

# Voting in the UN: A Second Image of China's Human Rights

Christopher Primiano  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Division of Global Affairs  
Rutgers University  
175 University Avenue  
Newark, NJ 07102  
USA  
[cbprimiano@gmail.com](mailto:cbprimiano@gmail.com)

Jun Xiang  
Assistant Professor  
Economics and Global Affairs  
Rutgers University  
360 MLK Blvd  
Hill Hall 814  
Newark, NJ 07102  
USA  
[junxiang@rutgers.edu](mailto:junxiang@rutgers.edu)  
1-973-353-3925

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## **Abstract**

It is generally agreed that China has a poor domestic human rights practice. Surprisingly, China has a better-than-average voting record on human rights in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Based on a new UNGA human rights dataset that we identified, we found that since joining the United Nations (UN) in 1971, China voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions 79 percent of the time, compared to the world average favoring ratio of 75 percent. This high level of voting in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA is in sharp contrast to China's domestic human rights record. Based on the widely used Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) human rights dataset, China was in the bottom 18 percent. This study makes two important contributions. First, and most importantly, we introduce a human rights dataset that presents a second image of China's human rights. In addition, we argue that the Chinese government strategically alters its endorsement of human rights in the UNGA based on changing levels of domestic threats.

## **Introduction**

A great deal of research has examined China's human rights, covering various issues such as village elections, ethnic conflict, the topic of Asian values, or the general lack of freedom for both ethnic groups and Chinese in general. Of these studies, most conclude that China has a poor domestic human rights practice. However, an often-neglected yet significant research question is to investigate China's international human rights stance. In this article, we advance a new analysis that has heretofore not been examined: China's voting on human rights resolutions in the UNGA. We argue that the proposed analysis provides a rare opportunity to investigate China's international human rights stance *in a systematic way*. In addition to their significance, UNGA human rights resolutions present a comprehensive coverage of various human rights categories. This study utilizes UNGA human rights resolutions to demonstrate a second image of China's human rights.

Based on the identified UNGA human rights data from 1971 to 2012, we show that China held a better-than-world-average voting record. Overall, China voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions for 79 percent of the time during this time period, compared to the world average favoring ratio of 75 percent. When examining individual human rights categories, China's voting record was either close to or better than the world average for five out of the six categories. In addition, aggregated annual data demonstrated China's voting on human rights in the UNGA tended to be higher or on the same level as the world average for the vast majority of the years. In short, contrary to the conventional wisdom that China has poor (domestic) human rights, China has consistently voted in the affirmative on

human rights resolutions in the UNGA. Due to the significance of UN voting, one cannot ignore this positive image for a comprehensive discussion of China's human rights.

That being said, we do not necessarily equate China's support of human rights resolutions as having a strong human rights practice in the UNGA. Indeed, future research is needed for explanations of China's affirmative voting on human rights resolutions in the UN. This study only provides a preliminary assessment, suggesting it is likely that China is willing to accept the international human rights regime and the Chinese government strategically alters its endorsement of human rights in the UNGA due to the changing levels of domestic threat. The primary contribution of this article is to introduce a UNGA human rights dataset to systematically examine China's international human rights stance.

The rest of this study proceeds in five sections. First, this study provides a brief summary of China's domestic human rights. Next, it discusses why it is important to examine UN human rights resolutions. Section four presents empirical evidence of China's human rights in the UNGA. Finally, a concluding remark is provided.

### **China's Domestic Human Rights**

Many scholars have argued that China has a poor domestic human rights practice. The widely employed CIRI human rights dataset provides a strong illustration of this argument. This dataset is arguably the leading and most comprehensive dataset

on states practice on human rights,<sup>1</sup> and a great deal of studies have used it to examine human rights.<sup>2</sup> The CIRI dataset, which examines human rights on 195 countries from 1981 to 2011, has the following detailed categories measuring states practice on human rights: disappearance, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, torture, freedom of assembly and association, freedom of domestic movement, freedom of foreign movement, freedom of speech, electoral self-determination, freedom of religion, workers' rights, women's rights, and independent judiciary. Regarding China, this dataset has presented a bleak picture on human rights from 1981 to 2011. Except for disappearance and women's political rights, China received almost the worst possible scores in all of the categories in the CIRI dataset. Thus, it is argued that the Chinese government has a very poor domestic human rights practice.

A number of existing studies have used Asian values to explain why China has poor domestic human rights. Some scholars<sup>3</sup> argue that Confucianism does not fit neatly with democracy.<sup>4</sup> According to Baohui Zhang, Confucianism does not stress rule of law; instead, it stresses "rule by virtues and virtuous men."<sup>5</sup> Hung-

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<sup>1</sup> Another very popular dataset, the Political Terror Scale (PTS), also provides data on human rights abuses and examines both state and non-state actors on human rights abuses. Although the PTS dataset uses the same sources as CIRI, US State Department and Amnesty International, it is not as detailed in categories as the CIRI dataset.

<sup>2</sup> Hafner-Burton 2008; Boockmann and Dreher 2011; Murdie and Davis 2012; Ausderan 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Such as Tien 1997; Hu 2000; and Zhang 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Other scholars, however, do not view Confucianism or the topic of Asian values as an impediment to democracy, Fukuyama 1998; Friedman 2009; Katsumata 2009. Edward Friedman argues that democracy and Confucianism can indeed coexist. Friedman points out that a number of Confucian influenced countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, are now democracies. Similar with Friedman, Katsumata argues that Asian values and human rights can coexist, Katsumata 2009, 633. Moreover, Katsumata argues that ASEAN states have been striving to advance human rights and democracy, 2009, 621.

<sup>5</sup> Zhang 2006, 124.

mao Tien sums up Confucius teachings as: “teachings that engender an acceptance of authoritarianism.”<sup>6</sup> Others point out the view in East Asia that economic development should receive priority over promoting democracy.<sup>7</sup> For example, Katsumata argues that in the 1990s, ASEAN states viewed economic development as more urgent than political rights.<sup>8</sup> Bell argues that a Chinese farmer would rather see economic issues be advanced than an abstract concept such as democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous leaders in Asia, such as Mahathir Mohammed in Malaysia, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, and Suharto in Indonesia, have argued that Asian values are different from Western values.<sup>10</sup> Many Asian countries, including China, have resorted to the Asian values argument to justify their poor human rights practice. Mukherjee argues that in recent years political figures in Southeast Asia have taken up the Asian values issue to hold onto power.<sup>11</sup> In other words, politicians in Southeast Asia use the Asian values issue as an excuse for not implementing democracy or political openness.<sup>12</sup> As Keck and Sikkink point out, numerous Asian states have dismissed international pressure on human rights by invoking Asian values as justification.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Tien 1997, 129.

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, however, according to Katsumata, ASEAN states have focused on developing political rights, Katsumata 2009, 622.

<sup>8</sup> Katsumata 2009, 622.

<sup>9</sup> Bell 1995, 17. Sen 1999, 171-172 points to quantitative studies in arguing that Lee Kuan Yew’s notion that economic development takes priority over human rights and that human rights interfere with economic development is not accurate.

<sup>10</sup> Mukherjee 2010, 685.

<sup>11</sup> Mukherjee 2010, 693.

<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee 2010, 686-687.

<sup>13</sup> Keck and Sikkink 1998, 118-119.

While existing research has extensively examined China's domestic human rights, little attention has been paid to China's international human rights stance, in particular voting on human rights in the UNGA. This study argues that human rights in the UNGA present a second image of China's human rights practice. This argument is twofold. First, UNGA human rights resolutions have significant implications, which shape both international norms and states' behaviors. In addition, measured by comparable categories of human rights in the CIRI dataset, China's human rights practice in the UNGA demonstrates a sharp contrast with its domestic human rights. As a result, it is critically important to present this second image. We discuss why UNGA human rights resolutions are important in next section, and show empirical evidence of China's human rights in the UNGA in section four.

### **Why UNGA Voting is Important**

On November 18, 2014 the UNGA passed a resolution condemning North Korea's human rights abuses and suggested that the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigate North Korea's leaders. In response, North Korea's representative to the UN, Choe Myong-nam, lashed out at the resolution, suggesting the country might react by conducting more nuclear weapons tests.<sup>14</sup> This example, among many others, demonstrates that countries take UN human rights resolutions seriously, which further implies the significance of UNGA voting.

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<sup>14</sup> Gladstone 2014.

Numerous scholars have argued that the UNGA is a significant institution to study when examining international politics.<sup>15</sup> The UNGA provides the only opportunity where the vast majority of countries debate and vote on many important global issues,<sup>16</sup> and voting in the General Assembly reveals countries' individual and collective preferences on these salient issues.<sup>17</sup> For example, Costa-Buranelli argues that: "to vote for a specific [UNGA] resolution or on a specific theme is not only a reflection of a state's interests, but it may well represent a support/endorsement for a given norm/rule in international relations as well."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, countries take UNGA resolutions seriously,<sup>19</sup> and UNGA decisions can generate a significant impact.<sup>20</sup> In the remaining of this section, we show two concrete examples regarding why it is important to examine UNGA voting. They include generating norms and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a catalyst for state action.

Voting decisions in the UNGA help to generate international norms. When discussing how international human rights norms affect countries' human rights practices, Risse and Sikkink argue, "international law and international organizations are still the primary vehicles for stating community norms and for collective legitimation."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Sugiyama proposes that IOs play a central role

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<sup>15</sup> Dixon 1981; Marin-Bosch 1987; Holloway 1990; Kim and Russett 1997; Voeten 2000; Stone 2004; Costa-Buranelli 2014; Ferdinand 2014; Foot 2014.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Voeten 2000, 185-186

<sup>17</sup> Kim and Russett 1997, 29; Stone 2004, 587; Costa-Buranelli 2014, 133; Ferdinand 2014, 664.

<sup>18</sup> 2014, 133.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Marin-Bosch 1987, 705.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Dixon 1981, 50.

<sup>21</sup> 1999, 8.

in creating new norms that are then adopted by states at the domestic level.<sup>22</sup> One explanation suggests that since people with strong specific knowledge work for IOs, such IOs are able to influence others with the IOs agenda.<sup>23</sup> In addition, reforms on human rights issues have been implemented in some cases because country leaders are concerned about how they are perceived by other fellow leaders of countries.<sup>24</sup>

When compared to other IOs, the UN has its advantages in generating norms. The UNGA is more inclusive and equitable than the other leading IOs, since it has the largest membership and adopts a one country, one vote policy. In the UNGA, it is the majority of world countries that decide the agenda and the voting outcome, compared to other IOs, such as IMF, that use weighted voting.<sup>25</sup> As a result, decisions reached in the UNGA are more likely to be perceived as legitimate.

The MDGs serve as a good example of how the UN can shape state actions. It is widely accepted that fighting poverty is a critical step in improving human rights. The UN's holistic approach in tackling poverty in the 1990s, such as focusing on education, health, food, and employment opportunities, has significantly impacted the focus of the MDGs.<sup>26</sup> The MDGs examine many facets of life, instead of treating poverty as not having enough income. In furthering the optimistic outlook on tackling poverty that has been generated as a result of the MDGs, UN Secretary

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<sup>22</sup> 2011, 40.

<sup>23</sup> Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 899.

<sup>24</sup> Risse and Sikkink 1999, 8.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Volgy, Frazier and Ingersoll 2003, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Stein and Horn 2012, 664.

General Ban Ki-Moon regards the MDGs as “the most successful global anti-poverty push in history.”<sup>27</sup>

Brazil, which has often been followed as a model in conditional cash transfers (CCTs), implemented CCTs that specifically focus on the first four MDGs—reducing poverty (MDG1), improving school attendance (MDG2), improving gender equality and empowering women (MDG3), and decreasing child mortality and advancing general health (MDG4). In 2008, Brazil’s Minister for Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, Patrus Ananias, stated that the primary reason the Brazilian government acted with its social program Zero Hunger was to achieve MDG1.<sup>28</sup> In short, the UN’s MDGs resulted in the Brazilian government taking specific actions to achieve the MDGs. Numerous other governments have also implemented specific CCTs with the goal of making progress on the MDGs. For example, the Indian government also took action with a CCT program to achieve MDG5A.<sup>29</sup>

### **China’s Voting on Human Rights Resolutions in the UNGA**

We argue that in addition to its domestic human rights practice, voting on human rights resolutions in the UNGA signals a country’s positions on human rights. The previous section suggests that UNGA resolutions are sufficiently significant to warrant an investigation. Furthermore, it is noted that UNGA human rights resolutions cover comparable categories as the CIRI data that shows countries’ domestic human rights practices, which makes a comparison between these two meaningful. In this section, we demonstrate that China’s voting on human rights in

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<sup>27</sup> Millennium Development Goals Report, 2013, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Rocha 2009, 62.

<sup>29</sup> See Gopichandran and Chetlapalli 2012, 173.

the UNGA presents a sharp contrast with its domestic human rights practice. As a result, this study concludes that UNGA human rights votes represent a second image of China's human rights.

In the following, we discuss our empirical strategy and show the results. Based on the UNGA roll call data from 1946 to 2012 compiled by Erik Voeten,<sup>30</sup> this study identified the subset of UNGA resolutions on human rights since 1971.<sup>31</sup> Since our goal is to make UNGA data comparable with the CIRI dataset, we selected the UNGA human rights resolutions that can find counterparts in the CIRI data. In total, there were 704 such UNGA resolutions from 1971 to 2012. More specifically, these UNGA resolutions were divided into six categories: a broad category addressing human rights in general,<sup>32</sup> physical integrity rights, freedom of travel, electoral self determination, freedom of religion, and women's rights. These categories comprised the vast majority of the categories shown in the CIRI data.<sup>33</sup> In the appendix, we provided the list of resolutions examined in this study, showing the title and the year of each resolution.

Furthermore, since this study aims to calculate the proportion of times China voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA, we identified whether a "yes" vote or a "no" vote supported human rights for each resolution. In doing so, we carefully read the language for each of the 704 identified human rights

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<sup>30</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=hdl:1902.1/12379>

<sup>31</sup> This is because the People's Republic of China became a UN member in 1971.

<sup>32</sup> This category of human rights resolutions contained the key word "human rights" or "right to" in the title of a resolution.

<sup>33</sup> Among the commonly used categories of the CIRI data, only freedom of assembly and association, freedom of speech, and workers' rights were missing from the UNGA data. However, these three categories were possibly being addressed by the general category of human rights.

resolutions, and determined whether the language is consistent with advancing human rights based on the references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and various other international human rights instruments. In conclusion, we found that for all the UNGA human rights resolutions examined in this study, a “yes” vote was to support human rights.<sup>34</sup>

As previously mentioned in section two, China’s domestic human rights practice measured by the CIRI data is among the lowest scores. To make the original CIRI scores more interpretable, we normalized them to be bounded by 0 and 1, where 0 indicates the worst possible human rights and 1 denotes the best possible human rights. Based on all categories, China’s domestic human rights scores were uniformly and significantly lower than the world averages.<sup>35</sup> For example, China received a score close to 0 over the period 1981 to 2011 on many categories (e.g., electoral self-determination and freedom of religion), while the corresponding world average was usually above .5. Based on the same categories, however, the UNGA data presented a strikingly different picture. This study examined each of the

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<sup>34</sup> However, among these 704 human rights resolutions, we found that 13 resolutions (i.e., 12 on religion and 1 on racism) contain some controversial language that can be viewed as limiting free speech and thereby undermining human rights. For instance, a 2005 resolution on “combating defamation of religions” contains the language “Urges States to take resolute action to prohibit the dissemination through political institutions and organizations of racist and xenophobic ideas and material aimed at any religion or its followers that constitute incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.” This example indicates limiting free speech in order to protect religion. Nonetheless, the language contained in these 13 resolutions overall supports human rights. In addition, 13 resolutions comprise of less than 2 percent of the total resolutions examined in this study. As a result, we expect these 13 resolutions to have a negligible effect on our conclusions.

<sup>35</sup> For each category in the CIRI data, we provided two scores in parenthesis: the first score shows China’s human rights and the second one indicates the world average. The results are the following: disappearance (.629 and .830), extrajudicial killing (.194 and .663), political imprisonment (.016 and .554), torture (.032 and .398), freedom of assembly and association (0 and .543), freedom of domestic movement (.048 and .753), freedom of foreign movement (.306 and .711), freedom of speech (.097 and .496), electoral self-determination (.048 and .553), freedom of religion (.016 and .668), workers’ rights (0 and .465), women’s rights (.443 and .490), and independent judiciary (.129 and .584).

six identified categories. For each category, we computed China's overall favoring ratio (i.e., the proportion of times China voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions during 1971 to 2012), and compared it to the world average for that category.

The category on human rights in general consisted of 418 resolutions, making it the largest number of resolutions for all of the categories. One example from this category was: "human rights situation in Kosovo." China voted in the affirmative for 294 resolutions, bringing China's ratio in favor to .703, which was similar to the world average of .723. Another category that demonstrated similar favoring ratios between China and the world average was women's rights, which included 18 UNGA resolutions. One example read: "convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women." This category corresponded to women's political, economic, and social rights in the CIRI data. China's favoring ratio of women's rights was .833, compared to the world average of .856.

Three of the six categories revealed that China's ratio was markedly better than the world average. These three categories were electoral self-determination, freedom of travel, and freedom of religion. Electoral self-determination had 191 resolutions, and an example was, "implementation of the declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples." China's supporting ratio for self-determination was .932, a number much higher than the world average of .783. The category on freedom of travel addressed freedom of foreign movement and freedom of domestic movement in the CIRI data, with an example of: "respect for the universal freedom of travel and the vital importance of family reunification." This

category included 10 resolutions, and China supported all 10 resolutions. On the other hand, the world average favoring ratio was only .594. Finally, freedom of religion had 8 UNGA resolutions, and one example from this category was: “combating defamation of religions.” Once again, China supported all 8 resolutions, compared to the world average supporting ratio of .617.<sup>36</sup>

The only UNGA human rights category where China performed worse than the world average was physical integrity rights. This category included disappearance, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and torture in the CIRI data,<sup>37</sup> and it included 11 UNGA resolutions. One example read: “to strongly condemn the apartheid regime of South Africa for its brutal repression and indiscriminate torture and killings.” Of the 11 resolutions, China voted for human rights in only 4 resolutions, resulting in a favoring ratio of .364. On the other hand, the world average on physical integrity rights was .760. Nonetheless, this category only consisted of approximately 1 percent of the total identified resolutions, and as a result, it did not change the big picture that China’s human rights practice in the UNGA has been significantly better than its domestic human rights.<sup>38</sup>

The analysis thus far has examined China’s human rights in the UNGA by separate categories. In the following, we aggregated all of the six categories and plotted the aggregated annual results in Figure 1 (top plot). As a comparison, China’s aggregated domestic human rights based on the CIRI data was also provided

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<sup>36</sup> Once again, these resolutions on religion contain some controversial language. However, the language overall supports human rights.

<sup>37</sup> The CIRI data also included a physical integrity rights index that aggregated these four categories.

<sup>38</sup> For 48 resolutions, China was coded as “absent.” Therefore, the total number of resolutions for China was 656 instead of 704.

in Figure 1 (bottom plot). In each plot, the horizontal axis indicated the year (1971 to 2012 for the top plot and 1981 to 2011 for the bottom plot), and the vertical axis denoted the favoring ratio of human rights. In addition, each plot showed China's human rights (solid line) as well as world average (dotted line).

[Figure 1 about here.]

As the bottom plot of Figure 1 clearly demonstrated, China's domestic human rights measured by the CIRI data was significantly below the world average for the entire time period from 1981 to 2011. While the world average remained close to .6, China's average was approximately .2 and displayed a downward trend. In other words, the gap between China and the world average was salient throughout this time period. On the other hand, China's voting record on human rights in the UNGA (the top plot) presented a strikingly different picture. It has tended to be better or on the same level as the world average from 1971 to 2012. One exception was the 1990s, where China's support of human rights was below the world average. Nevertheless, China's deviation from the world average in the 1990s was not significant, and its favoring ratio was never below .5. In short, Figure 1 demonstrated that contrary to the conventional wisdom that China has poor (domestic) human rights, China has consistently voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA. Due to the significance of the UN and UNGA voting, one cannot ignore this second image for any comprehensive discussion of China's human rights.

It is important to point out that in the above analysis we included resolutions on Israel and Palestine if there were clear human rights components with these

resolutions. However, numerous scholars have proposed to exclude resolutions on Israel when assessing human rights issues in the UN.<sup>39</sup> The main argument is that these resolutions tend to be highly politicized. For example, Gowan and Brantner argue that, “These votes—which pitch the US and Israel against nearly all other states, including the EU—have a ritualistic air.”<sup>40</sup> To address this particular concern in the existing research, we recalculated China’s voting in the UNGA and the world average, excluding the resolutions on Israel. The new plots were shown in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 about here.]

In this figure, the top plot demonstrated two cases of China’s voting on human rights in the UNGA, one with the resolutions on Israel (solid line, which is the same plot from Figure 1) and the other without those resolutions (dotted line). The bottom plot presented the world average for these two cases. The goal of Figure 2 was to illustrate whether the resolutions on Israel distorted China’s voting record on human rights. As Figure 2 demonstrated, the new plots that excluded the resolutions on Israel (both for China and the world average) looked almost identical to the plots from Figure 1 that included those resolutions. In each plot, the solid line and the dotted line overlapped with each other except for the years after the late 1990s. In addition, for the years showing divergence, the differences between the solid line and the dotted line were marginal. The data showed that throughout the 1971 to 2012 time period, China always supported human rights of Palestinians and criticized Israel for human rights abuses. Nonetheless, Figure 2 suggested that our decision on whether or not to include the resolutions on Israel did not affect our

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<sup>39</sup> E.g., Gowan and Brantner; 2010; Boockmann and Dreher 2011

<sup>40</sup> 2010, 6.

findings of China's voting on human rights in the UNGA in any significant way. Since this group of resolutions accounted for a large number of the identified UNGA resolutions, we chose to include such resolutions in our main analysis.

Scholars have argued that one prominent characteristic of China's voting in the UNGA has been its non-interference policy: China opposes discussing an individual country's domestic human rights in the UNGA<sup>41</sup>. As a result, it is expected that China would vote very differently on the human rights resolutions related to individual countries (i.e., country-specific resolutions). To sort out the effect of country-specific resolutions, we created two new plots of China's voting on human rights in the UNGA: one devoted exclusively to country-specific human rights resolutions and the other examining non-country-specific human rights resolutions. As usual, both China's favoring ratio (solid line) and the world average (dotted line) were shown in each plot. These plots were shown in Figure 3.

[Figure 3 about here.]

The bottom plot of Figure 3 clearly indicated that after excluding country-specific resolutions, China's support of human rights significantly outperformed the world average for almost the entire time period. China's favoring ratio was on average higher than .9 and it never dropped below .7 over the time period from 1971 to 2012. Put differently, country-specific resolutions had driven China's ratio of favor downward in Figure 1. This finding is consistent with the non-interference policy argument. In short, if one is willing to treat country-specific resolutions as a

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<sup>41</sup> Kinzelbach 2012, 313; Sceats and Breslin 2012.

group of deviations, the bottom plot of Figure 3 provided even stronger evidence that China endorsed human rights in the UNGA.

Let us now turn to country-specific resolutions. A country-specific resolution either targeted a country for its poor domestic human rights or admonished a country for its involvement in human rights abuses in another country. One important observation was that China rarely criticized the government of a developing country for the purpose of promoting that country's human rights.<sup>42</sup> Among the large amount of resolutions condemning human rights violations in developing countries, there were only 6 cases in which China voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions and in so doing criticized the government of a developing country.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, China has consistently voted in favor of human rights resolutions condemning Israel or a Western country.

These observations explain why in the top plot of Figure 3 China's support of human rights was often below the world average and displayed a tremendous fluctuation (i.e., its ratio of favor ranging from 0 to 1). Prior to the 1990s, since there were not many resolutions in the UNGA on human rights that condemned the governments of developing countries, China's ratio of favor was relatively high and even higher than the world average during the 1970s. In the early post-Cold War

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<sup>42</sup> This is consistent with the argument that there is a high level of voting cohesion between China and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) countries (e.g., Mielniczuk 2013, 1083; Ferdinand 2014, 382). In 1991, China's foreign minister, Qian Qichen, stated at the UNGA that the tenets of the NAM are central to Chinese foreign policy (Mielniczuk 2013, 1083). Mielniczuk sums up the main tenets as: "mutual respect for sovereignty; mutual non-aggression; non-interference; equality and mutual benefit; and peaceful coexistence." 2013, 1083.

<sup>43</sup> Of these 6 cases, there were 3 resolutions on human rights in Afghanistan for the years 1985, 1986, and 1987. During that time, the Soviet Union was working with the Afghan government in the civil war and the resolutions contained language criticizing the foreign involvement or "foreign forces." There were 2 resolutions on "Occupied Kuwait," regarding Saddam Hussein's invasion of that country. The remaining resolution was on Guatemala.

years, however, the US wanted the UNGA to focus on human rights issues in countries where it wanted political change, such as Cuba, Iran, Iraq, and Sudan.<sup>44</sup> As a result, China abstained or voted against human rights for many of these country-specific resolutions, and its ratio of favor significantly dropped in 1991. Finally, as the resolutions on Israel began to appear more frequently in the 2000s, we observed that China's favoring ratio started to increase and to catch up with the world average during this time period.<sup>45</sup>

The overall message from Figure 3 is that country-specific resolutions drove the pattern of China's endorsement of human rights in the UNGA. The top plot in Figure 3 showed a very similar trend as the top plot in Figure 1 for China's voting on human rights. In addition, when country-specific resolutions were taken out, the pattern became quite random as demonstrated in the bottom plot of Figure 3. Nonetheless, all three figures suggest that China has consistently voted in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA, which we argue presents a second image of China's human rights.

## **Conclusion**

In this study, we introduce an original human rights dataset to systematically examine China's international human rights stance, and put forward some novel findings of China's human rights. We demonstrate that in contrast to its poor domestic practice as indicated by the widely cited CIRI dataset, China voted in

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<sup>44</sup> Volgy, Frazier and Ingersoll 2003, 61.

<sup>45</sup> If we drop the resolutions on Israel from country-specific resolutions, China's favoring ratio of human rights was fairly low and flat since the early 1990s.

the affirmative on the vast majority of human rights resolutions in the UNGA from 1971 to 2012. This contrast suggests a second image of China's human rights, which has heretofore not been explored by other scholars in existing research.

However, we do not necessarily equate China's support of human rights resolutions as its having a strong human rights practice in the UNGA. Future research is needed to investigate this relationship. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of China's behind the scenes intent when it endorses human rights resolutions in the UNGA is beyond the scope of this study. To reiterate, the primary contribution of this article is to introduce a UNGA human rights dataset to systematically examine China's international human rights stance. Nonetheless, we conclude our article by offering two preliminary assessments of these questions.

First, the Chinese government receives large benefits for voting in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA, and therefore China is willing to endorse UNGA human rights resolutions. By showing a willingness to embrace the existing norms, China has and will continue to benefit significantly from the existing international political economy regime, including participation in IOs.<sup>46</sup> For example, it is argued that the Chinese government confirms to the international human rights regime to uphold its international image. Sceats and Breslin writes that, "China's ratification of core international human rights treaties and its record of participation in the Human Rights Council demonstrate that it wishes to be perceived as accepting the legitimacy of the international human rights system and,

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<sup>46</sup> E.g., Hempson-Jones 2005, 720; Pearson 2006; Li 2010; Wang 2011.

broadly, the norms on which it is based.”<sup>47</sup> Likewise, China has been abiding by the norms and rules in other areas, such as international trade<sup>48</sup> and nuclear non-proliferation.<sup>49</sup> All these examples suggest that likely China’s voting record in the UNGA is an indicator of its willingness to accept the international human rights regime.

In addition, we argue that China has been strategic in the UNGA in that the Chinese government alters its support of human rights based on changing levels of threat. In existing studies, other scholars have proposed the similar argument that China has been strategic in the UN. For example, Nathan examines China’s human rights in the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and points out that China has been strategically avoiding country-specific criticism.<sup>50</sup> More generally, he argues that China has been actively involved in the international human rights regime to advance its interests within the regime.<sup>51</sup> In this study, we show two cases to support our argument. One case is China’s voting on country-specific resolutions in the UNGA, and the other example illustrates China’s time-varying favoring ratio of human rights.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, after excluding country-specific resolutions, China’s voting in the affirmative on human rights resolutions consistently and significantly outperformed the world average. It is country-specific resolutions that drove China’s ratio of favor downward to be below the world average in many years.

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<sup>47</sup> 2012, 55.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Pearson 2006.

<sup>49</sup> E.g., Foot and Walter 2011; Li 2012.

<sup>50</sup> 2015, 16.

<sup>51</sup> 2010, 214. Also see Inboden and Chen 2012, 46.

We argue that endorsing country-specific resolutions that condemn human rights abuses by the governments of developing countries is expected to generate a demand for improving domestic human rights and thereby a threat to the Chinese government. Country-specific resolutions provide the closest and the most direct comparison between China and other developing countries on human rights practice, and China's support of such resolutions can easily be cited by the Chinese people to oppose similar human rights violations by the Chinese government. As a result, China strives to reduce the likelihood of demand for an improvement of domestic human rights, as well as the probability of threat by not supporting country-specific resolutions that condemn human rights abuses by the governments of developing countries.

A close examination of the time trend of China's favoring ratio of human rights resolutions in the UNGA further reveals that quite likely the Chinese government alters its support of human rights in response to changing levels of threat. Based on the top plot of Figure 1 (all human rights resolutions) and the top plot of Figure 3 (country-specific human rights resolutions), we see that China's ratio of favor plummeted in 1991 and began to increase again since the early 2000s. These patterns support our argument.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s significantly increased the threat to the legitimacy of the communist regime at the global level, which magnified the domestic threat to the Chinese government due to the demand for an improvement of human rights. In response, China minimized the threat by reducing the discrepancy between its human rights voting record in the UNGA and domestic

human rights practice. That is, China chose to decrease its level of support of human rights in the UNGA starting in the early 1990s.

As a result of China's increased and steady economic growth since the 1990s, the Chinese government has achieved an increased degree of legitimacy.<sup>52</sup> Because the Chinese people are satisfied with the growing economy, they are also likely to be satisfied with the government. Therefore, the Chinese people become less likely to challenge the government on human rights violations, and the perceived threat to the Chinese government decreases. The outcome is that the Chinese government feels less constrained when it votes in the affirmative on human rights resolutions in the UNGA, and we observe an increased ratio of favor since the early 2000s.

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<sup>52</sup> Perry and Goldman 2007, 17-18; Jacques 2009; Kennedy 2010, 182; Wright 2011, 37.

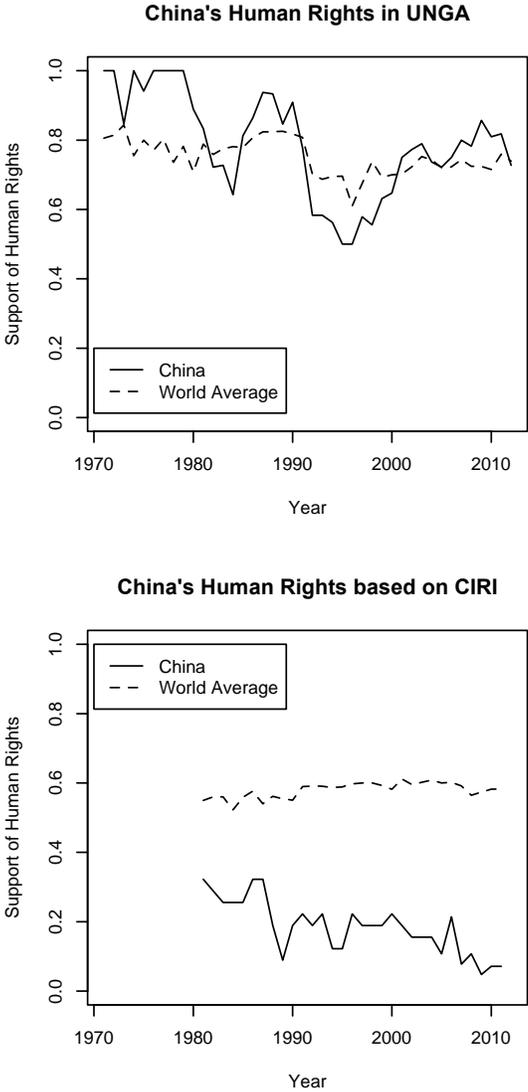
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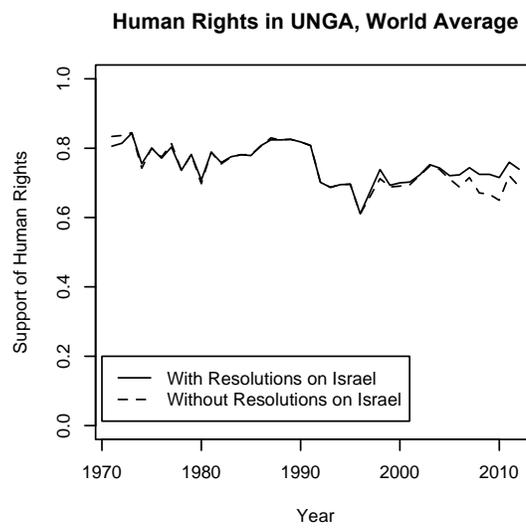
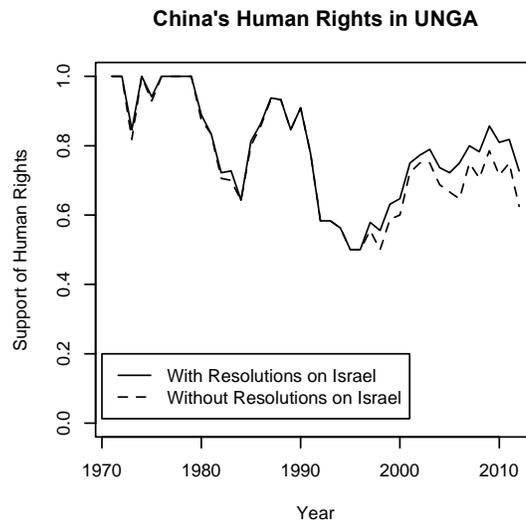
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Figure 1: China's Human Rights in the UNGA and Its Domestic Human Rights Based on the CIRI Data



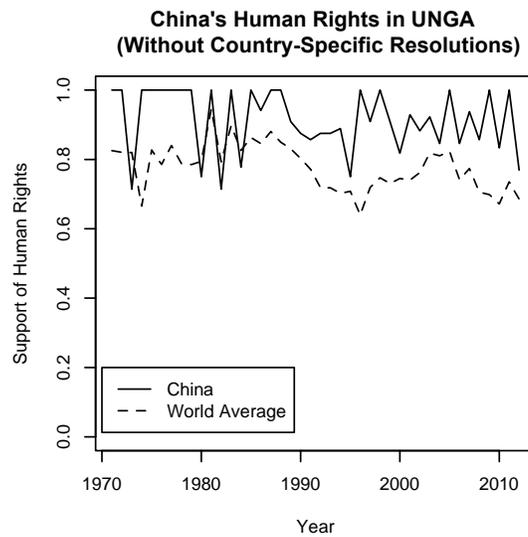
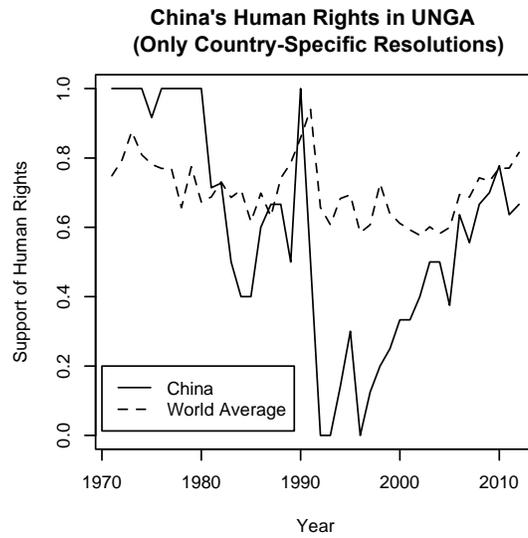
Data sources: Erik Voeten's United Nations General Assembly Voting Data, and the Cingranelli-Richards (CIRI) Human Rights Dataset.

Figure 2: Human Rights in the UNGA, with and without Resolutions on Israel



Data source: Erik Voeten's United Nations General Assembly Voting Data.

Figure 3: China's Human Rights in the UNGA, only Country-Specific Resolutions and without Country-Specific Resolutions



Data source: Erik Voeten's United Nations General Assembly Voting Data.