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Interview – Courtney J. Fung

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Dr. Courtney J. Fung is an assistant professor of International Relations at the University of Hong Kong and an associate-in-research at the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies at Harvard University. She was previously a research fellow with the East Asia Institute (Seoul) in their Program on Peace, Governance, and Development in East Asia, and a post-doctoral fellow with the now Columbia-Harvard China and the World Program. She is the author of *China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I am inspired by the work on status as a social variable, and in particular, the work that challenges the underlying bias in the literature that states should only ever want 'more' or 'greater' status (i.e. great power status), as well as works that conceptualize status as a driver for cooperation, as opposed to conflict. I think of Miller and Pu's books that challenge the assumption that rising states automatically seek to 'drop' their lower status, and de Carvalho and Neumann's edited volume on 'small state status seeking' and Røren's work on status, social relationships and friendship that illustrate that holding 'small' status can sometimes be the foreign policy objective for states

I'm also specifically interested in the new writing that makes more transparent the workings and dynamics at the UN Security Council. For what is meant to be the agency charged with managing international peace and security, we don't really have an understanding of how the institution actually works. Adler-Nissen and Pouliot offer treatment for how power operates in practice at the UN Security Council, and Schmitt's writing on the Russian practices at the United Nations is a real contribution too. More generally, because of my interest in how international diplomacy happens, I'm reading more about the links between how 'micro' politics and diplomacy affects 'macro' politics and diplomatic outcomes. So I am interested in the works of scholars like Nair and Wong who study face-to-face diplomacy and contribute to the 'practice' turn in their scholarship.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Understanding *how* intangible variables – like norms, status and identity – affect international politics has probably been the biggest change to how I understand the world. While I had some idea that these things mattered, it wasn't until graduate school that I had the time, education and training to learn more about how these 'soft' variables operate in international diplomacy. I was at school at a time when there was a growing interest in understanding and measuring how status and identity affect high politics, and I was able to learn from an increasingly sophisticated methodological, theoretical and empirical conversation.

My doctoral advisors had the most significant impact on my thinking. Not just for the obvious reasons that they read and critiqued my work over the course of the degree, but because they were also frank about navigating the doctoral process and what it takes to find a tenure-track academic post – including the pitfalls and less exciting parts of an academic career. They also set an example for me as to what it means to be a social scientist, a teacher, a public intellectual, a policy practitioner – and more often than not, I think about their comments or actions when I am stumped by student questions or dealing with the inevitable reviewer 2 feedback.

In your new book, you argue that status is overlooked when understanding decisions made by the UN Security Council. Why is status so important and how does it affect China's response to intervention?

Since China assumed its seat at the UN Security Council in October 1971, China has held fast to the principles of host state consent, UN Security Council authorization and regional support when considering intervention. These principles serve another important function, demarcating intervention from foreign-imposed regime change, and reducing the opportunity for these activities to occur against the PRC. However, China applies its principled position pragmatically in concert with China's interests, the particular circumstance of each case, and reflection of the normative zeitgeist regarding intervention. Even in the trinity of post-9/11 cases where heads of state are cited as potential targets of regime change, China has a puzzling record: acquiescing to an International Criminal Court referral for Sudan in 2005 and backing a Chapter VII peace operation in Darfur in 2007; supporting an International Criminal Court referral for Libya and acquiescing to a 'no-fly zone plus' over parts of Libya in 2011; and halting actions into Syria, while backing the use of 'consent-free' humanitarian corridors there in 2014.

My book argues that status is an overlooked determinant in understanding the variation in China's position on intervention at the UN Security Council. I use Renshon's 2017 definition of status—a state's "standing or rank in a status community"— and argue that status can have independent and significant effects for China's position on intervention. Status can shape China's response to intervention by way of China's peer groups. Under certain conditions, China's peer groups are able to modify China's preferences, even getting China to permit action. China's pursuit of status is in part driven by a consequentialist calculation to maximize China's standing as a group member, but it is also inherently social, with China driven by a logic of appropriateness and a desire to conform to an intersubjective standard of good behavior as a member of the peer group. To this extent, status is causal (i.e. external to actors) *and* constitutive (i.e. part of who actors are). By better understanding the impact and scope conditions of status, we can answer fundamental questions of *why* China took certain positions regarding intervention and *how* these positions were justified.

I show that China is not motivated by a singular status concern by unpacking the effects of China's twin statuses as *both* a great power *and* as a developing state—therefore, China is focused on reconciling its *status dilemma* – i.e. how China can maximize recognition from *both* its intervention peer groups: the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—the western, permanent members of the UN Security Council, the so-called "P3"—and *also* representatives of the Global South, which include geographic-specific regional organizations and often the host state.

Second, this book takes status seriously as a variable and does not treat status as a constant value to China. The UN Security Council is an excellent social environment to examine China's status considerations, and I isolate the causal mechanism and conditions under which status can matter enough to China to impact its response to intervention. China is most concerned about securing status in the wake of a status trigger, and when its peer groups congregate around the same policy position; when its peer groups remain cohesive, with no individual state defections, and when peer groups can make an unresponsive China pay social costs for bucking group standards of good behavior. With this insight, I join the literature that shows that states are rational actors in a social context and that the desire to take actions that comply with status, and related social factors like self-image and identity, can mean that states select policy options even if it means bearing material costs. The book concludes with new perspectives on the malleability of China's core interests, insights about the application of status for cooperation, and the implications of the status dilemma for rising powers.

Has China's approach and involvement in interventions shifted? What has been its position on the Syria conflict?

China's gradual shift in attitude regarding intervention—from outright dismissal to guarded engagement and more robust participation with some facets of the intervention regime—shows China's flexibility in practice regarding intervention, while emphasizing its commitment to limiting intervention through the UN Security Council, under the ideal conditions of host state consent and regional support. And when the UN Security Council has, at times, taken it upon itself to override state sovereignty, China has made "exceptions" to its first preference of a non-interventionist

stance, accommodating the international community's waxing and waning interest in intervention. However, despite this flexibility, China remains consistent in framing its support for enforcement or violations of consent as exceptions due to the case at hand. China's persistent scepticism regarding the value of Chapter VII activities reflects China's views that the use of force is only acceptable as a last resort, and serves as a blunt instrument to resolve conflict *because* it disregards consent and state sovereignty.

In regards to Syria, China has held a consistent public position that only a consensual approach can fully address events: mediation by the League of Arab States and the UN Special Envoy, a UN monitoring mission, and the political resolution via various multilateral groups are all initiatives backed by China. China supplements these multilateral efforts with its own bilateral efforts on diplomacy—with overtures to the Syrian opposition groups and also meeting with delegations from other Middle Eastern states. Chinese-supported measures show a commitment not to push for Assad's resignation nor establish a pathway to his departure through coercive measures, and to recognize equal criticism against all parties.

However, while China is willing to support consensual measures, the Syria case is a real departure for China's diplomatic strategy at the UN Security Council as China spent precious vetoes in relatively quick succession: preempting any perceived coercive measures (censure, demands for compliance, sanctions, and an International Criminal Court referral of the Syria case etc.). Given China's record of the absolute lowest number of vetoes at the UN Security Council, the willingness to commit multiple vetoes in this single case is truly significant, as these vetoes have slowed action and helped create permissible conditions for the ongoing conflict. In studying this case in detail, I found that China was able to discount status concerns, accepting some social costs from disassociating with its peer groups, choosing to have its intervention voting ultimately guided by other interests. To be clear though, China was *not* status immune in this particular case: process-tracing highlights efforts to reduce status pressures and the logic used to discount social influence, which transmits social pressures and rewards. Because China could discount status concerns, China actively intervened to ensure that a firm line against non-consensual intervention would be held, and in this case alone China committed three innovations: the use of multiple, successive veto votes; rebranding to delegitimize non-consensual intervention as "regime change"; and engaging in norm shaping of the responsibility to protect regarding the use of force. These three innovations together highlight China's willingness to firmly separate the intervention norm from that of regime change.

You used a range of methods to carry out your book research, including interviews with UN officials and Chinese foreign policy elites, and participant observation at the UN Security Council. What insights did these methods provide and what challenges did you face?

I develop my theory based on an extensive collection of data, accepting the bounded transparency regarding ongoing, sensitive foreign policy matters. For the history of China and intervention, the book relies on primary sources, including UN Security Council resolutions, verbatim records and official statements, and secondary documents from news reports to academic texts. But to uncover the "dogs that didn't bark"—those voting options *declined* by Beijing, for example—I conducted over 200 interviews with UN officials and Chinese foreign policy elites during multiple field trips—primarily in Beijing and New York. These interviews also gave me a sense of the less reported events that were key turning points, so I could more effectively examine evidence and arguments through process-tracing. Participant observation at UN Headquarters was crucial to understanding the near deference given to China because it is a veto-wielding player with an anti-intervention reputation. This reputation affected how other players set their expectations for negotiating with China.

Acquiring non-publicly accessible data wasn't straight forward for obvious reasons: diplomats are very busy as is; sometimes just the diplomat you need to talk to was already reassigned to new posts elsewhere, and some diplomats are understandably cautious about discussing current issues with a researcher. There were times when I really had to earn enough confidence and trust from my interviewees to actually have an interview that moved beyond official talking points; there were other times when I had to judge whether I could keep asking follow-up questions or raise contradictory evidence. Then there were some research difficulties that were perhaps due to the book's empirical content or my position as a junior, less-established scholar. I remember having some emotionally-charged, tough interviews, where I had to explain that I wasn't in the room to hurt the Chinese people's feelings through my research.

How does China approach and contribute to UN peacekeeping?

China is now a key peacekeeping player: China contributes more UN peacekeepers than the rest of the permanent members of the UN Security Council combined. At the 2015 World Summit, China offered 8,000 troops towards the UN peacekeeping standby force, potentially reducing the inevitable delay between mandating and fielding a mission – China alone offered a fifth of the total forces committed by fifty nations. By 2017, China was the second largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget. Yet, China wasn't always interested in peacekeeping, and China's engagement with UN peacekeeping shows complex learning about the value of peacekeeping as a foreign policy activity and platform for China.

The PRC's initial years at the UN Security Council prioritized the 'three no's' regarding peacekeeping: no voting, no fund contributions and no personnel for peacekeeping through 1980. China began voting for peacekeeping in 1981, as China judged that peacekeeping supported international peace and security, and thereby PRC economic growth during reform and opening through a peaceful international environment. That period marked the start of the PRC stating a preference for traditional peacekeeping: i.e. missions should abide by core peacekeeping principles of host state consent, impartiality, and the use of force for only self-defence and defence of the mandate.

China began dispatching personnel with twenty civilian election observers under the United Nations Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) in 1989, and five military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO) in 1990. China's first troop dispatch included 800 PLA engineering troops to the United Nations Transitional Administration in Cambodia (UNTAC) in 1992, which was key in illustrating PRC acceptance for multi-dimensional peacekeeping, where the UN itself engages in a broad mandate akin to nation-building, even sometimes assuming the functions of the host state. China continued with its trademark commitment to only dispatching enabler units – the typically hard to source non-combat logisticians, medical teams and engineers that enable a peacekeeping mission to function. Starting in 1999, China voted continuously for peace enforcement and transitional administration missions for East Timor, and PRC troop participation in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), and the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC) supported high-profile, large-scale missions short of troops, emphasizing China's commitment as a responsible power. These deployments coincided with China's official expansion of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) missions to include military operations other than war. Humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peacekeeping were identified as tasks to promote international peace and security, again supporting China's own national development and security.

China ramped up its participation to include deploying combat troops beginning in 2013 to UN Multidimensional Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and in 2015 to the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). However, deploying combat troops presents new challenges for China's peacekeeping units: adjudicating the use of force, taking combat casualties, and managing expectations for China's performance in the field, while staying within China's own normative framework of non-interference. These risks and costs complicate the benefits derived by China from supporting peacekeeping.

How do China and India differ in their approaches to the norms and provisions of the global security order?

There is a lot of discussion about a rising China and a rising India as supporters of a global security order: the norms, institutions and rules that pertain to global security issues. Both of these rising powers are key participants in two complementary and overlapping elements of this order: as troop contributors to UN peacekeeping missions and as norm shapers of the responsibility to protect. These two issue areas give opportunities for insights into how these states consider their role in providing for global security and their positions vis-à-vis a global security order, as both peacekeeping and the responsibility to protect present challenges to traditional sovereignty, which is almost a fixation for both China and India given their colonial histories and self-appointed positions as anti-imperialist Global South leaders seeking recognition for their heritage as great states. Interestingly, China and India have relatively complementary approaches as they operate in contrast to one another in both these issue areas.

Both states are considered core contributors to UN peacekeeping: China sending more troops than the rest of the P5 combined; India *double* China's troop levels. Both states deploy globally, in comparison to regionally-focused peacekeeping powers like Brazil or South Africa. Both of these states agitate about equitable say for the Global South regarding UN peacekeeping and chastise Western states for their lack of field commitments. However, after these broad dimensions, China and India differ on key aspects. India is yet to turn its long-established history of deployment into strategic diplomatic gains; and though China is risk-averse and cautious in its contributions, it has managed to strategically maximize the benefits of its peacekeeping deployment in terms of positive press, training opportunities for its assets, and linking peacekeeping to other foreign policy goals. In regards to the responsibility to protect, both states were initially R2P rejectionists but quickly diverged in their responses. India has largely focused on rejecting the use of the responsibility to protect to justify armed intervention. China modifies the responsibility to protect norm content by using state sovereignty to adapt the responsibility to protect, though it only briefly actively innovated a 'pillar 3' concept regarding the international community executing protection over the state.

What is the most important advice that you would give to early career scholars studying international relations?

Working on dissertation projects can be slow and tedious at times, and publishing means withstanding multiple rejections and long cycles of editing and rewriting. There will be moments when gate-keepers respond that the research question makes no sense or is too ambitious; the existing literature answers everything, data access is impossible etc. For less established scholars it can be daunting in having to push back by speaking clearer and writing better to make the case. In those bleaker moments, remembering what a privilege it is to have interesting work and the autonomy to do that work can help. It really helps to have a coterie of friends that are supportive – whether these are grad school friends trucking along side-by-side in virtual writing retreats, or friends that remind you to have a sense of perspective and a life outside of your project! At every step of my work, I've had generous and patient mentors to help with big things (writing reference letters, proof-reading chapters, weighing up job decisions etc.) and smaller things that are equally important (how to time requests of seniors, understanding how administrative bureaucracy works etc.) – so I'd encourage early career scholars to be mindful about establishing and nurturing mentorship relationships, and be open to the idea that mentors aren't restricted to senior academics, but administrative staff and peers too.