tanks in Contemporary China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁷ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2001).

⁸ Yan Xuetong, 'Political leadership and power redistribution', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 1–26 (p. 12); Yan Xuetong, 'The rise of China in Chinese eyes', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 10:26 (2001), pp. 33–9 (p. 34).

⁹ Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order'.

¹⁰ Michael Mastanduno, 'Partner politics: Russia, China and the challenge of extending US hegemony after the Cold War', *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2019), pp. 479–504 (p. 479).

¹¹ Mark Lanteigne, *China and International Institutions: Alternate Paths to Global Power* (Routledge, 2005), p. 1.

¹² John Ikenberry, *World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order* (Yale University Press, 2020), p. 264.

¹³ Ikenberry, *World Safe for Democracy*, p. 263.

¹⁴ Kevin Gray, *North Korea and the Geopolitics of Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 8.

¹⁵ Daniel Chernilo, 'Social theory's methodological nationalism', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9:1 (2006), pp. 5–6.

¹⁶ We build upon literature on transnational relations and non-state actors in shaping Sino–American relations, for example Kazushi Minami, *People's Diplomacy: How Americans and Chinese transformed US–China relations during the Cold War*

portraying Chinese elites as passive actors merely responding to the pressures of international anarchy or socialisation dynamics of the LIO. We also challenge the binary approach that labels China as either for or against the LIO, as reality reflects far greater complexity.¹⁷

We investigate a neglected aspect of China's rise: how American NGOs supported a new generation of China specialists who prepared for a new era in its relations with China and 'transferred' knowledge of world politics to China. These NGOs – particularly the Ford Foundation – helped normalise Sino-US relations and significantly influenced IR studies in China. We briefly show how Ford built academic Chinese studies in the US and helped forge a new policy consensus around engaging China from the 1960s. We then show the extensive range of Ford's elite knowledge network-building activities in China that were influential *institutionally and ideationally*, in terms of the *diplomatic and policy environment*, and in *pluralising and liberalising* aspects of Chinese academia. We examine the formation of Sino-US elite knowledge networks, facilitating transnational agendas through involvement in US foreign policy towards China and the training of international affairs experts. As a result of US foundations' entrepreneurial network-building, American-style IR became the hegemonic discipline in many countries, including China, marginalising the English School, for example.¹⁸

In this article, inspired by Gramsci's ideas on hegemony, historic blocs, and war of position, we offer an original internationally informed, archive research-based examination of the impact of American foundations on both China's rise and the growth of IR. Ford, while aiming to promote peace and socialise Chinese elites into the 'American order', inadvertently played a role in empowering Chinese IR scholars and elites, providing them a new understanding of world politics amid evolving geopolitical dynamics.¹⁹ Clearly, there are macro and micro factors influencing the development of Chinese IR, including debates among prominent scholars competing for status. Nevertheless, at least ten of the top twenty-five Chinese IR theorists were funded by Ford and worked in closely linked institutions, including Wang Yizhou, Wang Jisi, Yan Xuetong, Ni Shixiong, Shen Dingli, Chu Shulong, Yang Jiemian, Zhang Yunling, and Zhou Fangyin.²⁰ Yan Xuetong, for example, developed a strong critique of US loss of moral authority through policies of double standards in foreign affairs in the context of the LIO.²¹

This enabled Chinese scholars to develop intellectual tools, new concepts, and transnational networks, the groundwork for both integrating into and questioning the LIO. While American foundations initially sought to strengthen ties and socialise Chinese elites, they unintentionally created the basis of challenges to the LIO. Between 2002 and 2009, over 85 per cent of all Ford

(Cornell University Press, 2024); Pete Millwood, 'An "exceedingly delicate undertaking": Sino-American science diplomacy, 1966–78', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 56:1 (2021), pp. 166–90; Pete Millwood, *Improbable Diplomats: How Ping-Pong Players, Musicians, and Scientists Remade US-China Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), although these works focus on academic exchanges in natural sciences. Priscilla Roberts's work, 'Bringing the Chinese back in: The role of quasi-private institutions in Britain and the United States', in Priscilla Roberts and Odd Arne Westad (eds), *China, Hong Kong, and the Long 1970s* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), is important though it does not provide an in-depth account of how these actors mobilised social science to achieve strategic goals.

¹⁷Nana De Graff, Tobias Ten Brink, and Inderjeet Parmar, 'China's rise in a liberal world order in transition', *Review of International Political Economy*, 27:2 (2020), pp. 191–207.

¹⁸Zhang Yongjin, 'The "English School" in China: A travelogue of ideas and their diffusion', *European Journal International Relations*, 9:1 (2003), pp. 87–114.

¹⁹Huo Shuhong and Inderjeet Parmar, 'A new type of great power relationship? Gramsci, Kautsky and the role of the Ford Foundation's transnational elite knowledge networks in China', *Review of International Political Economy*, 27:2 (2020–03), pp. 234–57.

²⁰Peter M. Kristensen and Ras T. Nielsen, 'Constructing a Chinese international relations theory', *International Political Sociology*, 7:1 (2013), pp. 19–40; see table of most prominent Chinese IR scholars, p. 23.

²¹His latest is Yan Xuetong, 'Why China Isn't Scared of Trump', *Foreign Affairs*, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-china-isnt-scared-trump>, accessed 5 June 2025. In a similar vein, the heavily Ford-supported and influential China Institute of International Studies developed concepts to challenge R2P in the wake of US double standards in Libya, 2011; Xu Longdi, 'Emergence of a think tank and a rising power on the world stage: China Institute of International Studies', in J.G. McGann (ed.), *Think Tanks, Foreign Policy and the Emerging Powers* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 173–89.

grants (which totalled over \$440 m) to China went to state-linked institutions, strengthening the Chinese state.²² Ford neither co-opted Chinese elites nor was it co-opted by them; it was a delicately negotiated relationship between a liberal foreign actor and a centralised party-state.²³

This article unfolds across four sections. First, we explain our theoretical approach, drawing on Gramsci's concepts while differentiating them from an epistemic community-building approach. We use a Gramscian approach to study American foundations, highlighting their intended, unintended, and complexifying outcomes. Second, we explicate our Gramscian lens by exploring the rise of Ford-funded Chinese studies programmes in the US; third, we analyse Ford's hegemonic activities, focusing on its consequential impact on IR. We conclude by summarising our findings and discussing their implications, bringing out the longer-term contested hegemonic transition quality of Sino-US relations, as well as its less clear-cut short- and medium-term conflictual-competitive-cooperative complexities.

Gramsci, transnational elite knowledge networks, and Sino-US relations

Elite knowledge networks are 'flows of people, ideas and funding around a complex of knowledge, political, corporate, governmental and other institutions – ... the principal power technology ... [for] elite hegemony'.²⁴ We propose an international-informed Gramscian framework to analyse Ford's role in global politics, understand how Sino-US elite knowledge networks are formed, and explore Ford's unintended and complex impacts.

Our framework emphasises the *political agency* of recipient elite groups comprising an elite knowledge network, underscoring the *historicity* of power relations in a specific socio-economic and geopolitical context. We illustrate how knowledge networks go beyond being mere *conduits for the transfer of hegemonic ideas and norms* from more advanced to less developed states, instead forming a *nexus enabling complex development*. This process involves substitution, ultimately facilitating the *appropriation* of the required grammar for LIO navigation, giving rise to contingent conditions fuelling challenges from within.

Rosenberg clarifies the complexities of international interactions by emphasising 'the ... multiple and interactive quality of social reality ... different things going on, at different speeds, in different but ... happening in parallel ... to produce *hybrid effects and non-linear outcomes*'.²⁵

Consequently, international, state, and geopolitical dynamics generate challenges to dominant orders, enabling simultaneous integration and contestation. Hence, substitution processes²⁶ are unpredictable. Neither American foundations nor Chinese elites could foresee the complex long-term effects of their interactions. The controversies in China and at Ford after the repression at Tiananmen Square highlight this complexity.²⁷ China's elites welcomed foreign foundations and ideas knowing they carried the risk of jeopardising their state from within, but viewed them as necessary to compete on the world stage, while keeping them within manageable bounds.²⁸

²²Anthony K. Spires, 'US Foundations Boost Chinese Government, Not NGOs', *YaleGlobal Online*, available at: <https://archive-yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/us-foundations-boost-chinese-government-not-ngos>, accessed 7 June 2025; Xu, 'Emergence of a think tank'.

²³Menegazzi, *Rethinking Think Tanks*; Priscilla Roberts, 'Orchestrating and mediating'; Spires, 'Organizationally homophily'.

²⁴Inderjeet Parmar, 'How elite networks shape the contours of the discipline and what we might do about it', in Synne L Dyvik et al. (eds), *What's the Point of International Relations?* (Routledge, 2017), p. 108.

²⁵Justin Rosenberg et al., 'Debating uneven and combined development/debating international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:2 (2022), pp. 291–327 (p. 295; italics added).

²⁶Radhika Desai, 'Introduction: The materiality of nations in geopolitical economy', *World Review of Political Economy*, 6:4 (2015), pp. 449–58 (p. 451).

²⁷Federico Pachetti, 'The making of America's economic entanglement with China', PhD diss., Hong Kong University (2019).

²⁸Following Ford's activities with CASS, in 1988 it obtained special permission from the State Council to open a Beijing office; Norton Wheeler, *The Role of American NGOs in China's Modernization* (Routledge, 2013), p. 73. Despite this, Chinese elites debated the so-called Western 'peaceful evolution strategy' to change China from within; Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022); see also Gu Ting, 'China's

Chinese intellectuals involved with American foundations adopted and adapted previously unavailable external knowledge to align with the geopolitical requirements of a 'catching up' state.

To explicate the processes of hegemony inherent in collaborative knowledge production, we turn to Gramsci's work on hegemony and how organisations like Ford – as a microcosm of the US foreign policy establishment, with its state–corporate revolving door character – facilitate inter-ruling-elite transnational relations.²⁹ Ford, with a massive endowment rooted in profits originating with the Ford Motor Company and the global economy, was and is a core component of the national security state with close links with the CIA, state department, and the presidency. As a 'parastatist' organisation, it shares global mentalities driven by exceptionalist beliefs, alongside the American state and other corporate foundations, to remake the world in America's image.³⁰

Transnational elite network construction embeds asymmetric power relations with network-effectiveness in spreading knowledge dependent on vertical social relations. This is particularly relevant when considering the development of twentieth-century American foundations, because they played a central role in 'building and embedding American hegemony'.³¹ Hegemony may be understood as

processes by which a group, class or state – through a combination of persuasion and coercion – is able to attain 'buy in' from other groups, classes or states for its own objectives, values and interests. In order to establish hegemony, the hegemonic power or group normally culturally, intellectually, financially, or militarily penetrates the target group or society/state, thereby providing significant impetus in socialising elements in the target group.³²

American foundations collaborated with China to establish hegemonic relations,³³ fostering networks to disseminate US influence through non-state and state-licensed actors alike. These elite actors, semi-independently of the government, served as inter-state intermediaries. They hoped the 'molecular advance'³⁴ of American IR would pluralise Chinese IR academics (gradually) towards liberalism, paving the way for cooperative transnational relations, especially to shift local academics away from 'nationalist and procommunist strategies'.³⁵

Gramscian hegemony theory helps to understand the international dynamics shaping the development of Sino–US elite networks and the development of IR, and how these dynamics paved the way for contradictory, unintended, and intended but complex hybrid effects.

Of course, it would be possible to use other approaches to understand Ford's roles in China, such as Haass's 'epistemic community' approach.³⁶ This approach overlaps with Gramscian theory: it sees knowledge as a tool for policy influence; to shape societal outcomes; and as a group dynamic involving collective efforts via expert networks. But epistemic community approaches

Ruling Party Takes Direct Control of Country's Universities', *Radio Free Asia*, available at: {<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/china-universities-01182024160231.html>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

²⁹ Inderjeet Parmar and Bamo Nouri, 'Explaining the US presence in the Indo-Pacific', in Oliver Turner et al. (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of US Foreign Policy in the Indo-Pacific* (Routledge, 2023), pp. 137–51.

³⁰ Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century* (Columbia University Press, 2012); Godfrey Hodgson, 'The establishment', *Foreign Policy*, 10 (1973), pp. 3–40.

³¹ Inderjeet Parmar, 'Foundation networks and American hegemony', *European Journal of American Studies*, 7:1 (2012–04), pp. 1–29 (p. 1).

³² Inderjeet Parmar, 'Foundation networks', p. 1.

³³ Inderjeet Parmar, 'Transnational elite knowledge networks', *Security Studies*, 28:3 (2018), pp. 532–64.

³⁴ In Kees van der Pijl, *Transnational Classes and International Relations* (Routledge, 1998), van der Pijl argued that during a passive revolution, the state unintentionally creates spaces that external social forces may occupy.

³⁵ Parmar, *Foundations*, p. 7.

³⁶ Peter Haas, 'Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organization*, 46:1 (1992), pp. 1–35; Hu Yanfei and Gavin Hilson, 'Ford Foundation in China's reform era: Philanthropic policy influence in the Global South', in Roosa Lambin et al. (eds), *Handbook on Philanthropy and Social Policy* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025), pp. 167–81.

operate within pluralistic, liberal theoretical frameworks and are often funded by powerful corporate interests or governments, yet claim to be technocratic and above ideology. They accept the legitimacy of existing institutions and seek to influence them through problem-solving expertise oriented towards incremental change. Gramsci conversely grounds knowledge as a product of class relations, as part ideological struggles. The role of intellectuals is bound up with class power – whether of a traditional ruling class or a rising class. Gramscian intellectuals view knowledge as an arena for preserving, reforming, or overthrowing hegemony, to reshape the social order, frequently via paradigmatic change. Epistemic communities aim at pragmatic solutions on an incremental basis based on technical expertise. Given Ford's character, its corporate and state networks' focus on modernising China towards a liberal system away from a statist economy, and its record of international hegemonic projects for liberal reform, a Gramscian approach yields greater advantages in comprehending the political-ideological character of Ford's projects to transform China from a revolutionary state to one integrated in the US-led order.³⁷

Gramscian theory might be summarised into several claims against which we compare evidence: first, that hegemonic processes begin at home, by Ford engaging in funding knowledge of China (history, economy, government, political elites, culture) via university Chinese studies programmes. It promoted interest in China among foreign policy think tanks and specific China-focused groupings aiming to build elite Sino-US linkages. This is a process of building knowledge for use to influence both official government policies and attentive and elite opinion, a consensus around a new approach at home as the basis of changing US relations on the ground. Secondly, and relatedly, Ford may be expected to create transnational elite knowledge networks – a transnational historic bloc including government, think tanks, business, universities, and military – to integrate Chinese elites into the global order. Thirdly, we would expect Ford-funded scholars and institutions to diffuse broadly liberal ideas to align Chinese elites with American ways of thinking about economy, politics, and knowledge production. Finally, and again relatedly, we would expect Ford to wage a war of position, subtly to reshape Chinese scholars' thinking and institutions to align with US liberal elites. In combination, these programmes shaped theoretical and methodological approaches to IR in China, trained scholars for policy advisory roles as well as unofficial and semi-official diplomacy, and influenced and legitimised state policy. Ford may rightly claim to have helped integrate revolutionary China into the US-led international system, including managing tensions in an era of geopolitical competition.

The following sections provide empirical evidence based on Ford's previously unresearched archival records. Ford's archives include grant files on specific programmes and detailed summary reports on the aims, content, and results of grant programmes. These are based on still more detailed external and internal referees' reports, correspondence between programme officers, Ford correspondence with funded researchers, and regular grantee reports. In addition, the empirical sections of the article have used a range of other sources, including Ford's annual reports detailing the levels of funding for their entire programme, their overall global, regional, and country strategies, and the foundation's values and effectively its subterranean ideology. Its records include reports by leading officers such as Peter Geithner, first head of Ford's China office in Beijing (1988–90) and head of Asia programmes (1990–6). Other primary sources include reports from US-China bodies such as the National Committee on US-China Relations (NCUSCR). We have also used empirically rich secondary sources to supplement our research in primary sources. Hence, we provide an original account of Ford's hegemonic project in Sino-US relations.

Now we examine Ford's role in building a new consensus towards China as a precursor to ambitious plans to re-engineer Sino-US relations via a major, decades-long funding effort to build national and international elite knowledge networks. This included conferences, seminars, international organisations, academic programmes, scholar exchanges and visiting schemes, think tank research programmes, and professional societies. These programmes began in the 1950s and lasted well beyond China's 'opening up' in 1978.

³⁷ Parmar, *Foundations*.

Ford Foundation and China, 1950–70s: Building elite consensus

From the 1950s, Ford funded NGOs such as the National Committee on US–China Relations (NCUSCR), Committee for Scholarly Communication with Mainland China (later Committee on Scholarly Communication with the PRC [CSCPRC]), Asia Society, Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), and US–China Business Council. Ford's own close ties to American policymakers helped rebuild links with Chinese elites.³⁸

Ford played a significant role in improving US understanding of, and building capacity to culturally and diplomatically engage with, China in the 1960s and 1970s, funding China studies centres at American universities, and creating a climate of elite opinion favouring 'normalisation'.

Ford's IR work focused on the foreign policies and regional relations of developing countries and the broad political, social, and historical aspects of international affairs.³⁹ Because of its early investments, at the time of 'normalisation' Ford was in a strong position to support developments in China. Its support for IR studies created a rich elite network that advocated major policy reforms under the rubric of neoliberal international order, facilitating the appearance of cross-national interaction, knowledge generation, and multi-level Sino–US trust-building.

From 1952 to 1970, Ford invested approximately \$30 million on China studies in and outside of the United States.⁴⁰ Ford's work revolved around three main activities: development of university programmes and cultivation of academic–think tank–US government networks; promotion of intellectual work to influence policy and shape US attentive opinion on Sino–US relations; cultivation of resources enabling transnational networks with Chinese knowledge elites, thereby contributing to the development of the IR field.

A central Ford aim was the development of national elite knowledge networks specialising in regional expertise. These networks linked different dimensions of American political life, including academia, civil society, and government. According to the 1953 Ford Foundation Annual report, Ford supported 104 Asia and Middle East-focused scholars, ten studying China issues, including Albert Feuerwerker and Allen Whiting.⁴¹ From 1955, Ford funded programmes at Stanford, Chicago, Columbia, and Harvard for research on China's political and economic evolution. Berkeley's Center for Chinese Studies (established in 1957), funded by Ford and California state, was directed by Robert Scalapino. In 1971, Scalapino, as NCUSCR president, accommodated the US visit of the Chinese Ping Pong Teams. In December 1972, ten months after President Nixon's China trip, he visited China and also provided briefings for several US presidents before they visited China.⁴²

In 1967, Ford donated a total of \$5 million to Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Berkeley, and Michigan for research to expand Western understanding of China and train specialists for teaching and government posts.⁴³

Ford also supported NGOs to develop China programmes. For example, the CFR launched a China studies programme (1962–6) with \$900,000, steered by former CIA director Allen Dulles, CFR leaders John McCloy and Grayson Kirk, and China specialists Doak Barnett and Lucian Pye.⁴⁴

³⁸Priscilla Roberts, 'The Council on Foreign Relations and the making of US China policy, 1950–1980', conference paper, Transatlantic Studies Association, Shanghai (2015).

³⁹Ford Foundation, '1985 Annual Report' (December 1985), p. 77, available at: {<https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/about-ford/governance-and-financial-statements/annual-report/1985-annual-report/>}, accessed 9 June 2025.

⁴⁰John M. Lindbeck, *Understanding China: An Assessment of American Scholarly Resources* (Praeger Publishers, 1971), pp. 141–56.

⁴¹Ford Foundation, 'Annual Report for 1953' (December 1953), pp. 96–108.

⁴²Tao Wenzhao, *The US Policy Making Process for Post-Cold War China: The Role of US Think Tanks and Diplomacy* (Springer, 2018), pp. 35–6.

⁴³Ford Foundation, 'Annual Report 1967' (September 1967), p. 60, available at: {<https://www.fordfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/1967-annual-report.pdf>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁴⁴Chen Guangmeng, 'Dui wai guanxi weiyuanhui de "zhongguo yanjiu xiangmu" he Zhong mei guanxi de zhuanbian (1962–1968)' ([The China's studies program of Committee on Foreign Relations and the change of Sino–US (1962–1968)], *lishi jiaoxue wenti* [History Research and Teaching], 4 (2012), pp. 86–92.

The first director was Robert Blum, a former CIA official and ex-president of the Asia Foundation. The members of the Steering Committee identified ten policy issues, harnessing the expertise of major scholars such as Abraham Halpern, Archbald Steele, and Alexander Eckstein.⁴⁵

Ford also promoted networks to affect Sino-US policy and shape US attentive opinion. For example, in 1959, the state department's Richard Conlon,⁴⁶ preparing a report on US Asian policy for the US Senate, featured Scalapino's argument against continuing efforts to isolate China, and for exploring possibilities for its greater participation in world affairs. Scalapino's contribution strengthened support for normalisation and proved influential in adjusting official foreign policy.⁴⁷

From the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Ford granted CFR \$100,000 to study US-Soviet relations, as well as a ten-year general grant of \$1,500,000. As a result, from 1956 to 1962, forty books were published, two of which were on China. The first was *Moscow-Peking Axis* (1957) by Howard Boorman et al. The second was *Communist China and Asia* by Doak Barnett,⁴⁸ which adopted the 'two Chinas' policy (recognising the PRC's legitimacy), altering the posture of unqualified hostility to China.

The CFR's work eased Sino-US relations, an important factor in the Johnson administration's adjustment of China policy. Former state department officials and Professor James Thomson (Harvard) believed that the research results of this project gave policymakers a clear message: Since China will continue to exist in one form or another, it is important not to isolate it, but to make it peaceful and rational, and shape Sino-US relations to be mutually acceptable to a country with a massive population and global significance. Influenced by the CFR, the US Senate adopted a posture of 'containing but not isolating' China.⁴⁹

Despite the break in relations in 1951, Ford trained a generation of China specialists for a new era in Sino-US relations.

Ford constructs transnational elite knowledge networks and, develops IR in China, integrating China into the LIO

Ford's activities also cultivated transnational knowledge networks with Chinese elites, including the development of IR in China, particularly after the 1970s. Ford established a transnational IR scholars' network and influenced the formation of an IR community that could embody liberal internationalist tendencies. Prior to Ford funding, IR in China was at best a minor field. As China 'opened up', modern IR developed rapidly.⁵⁰

Table 1 shows the 'Chinese academic-state-transnational nexus'. Ford-funded scholars became key figures in Chinese IR, well connected with state and transnational institutions,⁵¹ facilitating the penetration of liberal internationalist thought into China, and from the latter back to the United States. This transnational network linked China and the United States via intra-state and 'civil society' channels, by-passing but conditioned by official inter-state relations.

In the early 1970s, Ford supported scholarly exchanges between China and the United States, with grants to CSCPRC and NCUSCR. In the early 1980s, Chinese IR specialists numbered no more

⁴⁵ Han Tie, 'The Ford Foundation and Chinese studies, 1950-1979', PhD diss. University of Wisconsin-Madison (1997), p. 346.

⁴⁶ Conlon was a PR and business consultant involved in the Committee for a Free Asia; see Central Intelligence Agency, National Review Bulletin, 'More Chinese Puzzles', November 1959.

⁴⁷ Ezra Vogel, 'In memoriam - Robert Scalapino, 1919-2011', *The China Quarterly*, 209 (2012), pp. 217-21.

⁴⁸ Han Tie, 'The Ford Foundation and Chinese studies', p. 342.

⁴⁹ James C. Thomson, 'Dragon under glass: Time for a new China policy', *Atlantic*, available at: {<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1967/10/dragon-under-glass-time-for-a-new-china-policy/660169/>}, accessed 6 June 2025.

⁵⁰ Liang Shoude, 'Constructing an international relations theory with Chinese characteristics', *Political Science*, 49:1 (1997), pp. 23-39; David Shambaugh, 'International relations studies in China', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11:3 (2011), pp. 339-72.

⁵¹ Eight of fifteen scholars listed in Table 1 were regarded as some of the 'most prominent Chinese IR scholars' in Kristensen and Nielsen, 'Constructing a Chinese international relations theory'.

Table 1. Ford-funded Scholars: ‘Chinese academic–state–transnational nexus’.

Dispatching institution	Name	Current or past academic position	Present and past positions within the state institutions	Past and present transnational connections
Peking University	Wang Jisi	- Dir., Institute of American Studies (CASS) - Dean, SIS, Peking Univ.	- Member, Foreign Policy Advisory Group at Ministry of Foreign Affairs	- Asia Society Distinguished Fellow - International Crisis Group - East Asian Institute, UC, Berkeley; Michigan; Claremont McKenna College; - Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Singapore
	Yuan Ming	- Professor, Vice Dir. SIS, Peking Univ.	- Member, Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference - Member of Foreign Relations Committee - International Advisory Board, Council on Foreign Relations	- Carter Center; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Brookings - Hong Kong University - International Council, Asia Society - Board, United Nations Foundation
	Yuan Jian	- Professor, Beijing Language and Culture University - Fellow, China Institute of International Studies	- Dir., US Research Office, China Institute of International Studies Secretary-General of CSCAP - Editorial Committee, <i>Journal of China International Studies</i>	- Secretary-General, China Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific PhD, Yale Univ.
China Institute of Contemporary International Relations	Chu Shulong	- Fellow, Dean CICIR - Dir., International Institution Development Global Governance Studies (IDGGS), Tsinghua Univ.	- Advisor, China’s Central Television (CCTV) international reporting	- CSCAP (Council on Security Cooperation in Asia-Pacific) (Track II) - Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, Brookings - PhD in Political Science, George Washington Univ.
Shanghai Institution for International Studies	Yang Jiemin	- PhD, Shanghai International Studies University - Fellow, Dir. of SIIS	- Counsellor, Shanghai Municipal People’s Government - Member, Foreign Policy Advisory Group, Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Research fellow, Research Center for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits of Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council	- MA, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy - Member, Executive Committee, Trilateral Commission of North America, Europe and Asia
	Yu Xintian	- Research Fellow, Dir. SIIS - Vice Dir., Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences	- Vice Chairman, China National Association for International Studies - Member, Shanghai 10th Municipal Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference - Chairman, Shanghai Association of International Relations	- Johns Hopkins University and - UC Berkeley - Eisenhower Exchange Program

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Dispatching institution	Name	Current or past academic position	Present and past positions within the state institutions	Past and present transnational connections
Fudan University	Ni Shixiong	- Dir., School of International Relations and Public Affairs at Fudan - Dir., Center for American Studies, Fudan Univ.	- Member, Social Science and Social Affairs Commission, Ministry of Education - Vice Chairman, National Higher Education International Politics Research Association - Vice Chairman, Shanghai Association of International Relations	- Studied with Professors Stanley Hoffman and Joseph Nye at Harvard Univ.
	Shen Dingli	- Professor, Dir., Center for American Studies at Fudan - Founder, China's first non-government based Program on Arms Control and Regional Security, Fudan	- Shanghai and Hangzhou Municipality as Convention Ambassador - Vice Dir., Shanghai International Strategic Studies Institute - Vice Chairman, Shanghai American Society - Vice Chairman, Shanghai Pacific Economic Cooperation Council	- Post-doctoral Researcher for arms control, Princeton Univ. - Strategic Plan Adviser, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan - Member, International Council, Asia Society - Eisenhower Fellow - Washington Univ. in St. Louis
Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	Zhang Yunling	- Professor - Dir., Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, CASS	- Member, Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference	- Member, APEC Expert Group, East Asia Vision Group, Expert group of East Asia Free Trade Area Feasibility Study, China–ROK Joint Expert Committee, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN Consultant, Deutsche Bank in Asia-Pacific region Massachusetts Institute of Technology
	Wang Yizhou	Chief editor, <i>World Economics and Politics</i> - Prof. and PhD at CASS - Vice Dir., School of International Studies, Peking Univ.	- Dean, Regional National Research Institute, Nanjing Univ. - Vice Chairman, China National Association for International Studies	- Hungary Academy of Sciences - CFIA of Harvard Univ.
	Zi Zhongyun	- Dir., Institute of American Studies at CASS - Chief editor, <i>American Studies Quarterly</i>	- Dir., Sino–US Relations History Research Institute - Dir., Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs - Founder, Chinese American Association	- Princeton Univ. - Wilson International Center for Scholars

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued.)

Dispatching institution	Name	Current or past academic position	Present and past positions within the state institutions	Past and present transnational connections
	Niu Jun	- PhD, Renmin Univ. - Institute of American Studies, CASS - Prof., School of International Relations, Peking Univ.	- Secretary-General, China–US Relations History Research Association - Special Researcher, Beijing Pacific International Institute for Strategic Studies - Deputy Editor, <i>International Economic Review Magazine</i>	- Editorial Board, UK Cold War History - UNC; UC, Berkeley; Hong Kong U., Wilson International Scholars Visiting Center - Norwegian Nobel Institute
	Jin Canrong	- PhD, Peking Univ. - Research fellow, Institute of American Studies, CASS - Prof., Vice Dir., School of International Studies at Renmin Univ.	- Vice Chairman, China National Association for International Studies - Public diplomacy consultant, Ministry of Foreign Affairs	- Columbia University - University of Lagos in the United States (funded by Asia Foundation)
Shanghai Institute for International Studies	Pan Guang	- PhD, East China Normal Univ. - Research Fellow, Dir., Shanghai Institute for International Studies	- Dir., Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai - Dir., Shanghai Cooperation Organization Research Center - Vice Dean, China Middle East Society - Dir., Shanghai World History Society - Consulting expert, Shanghai Municipal Government Foreign Affairs Office - Consultant, Shanghai Municipal anti-terrorism work	- Member, International Council at Asia Society - Member, Advisory Committee of the Asia-Europe Foundation's 'Asia Europe Magazine' - Member, Executive Committee of the Asia Studies Scholars Foundation - Senior Advisor, China Euro-Asia Forum - Member, High Committee of the International Alliance for Dialogue among Civilizations
PLA, National Defence University	Pan Zhenqiang	- Dir., Institute of Strategic Studies, PLA National Defence Univ.	- Senior adviser, China Reform Forum - Executive Director, UN Association of China - Member of Council, China Arms Control and Disarmament Association - Advisor, Expert Group on Arms Control of the Second Artillery Force, PLA	- National Defense University; Stanford; Harvard - Member, EC. Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs

than few hundred, and only Fudan University and Peking University trained IR students.⁵² With China's opening and joining international organisations, it was necessary to develop professionals to engage in theoretical, research, and policy work. China increasingly looked abroad for ideas for selective incorporation into its development strategy.⁵³

In response to requests from Chinese academics and government officials, Ford supported IR through Sino-US academic and professional exchanges from late 1978. Ford's Asia and Pacific Program staff believed they would contribute to greater rationality of Chinese international policies and thus promote peace.⁵⁴

Ford staff met in Beijing and New York with officials from CASS. In late April 1979, a CASS delegation proposed focusing on industrial management, applied economics, international relations, and world politics. In the same year, Ford VP Marshall Robinson, as a member of the delegation led by the US Commerce Secretary, identified the IR field as one of the three areas in which it agreed to work with the Chinese (the other two were economics and law).

Ford targeted CASS because it contained the greatest concentration of policy-oriented social scientists. Ford and CASS jointly sponsored conferences on international affairs, bringing senior staff from CASS's IR institutes to the United States and funding visits by American specialists to China.⁵⁵

Ford, alongside Rockefeller philanthropies, funded the Committee on International Relations Studies with the People's Republic of China (CIRSPRC, established 1984), for IR studies in China to strengthen research, training, and policy analysis and Sino-US collaborations. CIRSPRC consisted of leading East Asian and IR specialists chaired initially by Scalapino, and subsequently by Harry Harding (George Washington University). CIRSPRC provided US fellowships for Chinese scholars, organised IR training programmes in China, supported international conferences and policy dialogues in both countries, and made IR research materials and Western scholarship available to Chinese scholars.

During its eight years (1984–92), CIRSPRC established formal relationships with four universities, two social science academies, and six government research institutions (as well as informal ties to several others)⁵⁶ and provided fellowships for 102 Chinese scholars, 39 (38 per cent) for doctoral degrees, 22 (21 per cent) for master's degrees, and 41 (40 per cent) for shorter-term research visits.⁵⁷ The CIRSPRC programme over the eight-year period totalled about \$4 million, of which Ford provided roughly half.⁵⁸ These scholars held senior administrative positions in their respective institutions. Ford support led to an era marked by an 'opening to and importing' Western IR theories, followed by a period of 'absorption and innovation' in the 1990s.⁵⁹

⁵² Ford Foundation, 'International relations studies in China: A review of Ford Foundation past grantmaking and future choices (Reports 017338)', Ford Foundation (2000), p. 91; David L. Shambaugh and Wang Jisi, 'Research on international studies in the People's Republic of China', *Political Science and Politics*, 17:4 (1984), pp. 758–64; David L. Shambaugh, 'China's national security research bureaucracy', *The China Quarterly*, 110 (1987), pp. 276–304.

⁵³ Wheeler, *The Role of American NGOs*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Ford Foundation, 'Next steps for the Ford Foundation concerning China (Reports 004112)' (1979).

⁵⁵ Peter Geithner, 'Ford Foundation support for international relations in China', in Ford Foundation, 'A review of Ford Foundation past grantmaking and future choices (Reports 017338)' (2000), p. 93.

⁵⁶ Fudan, Peking, Renmin, and National Defense universities, Chinese and Shanghai Academies of Social Sciences, and five government research institutes: China Center for International Studies (CCIS), China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing Institute of International Strategic Studies (BUSS), and Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS).

⁵⁷ Peter Geithner, Ford Foundation support for international relations in China, 'Reports 017338', p. 94.

⁵⁸ Peter Geithner, Ford Foundation support for international relations in China, 'Reports 017338', p. 94; Yuan Zhengqing at CASS as Ford Visiting Fellow at the Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies during 2007–8; Qin Yaqing funded by Asia Foundation to study at University of Missouri; Li Bin, Post-Doctoral MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.

⁵⁹ Zhang, 'The "English School"'.

CIRSPRC also sponsored in-China teaching programmes and policy workshops to train young scholars, including at Peking University's Institute of International Relations (IIR). IIR held a conference on international studies in China in June 1991 with partial support of Ford. Thirty-four scholars (seventeen Chinese, seventeen foreign) attended, including Scalapino, Harding, Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and Adam Roberts. As opportunities for Chinese to study abroad under official auspices began to decline after 1989, CIRSPRC supported more structured training programmes inside China, including summer workshops on the political economy of the Asia-Pacific region, and arms control.⁶⁰

From 1993, CIRSPRC expanded to provide support in other Asia-Pacific countries (renamed the Program for International Studies in Asia [PISA]). The fourth annual Renmin/PISA IR summer workshop was held in 1993, a programme entitled 'IR Theory and Global Transformation'. Fifty-one participants from Chinese universities and institutes attended. Teaching was divided between the PISA team – Barry Hughes (Denver), Charles Kegley (South Carolina), and Steve Chan (Colorado); and the Renmin team – Liang Shoude (Peking), Feng Tejun (Renmin), Xi Renchang (CASS), and Shen Qurong and Song Baoxian (CICIR). Song Xinning (Renmin) was the Chinese team leader and co-organiser of the workshop.⁶¹

Another key Ford-funded organisation was the National Committee on US–China Relations (NCUSCR) to which, from 1981 to 1994, Ford funnelled about \$1,000,000.⁶² Its members included Henry Kissinger, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy, and Condoleezza Rice. NCUSCR organised many projects, including the Scholar Orientation Program (SOP) and the Binational Dialogue, with Ford's support, to cultivate future experts, opinion leaders, and policymakers.

The Scholar Orientation Program (SOP), from summer 1980, brought together Chinese scholars and professionals studying in American universities for a 12–14-day series of lectures and seminars on American history, government, society, and economy. Meeting leaders in all branches of US government, business, professional, and university affairs was an integral part of the programme. Over the course of twenty-two years, SOP recruited 1,145 Chinese participants, many of whom remained involved in Committee activities.⁶³

Through the Committee's efforts, such leaders informally discussed the most pressing questions.⁶⁴ In February 1968, Cecil Tomas, executive director of the Committee, and several other founding members briefed President Johnson on the situation in China and made suggestions on possible official measures. The Committee held its first national convention in March 1969, bringing together more than 2,000 participants to hear speakers on 'the US and China: The Next Decade'. The clear thrust was toward increased openness to China.⁶⁵

Ford also supported study centres jointly founded by Chinese and US institutions, such as the Hopkins–Nanjing Center, focused mainly on Chinese and American studies. From 1986, numerous Chinese and foreign students were funded to study international political and economic issues at the Center every year. A significant part of the curriculum for Chinese students involved comparative and international politics, making the programme an important source of IR training.⁶⁶

⁶⁰Ford Foundation, 'Peking University (09150440)', 1 February 1991–1 August 1991.

⁶¹CSCPRC, 'China Exchanges News', 21:1 (1993), p. 28.

⁶²Feng Chengbai, *Zhongguo yu beimei wenhua jiaoliu zhi* [Cultural exchanges between China and North America] (Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), p. 303.

⁶³NCUSCR, 'Scholar Orientation Program 1980', available at: <https://www.ncuscr.org/program/scholar-orientation-program-1980>, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁶⁴Robert A. and Pamela Mang, 'A History of the Origins of the National Committee on United States–China Relations', NCUSCR, available at: https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/page_attachments/NCUSCR-Early-History-Mang.pdf, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁶⁵Laurence Shoup and William Minter, *Imperial Brain Trust* (Monthly Review Press, 1977), p. 210.

⁶⁶Peter Geithner, Ford Foundation support for international relations in China, 'Reports (017338)', p. 94.

Ford's elite networks diffuse liberal ideas

Ford programmes profoundly shaped IR in China, building a scholarly community that provided the infrastructure for effective teaching, research, and career-building but also promoting the diffusion of liberal ideas, to align Chinese elites with American ways of thinking. The influence of those investments continues to this day because there was serious demand within China for new ways of thinking about its changing world role.

Ford brought Chinese scholars to the US to study IR, which led to Chinese IR being increasingly influenced by Western theories. Many IR publications were translated into Chinese. Early textbooks were published after visiting scholarships to the United States. American foundations also financed translations of IR theory works in the 1980s–1990s,⁶⁷ including works by Hans J. Morgenthau, Edward H. Carr, Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Samuel Huntington, Morton Kaplan, Robert Gilpin, and Kenneth Waltz. Works by Chinese scholars to translate Western IR texts began in 1981. By 1985, Chen Hanwen's book (which sold over 100,000 copies) introduced concepts such as geopolitics as well as contentious conceptual and methodological debates in IR's evolution. By the mid-1980s, the importation of US IR theories intensified, *as did a desire among Chinese scholars to develop their own theories*. Following a seminar on IR theory in Shanghai in 1987, the first such book – *Chinese Perspectives in IR* – was published in 1989.⁶⁸ This strongly indicates the unintended effects of Ford's promotion of IR in China – it promoted Western IR but encouraged syntheses of Western and Chinese ideas.

The first collection of essays on contemporary American theories of IR was selected by Professor Ni Shixiong, freshly returned from Harvard.⁶⁹ Ni and Professor Jin Yingzhong published in 2001 *Contemporary Western Theories of International Relations*, which became the main IR textbook in China. In the mid-1990s, Wang Yizhou, a Ford-funded Harvard student, wrote *Western International Politics: History and Theory*. They both contributed to the popularity of Western IR theories in China and advocated the standardisation of China's IR research in accordance with Western IR paradigms. Wang Jisi spent several years studying in Western countries before working with Hu Jintao. Xia Yong, director of the State Bureau of Secrecy, studied at Harvard as a post-doctoral fellow for two years.⁷⁰

In the early 1990s, China saw a notable increase in textbooks and academic journals introducing IR theory. The journal *World Economy and Politics*, edited by Wang Yizhou, emphasises methodology, rational thinking, and theory. Professors Shen Dingli and Chu Shulong taught courses on regional security, arms control, and IR theory. The 1980s were an era of 'opening to and importing' Western IR theories, followed by a period of 'absorption and innovation' in the 1990s.⁷¹

Zhao Xi shows how the syllabi of leading Chinese universities – Fudan, Nankai, and Zhejiang – were dominated by American IR. The US hegemon effectively 'trains and exports scholars' and 'changes, or even defines, the relative value that smaller communities place on different publications, scholars, and universities'.⁷² Zhao analysed three undergraduate syllabi across three leading universities, finding widespread evidence of gender bias, US-centrism and Euro-centrism. Analysing syllabi from 2009 to 2016, Zhao found 37 per cent of authors were US-based, 29 per cent China-based, and others were in Holland, the UK, Taiwan, and Germany (4 per cent each). A plurality of the authors on reading lists were US PhDs (43 per cent); only 17 per cent were China-trained.⁷³

⁶⁷Zhang, 'The "English School"'.
⁶⁸Zhang, 'The "English School"', pp. 90–2.

⁶⁹Zhang, 'The "English School"', pp. 87–91.

⁷⁰Li Cheng, 'Foreign-educated returnees in the people's Republic of China', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 7:4 (2006), pp. 439–516.

⁷¹Zhang, 'The "English School"', pp. 87–91.

⁷²Zhao Xi, 'Inclusivity and bias in the teaching of international relations', master's diss., ISTCE, University Institute of Lisbon (November 2022), available at: https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/27907/1/master_xi_zhao.pdf, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁷³Xi, 'Inclusivity and bias'.

Ford thus helped create a small but highly dynamic IR community. The process was boosted by the one million students China sent to study abroad between 1978 and 2006. McMahon and Zou also show that there were over forty IR programmes, mainly in the top Chinese universities. Of the students educated abroad, only around a quarter returned home.⁷⁴ The expansion of IR in China was more than matched by China's general internationalisation – membership of over 260 international conventions and most major international organisations. IR development and expansion was 'directly related to the government's push to normalize relations with its neighbours, increasing the need for more policy-relevant research'. Hence, between 1995 and 1998, over 80 per cent of Chinese IR journal articles were on 'current affairs' and 18 per cent theoretical. The impact of Western IR in China increased rapidly in the 1990s and into the 2000s: between 1978 and 1990, just two such IR publications were translated into Chinese, growing to ten (1991–2000) and later seventy-four (2001–7). Hence, 'democratic peace' theory and 'clash of civilisations' thinking diffused within the Chinese IR community. Top universities such as Tsinghua became IR field-leaders, hosting the *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, published by Oxford University Press and part-funded by the MacArthur Foundation.

A key aspect of the infrastructure of an academic career and discipline is a professional association. In 1986, Rockefeller part-funded the formation of Chinese Scholars of Political Science and International Studies, a US-based society of mainly Chinese scholars. It built a critical mass of scholars, scholarly exchange, and networks and promotes knowledge production on China's political system. It has over 1,000 members and is affiliated with the American Political Science Association and the International Studies Association. Now called the Association of Chinese Political Studies, it holds annual conferences, publishes research monographs and networks with scholars across the world and with other US-based, mainly Chinese associations such as the China Economist Society.⁷⁵

Returning Chinese scholars have and are playing leading roles in some of the most prestigious institutions – such as Peking's School of International Studies, Fudan's School of IR and Public Affairs, the Institute of World Economy and Politics, and Institute of American Studies, under CASS's auspices.⁷⁶ A particularly important figure is Wang Jisi, widely known in Chinese policy-making circles and American think tanks. He has travelled extensively across the United States and spent time at the universities of California and Michigan, as well as at Oxford. He is known as a 'pragmatic liberal internationalist', valuing stable and productive Sino-US relations. 'His ideas have played a pivotal role in steering academic discourse in China – specifically over its relationship with the United States, but also when it comes to deepening the country's understanding of America.'⁷⁷ Another interesting example of US influence in the Chinese IR academy is demonstrated in an empirical article, 'Chinese Education in Diplomacy'. In it, Xiao Xi argues for a more rational, value-free, and US style of research of diplomatic studies, but with Chinese characteristics. Critiquing the CCP as heavy-handedly setting IR agendas for state purposes – promoting 'peaceful rise' and 'peaceful development' – Xi appears to take at face value American claims to objectivity in policy studies. And while critical of 'Western-centrism' in China's diplomacy programmes, the solution appears to lie, to Xi, in the direction of *greater US influence*.⁷⁸ Similarly, Yan Xuetong, a Ford grantee, was another prominent IR scholar who argued that the production of IR theory had

⁷⁴P. C. McMahon and Yue Zou, 'Thirty years of reform and opening up: Teaching IR in China', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 44:1 (2011), pp. 115–21.

⁷⁵The Association of Chinese Political Studies, 'History and Purpose', ACPSUS, available at: <https://www.acpsus.org/>, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁷⁶Zhang, 'The "English School"', p. 102.

⁷⁷Brian Wong, 'Who is Wang Jisi?', *US-China Perceptions Monitor*, available at: <https://uscnpm.org/who-is-wang-jisi/>, accessed 5 June 2025; the leading institutes in China – mostly US/Ford-funded – produced the most informed Chinese analysts of the US and Sino-US relations; Philip Saunders, 'China's America watchers: Changing attitudes towards the United States', *The China Quarterly*, 161 (2000), pp. 41–65.

⁷⁸Xiao Xi, 'Chinese education in diplomacy', *China: An International Journal*, 10:1 (2012), pp. 77–92.

to be scientific.⁷⁹ Yan claimed that the ‘basic characteristics of science are objectivity, verifiability and openness’,⁸⁰ the main pillars of theory-building.

The above constitutes large-scale US efforts led by non-state actors such as Ford, in concert with the US state, with considerable demand in China for Western, especially American, social-scientific thinking. This resulted in a transformed theoretical, methodological, empirical, and policy-oriented IR community in China. American IR was hegemonic for the first several decades after 1978. In effect, the ‘de-Marxification’ of the party reflected a similar process in Chinese IR’s detachment from Mao’s Marxism and greater embrace of Western theories. China’s ‘contender’ state position and desire to integrate into the US-led LIO compelled the re-theorisation of IR away from Chinese versions of Marxism and class struggle, towards harmony, peaceful rise, development, and competition.⁸¹ Ford effectively promoted a more policy-oriented, empirical IR that later combined with Confucianism and other traditional Chinese thought to construct a culturally nationalist approach to world affairs, which emphasises not only selectively learning Western culture to catch up to and exceed the West but also China’s national culture. In some ways, this planted the roots for a liminal liberal internationalism with Chinese characteristics that infused some of the attempts to build an ‘IR with Chinese characteristics’ and later on the Chinese School of IR.

Liang Shoude, at Peking University, called for an IR theory with ‘Chinese characteristics’. He wanted IR in China to achieve the unity of universality and particularity, commonness and individuality, form and content.⁸²

In the twenty-first century, Qin Yaqing placed the ‘relationality’ of Chinese cultural thought in the ontology of international society, replacing individual rationality with relational rationality to depict the behaviour pattern of international actors, and defined the interaction of international actors in shaping relations as a process, which made up for the static and individual-oriented bias of Western IR theory.⁸³ Yan Xuetong developed moral realism on the basis of analysing pre-Qin inter-state political thought, taking power and national reputation as enhancing state power and leadership. The combination of idealism and realism is realised at the normative level.⁸⁴

Ren Xiao et al. put forward *Gongsheng* theory, which holds that actors in international relations are heterogeneous and must be accepted, respected, and treated as equals so they can realise ‘coexistence’, laying the theoretical foundation for the inclusive coexistence of multiple cultures, the joint governance of global affairs, and the final construction of the global community of human destiny.⁸⁵

Overall, this subliminal liberal internationalism with Chinese characteristics, made possible through Ford’s influence, reflects Chinese reappropriation of liberal ideas. Since the mid-2000s, the original IR theories developed by Chinese IR scholars have advocated a broad degree of openness in the global political economy while simultaneously promoting approaches that safeguard the autonomy of the Chinese state.⁸⁶ Most Chinese IR theories address the strategic challenge of sustaining an open international system in a way that benefits China’s modernisation, but without triggering a direct conflict with the United States. Unfortunately, this intellectual process has not been well understood by external analysts, who believed, perhaps from a Eurocentric perspective, that a successful outcome would have been the wholesale acceptance of Anglo-American IR theory and its

⁷⁹ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 201–2.

⁸⁰ Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, p. 199.

⁸¹ Ferran Perez Mena, ‘Farewell to revolution: The “Chinese School of IR” and the depoliticization of IR theory in post-Mao China’, *International Politics*, 61 (2023), pp. 703–17; Masaharu Hishida, ‘The Chinese Communist Party: Deepening of a crisis or renewal of the party base?’, *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 23–45.

⁸² Liang Shoude, ‘Constructing an IR theory with Chinese characteristics’.

⁸³ Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁸⁴ Yan Xuetong, ‘International relations theory of moral realism’, *International Studies*, 5 (2014), pp. 102–28.

⁸⁵ Zhang Chun, Yu Hongyuan, Zhang Jian, and Zhou Shixin, ‘hainabaichuan, baorong gongsheng de “shanghaixuepai” [Inclusive and symbiotic ‘Shanghai School’ of IR theory]’, *Guoji Zhongguo* [Global Review], 6:6 (2014), pp. 1–17.

⁸⁶ Ferran Perez Mena, *Contender States and Modern Chinese International Thought: From the Republican Era until the ‘Chinese School of International Relations’* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), p. 188.

normative prescriptions. Viewed from a critical perspective that considers the agency of Chinese intellectuals, even though it was constrained by the normative structures of the Chinese state and the everyday restrictions on research, this ambiguous and elusive Chinese liberal internationalism may, in fact, have been the normative outlook that enabled an intra-elite Sino–American cooperation, which other forms of IR knowledge, such as Marxism, might not have promoted. Ultimately, despite the growing disenchantment of some Chinese ‘liberal internationalists’ towards the United States, this strand of thought may have slowed further erosion of Sino–American relations in the Trump era and sustained some of the transnational pillars of the post-1945 American order, which the Trump administration is actively seeking to dismantle or reshape.

Ford’s ‘war of position’ – transferring liberal internationalism from IR scholars to policymakers

Through a ‘war of position’ that promoted gradual change, Ford sowed the seeds for autonomous institutions capable of advancing liberal internationalist ideas and Sino–US cooperation. Ford influenced the environment of official and unofficial Sino–US relations through its non- and semi-official diplomatic initiatives. The initiatives included conferences between private Sino–US elites for deeper inter-societal relations, normalising diplomatic relations, and opening economic, strategic, and security dialogues. The main goal of this ‘war of position’ was to promote the ‘molecular advance’ of liberal internationalist and anti-Marxist ideas within Chinese institutions, and ensure they could be transferred into the policy-making sphere to shape Sino–US relations and integration into the LIO.

The strategy of gradual change and policy influence had two dimensions. Firstly, it connected US–China institutions and forums that organised Track II and 1.5 initiatives. For example, the National Committee’s US–China Dialogue, and off-the-record gatherings of both countries, was the first formal instance of Track II diplomacy. A series of binational conferences, co-hosted by the NCUSCR and the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), started in September 1984, continuing until 2002. Around thirty to forty top-level Sino–US leaders would meet for three days to discuss sensitive issues, establishing a foundation for greater understanding and communication⁸⁷ that went ‘beyond the exchange of policy statements’.⁸⁸

An influential aspect of such activities included a 1993 National Committee policy report – ‘US–China Relations at a Crossroads’, a comprehensive analysis with a strategic vision and policy recommendations. It suggested the Clinton administration establish a comprehensive relationship with China, despite human rights concerns, and grant China most-favoured nation status. Such unofficial dialogues paved the way to more extensive dialogues.⁸⁹

Secondly, the strategy entailed funding IR think tanks, including the Institute for International Studies (Tsinghua), Center for American Studies (CAS, Fudan), CASS, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, Shanghai Institute of International Studies, Institute of International and Strategic Studies at Peking, and China Institute of International Studies.⁹⁰

Table 2 shows that think tanks hold different levels of importance within the Chinese state. According to Glaser, the organisational status of think tanks occupies three concentric circles, identifying three types: Tier 1 think tanks are the ‘most influential’, closely connected to the military, Party, and government research institutions, with stronger relationships with policymakers, participating regularly in policy discussions. Tier 2 think tanks, while also connected to key institutions

⁸⁷‘U.S.–China Distinguished Citizens Dialogue’, NCUSCR, available at: {<https://www.ncuscr.org/program/us-china-distinguished-citizens-dialogue-1984>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁸⁸‘Binational symposium to begin this fall’, *U.S. China Relations: Notes from the National Committee*, 14: 2 (1984), pp. 4–5.

⁸⁹Priscilla Roberts, ‘Our friends don’t understand our policies and our situation: Informal US–China dialogues in the early 1990’s’, ISA Conference, Hong Kong, 2017, available at: {<http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/8f22e9c8-1187-4fb5-b967-589c4a6c2e16.pdf>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

⁹⁰China’s major international studies’ think tanks, affiliated with top universities like Fudan, Peking, and Tsinghua, along with prominent think tanks like CASS and CIIS, have been led by Western-educated returnees. Renowned American scholars regularly visited China, introducing the latest American debates in IR theory.

Table 2. Ford-funded Chinese think tanks and research organisations (1988–2010).

Name institution	Affiliation and importance	Associated academics and their international experience	Areas of expertise that received funds	Amount received
<i>Institution of International Studies of Tsinghua Univ.</i>	Tsinghua Univ. (Tier Three)	Xing Yue (Harvard); Li Chen (MIT); Shi Zhiqin (Illinois); Li Daobin (Chicago); Pang Jin (Chicago); Pang Zhongying (Warwick); Zhou Fangyin (Berkeley) Sun Xuefeng (Delhi); Yan Xuetong (Berkeley); Li Bin (Princeton)	- International research scholarships for young scholars - Science and nuclear arms control	\$120,000
<i>Center for American Studies (CAS) of Fudan Univ.</i>	Fudan Univ. (Tier three)	Ni Sixiong (Harvard); Sun Zhe (Columbia); Xu Yihua (Princeton) Jin Xiahua (Second Secretary at Chinese Embassy in London, CEO, Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange in San Francisco); Shen Dingli (Princeton) Zhu Mingquan (Nanjing); Wu Xinbo (George Washington, Stanford, Brookings) Liu Yongtao (Minnesota; East-West Center Honolulu); Wu Chunsi (MIT) Deng Hongmei (Monterey Institute of International Studies) Zhang Jiadong (Monterey Institute of International Studies; Georgia University; George Washington University)	- American Studies, (Sino–US relations, US security strategy, religion in the US, and oral history project) - Sino–US relations and regional security - Activities related to arms control and regional security	\$355,300
<i>Chinese Academy of Social Sciences</i>	State Council (tier 2)	Wang Jisi (Oxford, Berkeley, Princeton) Gu Guoliang (Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey Stimson) Yang Guang (Institut des Etudes Politiques de Paris; Wisconsin)	- American studies - Latin American studies - Soviet and Eastern European Studies - West Asian and African Studies - World Economics and Politics - Arms control and non-proliferation	\$600,000

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued.)

Name institution	Affiliation and importance	Associated academics and their international experience	Areas of expertise that received funds	Amount received
<i>China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)</i>	Ministry of State Security (Tier 1)	Lu Zongwei (Institute of Developing Economies, Japan) Fu Mengzi (Wuhan Univ.); Ji Zhiye (Vladimir Normal Univ., Russia) Yang Bojiang (Harvard Univ., Brookings); Hu Jiping (Hosei Univ.); Feng Yujun (Vladimir Normal Univ., Russia); Jiang Yong (Wuhan Univ.) Da Wei (Johns Hopkins); Yang Mingjie (Harvard, Stimson Centre) Fu Xiaoqiang (Syracuse)	- Security Cooperation Mechanism in Northeast Asia	\$80,000
<i>Shanghai Institute of International Studies</i>	Shanghai City Government (Tier 1)	Chen Dongxiao (Fudan); Li Weijian (Illinois); Ye Qing (Fudan) Zhao Ganchen (Johns Hopkins) Zhao Huasheng (Nanjing Univ.) Yang Jiemian (Trilateral Commission of North America, Europe and Asia)	- Research activities on Cross-Taiwan Strait relations; Middle Eastern and Arabic; China–Russia relations, Sino–US relations - Cooperation and security issues in Northeast Asia	\$125,000
<i>Institute of International Relations, Peking Univ.</i>	Peking Univ. (Tier 3)	Yuan Ming (Brookings; Berkeley, Oxford, CEIP) Fan Shiming (Harvard); Han Hua (Harvard, Stimson, SIPRI) Liu Jinzhi (Harvard; UCSD) Zhang Xiaoming (Harvard, SIPRI, Wilson Inter. Center)	- Conference on international studies in China from different regional perspectives - Support for institutional development of arms control work - Conference on International Relations in China	\$103,000
<i>China Institute of International Studies</i>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Tier 1)	Yang Yonghong, Li Bijian, Duan Hong (Denver); Xing Yuchun (George Washington) Rong Ying (Texas A&M); Guo Xiangang (UC, Berkeley)	- Visiting fellows' programme for key Chinese think tank - International symposia on arms control and international security issues	\$75,000

such as the State Council, Central Committee, and People's Liberation Army, are less influential but provide 'advice on a regular and frequent basis'. Tier 3 think tanks are marginally influential university research institutes, although some of their leaders or members have been involved in policy discussions.⁹¹ Ford strategically funded think tanks with different degrees of proximity to the state, building elite knowledge networks connecting liberal international ideas with that state.

University-affiliated think tanks operated a revolving door between IR specialists from government, CASS, and universities.⁹² The IISS at Peking was established in 2013 by Wang Jisi. Wang, a 'liberal thinker' and a Ford grantee, was the director of the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Central Party School from 2001 to 2009 but also from 2008 to 2016 was a member of the Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of China's Foreign Ministry.⁹³ Wang was embedded in Beijing's foreign policy circles. He was 'known as the brain behind Chinese President Hu Jintao's foreign affairs decisions'.⁹⁴ As advisor to the Foreign Ministry and after the US's announcement of the 'Pivot to Asia', Wang advocated a strategy of 'Marching Westward' through the 'New Silk Road'. While Wang was aware of the strategic risks linked to this, it sought to 'avoid conflicts with the United States and better achieve national interests'⁹⁵ or 'rebalancing, without causing clashes between China's land and sea power'.⁹⁶ After stepping down as SIS director, Wang worked through IISS to improve Sino-US person-to-person ties and advocated with American collaborators the necessity of their 'full resumption' after the Covid-19 pandemic.⁹⁷

The Institute of International Studies at Tsinghua, established in 1997, was headed by former Ambassador Professor Xue Mouhong, a long-term Ford grantee, and recruited well-known new faculty, such as Sun Zhe from Fudan, Song Xinning from Renmin, and Chu Shulong from CICIR. Yan Xuetong moved from CICIR to Tsinghua and became the director of the Institute, encouraging its researchers to conduct their research abroad. During 1999–2005, Ford provided support to nine PhD students of the Institute at Tsinghua for overseas training.⁹⁸ The Institute merged with the Institute of Contemporary International Relations under Sun Xufeng's leadership.

Overseas research and training visits were influential in China. For instance, Li Bin spent two years at Princeton and MIT, focusing on science and nuclear arms control, and then transferred to the Institute at Tsinghua in 2000, thereafter establishing Tsinghua's science and arms control programme, China's first specialised training initiative. Li Bin organised the Ford-funded Tsinghua Arms Control Summer Symposia from 2002 to 2008, which prompted Tsinghua to conduct a special winter programme in 2008, training scholars from nearly thirty universities.⁹⁹ Many government agencies including the military and the nuclear defence industry train their officials in these programmes and have gradually established formal units devoted to nuclear arms control.

Ford's support enlarged the pool of trained specialists in China on arms control and security issues and strengthened their capacity to help articulate China's security interests and policies

⁹¹ Bonnie Glaser, 'Review of Chinese foreign policy research institutes and the practice of influence', in Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *China's Foreign Policy: Who Makes It, and How Is It Made?* (Palgrave, 2012), pp. 91–2.

⁹² Liao Xuanli, *Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks and China's Policy Towards Japan* (Chinese UP Press, 2006), p. 59.

⁹³ Asia Society, 'Wang Jisi', *Asia Society*, available at: <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/wang-jisi>, accessed 21 August 2025.

⁹⁴ Hankyoreh, 'Hu's Adviser Says China's N.K. Policy Must Remain Intact', *Hankyoreh*, available at: https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/185296.html, accessed 21 August 2025.

⁹⁵ Chen Qi and Liu Lanyu, 'The debates among Chinese IR scholars on China's national strategy', in Feng Huiyun, He Kai, and Yan Xuetong (eds), *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy: Debating International Relations* (Routledge, 2019), p. 77.

⁹⁶ Wang Jisi, "'Marching westwards": The rebalancing of China's geostrategy', in Shao Binhong (ed.), *The Word in 2020 According to China* (Brill, 2014), p. 136.

⁹⁷ Scott Kennedy and Wang Jisi, 'Breaking the Ice: The Role of Scholarly Exchange in Stabilizing U.S.–China Relations', *CSIS*, April 2023.

⁹⁸ Ford Foundation, 'Tsinghua University (09851314)', 1 July 1998–31 December 2005.

⁹⁹ 'The Sixth Tsinghua Arms Control Symposium-Subject: Arms Control Education (Di liu jie qinghua daxue junbei kongzhi yantao hui, zhuti: junbei kongzhi jiaoxue)' (Arms Control Program, Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University, December 13–15, 2008). For Li Bin bio: <https://www.dir.tsinghua.edu.cn/iren/info/1033/1252.htm>.

related to weapons of mass destruction; participate in international negotiations; develop training for younger scientists; and help Western governments and NGOs understand better China's arms control actors and policies.¹⁰⁰

The Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, founded in 2010, and part of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Asia Program, has been a key institution in Beijing that promoted Track II and especially Track 1.5 dialogues, connecting Chinese and US IR communities with their respective states and policymakers. In 2010, Paul Haenle, a prominent US–China expert and former NSC China director (under Bush and Obama), became director, while Tsinghua IR professor Yan Xuetong was President of the Management Board (until 2020). This think tank aimed at 'collaborative research and dialogue'¹⁰¹ and fostered relations between scholars and experts with 'relationships with policymakers, policy influence in their respective countries, or who may return to government in the future'.¹⁰² According to Haenle, 'the centre maintains positive relationships with key Chinese government agencies that shape decisions'.¹⁰³

In June 2015, the Center hosted a meeting between Sino–US experts to discuss President Xi Jinping's US visit. US–Carnegie scholars and Chinese scholars 'expressed what they hope the visit would achieve and possible obstacles and challenges'.¹⁰⁴ During recent years, despite rocky Sino–US relations, Ford has funded the centre on multiple occasions, including hosting 'a track 1.5 Dialogue on U.S.–China relations and activities related to understanding China's emerging role in the world from the perspective of other regions'.¹⁰⁵ In 2021, the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center received funds to 'advance peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decisionmakers in government, business, and civil society'.¹⁰⁶

The Ford-funded Center for American Studies (CAS, Fudan) became one of China's most respected centres, established in 1985 by Professor Xie Xide (a leading nuclear physicist who returned to China from the United States). As shown in Table 2, CAS has been largely led by scholars who returned from the United States. For example, Ni Shixiong served as director from 2000 to 2006. The think tank formed a group of US-educated researchers on arms control and regional security. CAS hosted public addresses by former President George H. W. Bush and other leaders, and organised conferences on Sino–US relations. In August 1995, in the midst of a temporary chill in Sino–American relations, around forty Chinese scholars and researchers gathered at Fudan to examine key aspects of international security.

As the founder of arms control and nuclear non-proliferation studies at CAS, Shen Dingli (PhD in physics, 1988) completed two years of post-doctoral training in arms control at Princeton. Returning to Fudan in 1991, he offered graduate classes on nuclear arms issues. Shen was invited in 1991 to participate in an annual International Summer Symposium on Science and World Affairs organised by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS). Some of his papers were published by the Woodrow Wilson Center, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Pugwash Conferences

¹⁰⁰Peter Geithner, Ford Foundation support for international relations in China, 'Reports 017338', p. 96.

¹⁰¹Paul Haenle, 'A Reference Point for Internationalizing Chinese Think Tanks', Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/02/09/reference-point-for-internationalizing-chinese-think-tanks-pub-59022>, accessed 4 June 2025.

¹⁰²Paul Haenle, 'A conversation with Paul Haenle', Open Philanthropy (July 2015), p. 1, available at https://www.openphilanthropy.org/wp-content/uploads/Paul_Haenle_07-08-15_public.pdf, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹⁰³Haenle, 'A conversation with Paul Haenle', p. 2.

¹⁰⁴Haenle, 'A conversation with Paul Haenle', p. 2.

¹⁰⁵Ford Foundation, 'For the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center for Global Policy to Host a Track 1.5 Dialogue on U.S.–China Relations and Activities Related to Understanding China's Emerging Role in the World from the Perspective of Other Regions – 135926', available at: <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/carnegie-endowment-for-international-peace-135926/>, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹⁰⁶Ford Foundation, 'Core Support for the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center to Advance Peace through Analysis and Development of Fresh Policy Ideas and Direct Engagement and Collaboration with Decisionmakers in Government, Business, and Civil Society Related to U.S.–China Relations', available at <https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/carnegie-endowment-for-international-peace-139782/>, accessed 5 June 2025.

on Science and World Affairs, and United Nations publication and journals in Germany, India, and Pakistan.

In the early 2000s, the China–US relationship continued to confront significant challenges. In this new context, Ford continued to support CAS research activities (2001–3). The new director, Professor Ni Shixiong, produced an edited book on current issues in the relationship, especially looking at Taiwan, TMD, and the impact of the new US administration. Professor Zhu Mingquan led the project on US security strategy.¹⁰⁷

The Center for American Studies (CAS, Fudan) also initiated a Ford-backed Sino–US Track II dialogue. Before President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji's US visits, CAS and the US National Defense University launched a strategic dialogue in July 1997 in Shanghai and January 1999 in Washington, DC. Building on this, CAS and the Pacific Forum at Honolulu jointly organised a second-stage dialogue in May 1999 and April 2000. This habit of cooperation and dialogue paved the way to a more constructive approach when differences between the United States and China over National Missile Defense chilled relations. Following President Bush's visit to Shanghai in October 2001 and before his anticipated trip to Beijing in February 2002, CAS and the Pacific Forum initiated a third-stage strategic dialogue. This dialogue's constructive insights improved relations by identifying problems and exploring methods for dispute resolution.¹⁰⁸

CAS also played a crucial role in arms control and regional security research in China, establishing networks with the New York-based Program on International Cooperation. This collaboration supported the Program on Arms Control and Regional Security at Fudan in 1991, led by Shen Dingli. Ford funds were utilised for three international workshops, including discussions on a limited nuclear weapons-free zone in Northeast Asia with Georgia Tech's Center for International Strategy, a roundtable on the foreign policy consequences of arms control with the National Committee on US–China Relations, and collaboration with Brookings for the continuation of the China–India–Pakistan–US dialogue.¹⁰⁹

In addition, prominent individuals played key roles. IR Professor Tang Shiping (Fudan) with Professor Peter Gries launched the Sino–American Security Dialogue (SASD, 2002–4) to mitigate 'frustration with the adversarial and national identity-based discussions taking place between many of the older specialists in the course of other bilateral security dialogues'.¹¹⁰ SASD created a forum for exchange among the younger generation of Sino–US security experts¹¹¹ to promote a common security culture.

A Ford-supported government think tank, CASS, ran several area studies institutes – American, Latin American, Soviet and East European, West Asia and African Studies, Institute of World Economics and Politics. They received Ford support (\$600,000) in the 1990s.¹¹² The Institute of American Studies, the most creative and active area centre, was led from 1993 to 2005 by Wang Jisi, who thought the social dimensions of Sino–US relations would dominate in the future. Ford awarded him \$25,000 to gain a better appreciation of American politics and social development (1998–2000).

CICIR has been a major recipient of Ford support for IR through individual grants for overseas training. Many of its researchers studied political, economic, and social issues in various regions, including Liu Yueming (Middle East/African), Lu Zhongwei (Asia-Pacific security, Northeast Asian issues, world economy), Tao Jian (US and Europe), Wang Zaibang (world politics), Zhang Buren (Russian, Central Asia, and East Europe). Ford granted \$80,000 to CICIR for a programme

¹⁰⁷Ford Foundation, 'Fudan University (10150326)', 1 January 2001–31 December 2003.

¹⁰⁸Ford Foundation, 'Fudan University (10151524)', 1 August 2001–31 January 2002.

¹⁰⁹Ford Foundation, 'Peking University (09951067)', 1 June 1999–30 April 2003.

¹¹⁰'Survey of Programs on United States–China Relations and Security Issues', NCUSCR, p. 24, available at {www.ncuscr.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Survey-Final-Report.pdf}, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹¹¹Tang Shiping, CV, p. 4, available at: {https://faculty.fudan.edu.cn/_local/D/74/BB/9A2C744311C892947E606249E6D_CAB9C412_2C622.pdf}.

¹¹²Wang Jisi, 'International relations studies in China today', in Ford Foundation, 'International relations studies in China: A review of Ford Foundation past grantmaking and future choices (Reports 017338)' (2000), p. 119.

on security cooperation mechanisms in Northeast Asia in 2004. One of the important aspects of CICIR is that it 'functions as the central government's primary civilian intelligence organ and enjoys direct channels to members of the Politburo Standing Committee'.¹¹³ In 2015, CICIR received a Ford Grant of \$192,681 to 'promote better understanding of risks and challenges in the Asia-Pacific community and build a trans-Pacific security framework to contribute to regional peace and common prosperity'.¹¹⁴

CIIS has seen an increasing role in China's foreign policy process, partly due to the appointment of former Ambassador Yang Chengxu as president in 1996, and new financial resources from Ford.¹¹⁵ CIIS recruitment of graduates from top-ranked Chinese universities who were trained abroad built higher quality research teams. In 2009, CIIS received a \$40,000 grant from Ford to host the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific's Study Group on Multilateral Security Governance.¹¹⁶

The Shanghai Institute of International Studies also collaborated with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government to study Sino-US relations and promote semi-official dialogues. For example, in May 2000, Joseph Nye led a delegation, including China policy advisors for presidential candidates, to Shanghai and Beijing for discussions with scholars and officials. In September 2000, SIIS sent a delegation to the United States, led by Shi Yuequn and Yang Jiemian,¹¹⁷ the younger brother of Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi. The visit provided crucial opportunities to engage with decision-making levels in US government institutions, enhancing SIIS fellows' understanding of American policy towards China.

Conclusion

Drawing on Gramscian hegemony theory, we offer an internationally informed approach to holistically understand Ford's significant impact on China's rise and the development of IR. We move beyond internalism and methodological nationalism prevalent in liberalism and realism. By incorporating the interplay between domestic and international spheres as a causal and enabling factor, we provide insight into the evolution and transformation of Sino-American relations, transnational elite networks, and Chinese IR, complexifying Sino-US dynamics.

Ford's activities between the late 1950s and late 1970s included \$90 million to develop Chinese studies in the United States and domestic knowledge networks connecting Sino-US experts with foreign policy-making circles, the national security state, and media corporations.

¹¹³Jackson. P. Neagli, 'Conditional autonomy in Chinese think tanks: A study of CICIR vs. Unirule', *Leviathan*, 10:1 (2020), p. 15.

¹¹⁴Ford Foundation, 'To Promote Better Understanding of Risks and Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Community and Build a Trans-Pacific Security Framework to Contribute to Regional Peace and Common Prosperity', available at: {<https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/china-institutes-of-contemporary-international-relations-125134/>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹¹⁵Liao and Xuanli, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 80.

¹¹⁶Ford Foundation, 'To Host the Second Meeting of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific's Study Group on Multilateral Security Governance in Northeast Asia and Pacific', Ford Foundation, available at: {<https://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/awarded-grants/grants-database/china-institute-of-international-studies-112445/>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹¹⁷Ford grantee Yang Jiemian played an important role in Xi Jinping's foreign policy as a research fellow on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy Research Centre, 'providing ideological and theoretical support for China's diplomacy'. This research centre is located within CIIS, administered by the MFA. Recently, Yang Jiemian has been active in shaping China's diplomacy, especially towards the BRICS. See Jiang Jiang and He Yuzhe, 'Yang Jiemian: The Rise of the East and the Decline of the West Are of Significance to Historical Advancement', *Ginger River Review*, available at {<https://www.gingerriver.com/p/yang-jiemian-the-rise-of-the-east>}, accessed 27 August 2025; David Bandurski, 'New Xi Jinping Diplomatic Thought Center Opens', *China Media Project*, available at {<https://chinamediaproject.org/2020/07/21/center-opens-for-xi-jinping-thought-on-foreign-policy/>}, accessed 27 August 2025; 'Xi's Foreign Policy Strategist Yang Jiemian Banks on the BRICS', *Intelligence Online*, available at {<https://www.intelligenceonline.com/government-intelligence/2024/03/12/xi-s-foreign-policy-strategist-yang-jiemian-banks-on-the-brics,110190492-art>}, accessed 27 August 2025.

Scholars, policymakers, and media experts who were socialised in these knowledge networks shared a technocratic understanding of global governance. Consequently, they saw Sino–US relations as a sphere completely separated from their populations. The relation was characterised by a positive-sum game within these transnational elites and a zero-sum game for their working peoples.

These transnational knowledge networks shaped several dimensions of Sino–American relations and the Chinese state, enabling the creation of a dynamic, outward-facing, pluralistic IR community. This community, trained in the West or exposed to these networks, included liberal internationalists and realists. While these new elite networks broadened the spectrum of debate of world politics in China by breaking taboos – the abandonment of concepts such as class struggle, revolution, and proletarian internationalism – they also contributed to narrowing debates about how IR knowledge should be produced. These scholars contributed to the gradual de-Marxification of IR knowledge. Unlike past Chinese intellectuals educated during the 1950s and 1960s in a system that promoted Marxist/Mao Zedong thought as analytical tools to understand world politics, this new IR community embraced a subliminal liberal internationalism and more rationalist approaches to world politics.

These networks also facilitated the development of non-official diplomatic channels and a policy environment fostering intra-elite Sino–US cooperation. They helped manage those relations in a new geopolitical context characterised by the expansion of neoliberal globalisation and elite interpenetration in Sino–US policy-making environments.

Lastly, transnational knowledge networks contributed to the emergence of new networks primarily situated on the Chinese side, gaining a degree of relative autonomy that, in turn, contributed to the expansion of a ‘quasi-civil society’ within China and its transnational expansion.¹¹⁸ Alongside the creation of these networks, Chinese elites progressively engaged in transnational networks, including those historically dominated by liberal internationalists, such as the Trilateral Commission (TC). These networks traditionally revolved around the economic and political interests of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan. For instance, TC established the Asia-Pacific group in 2000, which China joined in 2009.¹¹⁹ In recent years, despite growing geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, the Asia-Pacific group, which includes nine Chinese members, advocates for maintaining engagement with China.¹²⁰ The Carnegie–Tsinghua Center also helped develop transnational knowledge networks and promoted liberal internationalism with Chinese characteristics. Despite Sino–US trade wars and growing inter-state conflict, in 2020, the centre received funding from Ford to host a Track 1.5 dialogue to smooth US–China relations. However, it is important to note that these transnational relations remain complex and have a ‘conflictual/cooperative nature’.¹²¹

Although speculative, a counterfactual is valuable: what if Ford had not invested in IR in China? It would certainly have delayed its professionalisation and Western orientation; IR may have remained more Marxist–Leninist in character. China’s IR may have emphasised sovereignty and anti-hegemonism over global interdependence, resulting in fewer ‘pro-Western’ scholars, less open to transnational dialogues. Zhang shows, for example, that the English School of IR may well have been more significant in China had it not been for the network-building power of American foundations.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Spires, ‘US Foundations Boost Chinese Government, Not NGOs’; Cheng Li, ‘China’s new think tanks: Where officials, entrepreneurs, and scholars interact’, *China Leadership Monitor*, 29 (2009), pp. 1–21.

¹¹⁹ Trilateral Commission, Asia-Pacific Group, available at: {<https://www.trilateral.org/regions/asia-pacific-group/>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹²⁰ Ken Moriyasu and Mariko Kodaki, ‘Inside the Trilateral Commission: Power Elites Grapple with China’s Rise’, *Nikkei Asia*, available at: {<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Inside-the-Trilateral-Commission-Power-elites-grapple-with-China-s-rise>}, accessed 5 June 2025.

¹²¹ Huo and Parmar, ‘A new type of great power relationship’, p. 235.

¹²² Zhang, ‘The “English School”’, pp. 100–1.

Without Ford's investments across IR, economics, and law, resource constraints might have limited IR to elite Beijing/Shanghai institutions, with less emphasis on empirical, policy-relevant research. Other funders (World Bank, Soros Foundation) could have filled some gaps, but Ford's scale and focus on elite networks was unique.

Without Ford, elite policymakers might have been less exposed to American models, leading to more cautious liberalisation. Civil society building via GONGOs (government organised non-governmental organisations) might have been weaker, resulting in less 'managed' pluralism and more top-down control.

Ford's networks created 'bridges' between US and Chinese academics. Without this, personal and institutional links could have been sparser, exacerbating mistrust during events like the 1989 Tiananmen crisis. The lack of such networks might have amplified nationalist IR scholarship, prioritising confrontation over cooperation.

Ford's work *facilitated* China's 'willing' entry into the LIO from 1978. Without it, China's global engagement *might have been more adversarial earlier* without the liberal tempering Ford provided, *heightening* US–China rivalry, *delaying* China's WTO entry. However, state imperatives would likely have driven some opening, so LIO integration might have occurred, but with less US influence.

European foundations and bilateral aid from Japan/EU might have stepped in, introducing diverse norms. But without Ford's US-centric push, Chinese IR could have leaned toward multipolar theories sooner, or towards more anti-Western approaches, complicating global stability.

Today, China's IR discipline is robust and blends American/liberal and Chinese characteristics; Ford's absence might have resulted in a more fragmented field, with uneven regional development and less policy impact. Geopolitically, US soft power in China could be diminished, contributing to today's tensions – though structural factors like economic interdependence would persist. Overall, Ford's absence might have delayed convergence: China integrates globally, but on more autonomous terms, potentially leading to an earlier hegemonic challenge.

These transnational elite networks also had unpredictable unintended consequences. Ford's knowledge transfer activities laid the groundwork for some of the counter-hegemonic dynamics that question the LIO from within, for example scholar Yan Xuetong's moral realist critiques of US hard power and loss of moral authority, most recently with regard to the Trump administration.¹²³ This insight qualifies some of the teleological and linear narratives concerning China's trajectory within the LIO. In conclusion, as IR scholars grapple with comprehending the geopolitical impacts of rising powers and the LIO's future, we assert that IR approaches lacking consideration of transnational dynamics, the agency of diverse political actors, and the historical context in which these relations unfold will struggle to understand the complexities shaping geopolitical shifts and transformations in the global political economy.

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¹²³Yan, 'Why China Isn't Scared of Trump'.

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