

*Identifications* (1988; p. 57, fn 11). Hogg and Abrams define both social mobility and social competition but make clear that the former denotes an individual strategy that “leaves the status quo unchanged, in terms of the power and status relations between groups” (Hogg and Abrams, pp. 24–25), whereas the latter refers not to rule-breaking, noncompliance, or withdrawal from institutions but to “direct competition between subordinate and dominant groups on dimensions consensually valued by both groups” (p. 49).

This conceptual confusion contributes to substantial theoretical and empirical ambiguity. For example, Mukherjee argues that states challenge institutions (via withdrawal or noncompliance) when they face exclusion and unfairness because doing so is the most effective means of improving their status given the conditions (p. 70). Yet, as Mukherjee notes, status requires recognition by others (p. 43). *Ascending Order* does not persuasively explain why institutional withdrawal or noncompliance should lead to the recognition of a status claim, rather than to stigmatization or diplomatic isolation. The case studies also never demonstrate that institutional withdrawal or noncompliance leads to higher status, although at times (as when he claims that India’s 1974 nuclear explosion “restored its status”) Mukherjee asserts this without providing evidence related to changes in recognition (p. 237).

Indeed, because they are so rich and carefully researched, the case studies often highlight the significant *limitations* of theoretical frameworks that—like institutional status theory—model states as rational actors and assume that domestic politics are unimportant. This is most striking in the explanation for Japan’s changing orientation toward the interwar naval order. In chapter 5, Mukherjee tells a persuasive story about how accumulating evidence that Japan could not achieve equal membership within the Western-dominated great power club eventually benefited “right-wing groups and militarists” in political contests with moderates over the direction of foreign policy (p. 145). As compelling as it is, this narrative bears little resemblance to institutional status theory, which does not consider or theorize (and actually excludes by explicit assumption) the possibility that international status dynamics might influence domestic politics. Mukherjee is thus right to call, in the conclusion, for greater attention to the relationship between status and domestic politics (p. 291).

Overall, *Ascending Order* is worth reading for those interested in how concerns about prestige and position influence foreign policy. The book provides some important insights about what drives states’ orientations toward international institutions; it is a model of careful, detailed historical research and a provocative entry in the ongoing debate over how to productively integrate insights from social psychology into the study of status in world politics.

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— Jamie J. Gruffydd-Jones , University of Kent  
j.j.gruffydd-jones@kent.ac.uk

At the turn of the century, scholars asked whether participation in the international human rights regime had changed China. Some, like Rosemary Foot and Ann Kent, argued that Beijing’s increasing involvement in the regime had led its leaders to comply more and more with human rights norms—even if they had not yet fully internalised those norms.

In this book, Rana Siu Inboden explores how Chinese leaders have responded, and in particular, how they have sought to shape the human rights regime in return. Inboden talks us through how, between 1982 and 2017, Chinese leaders gradually developed more sophisticated views of institutions like the UN Human Rights Council and the Convention against Torture, and refined their understanding of what China’s role within them should be. The book gives us a fascinating insight into Beijing’s strategies towards these institutions, and into officials’ evolving tactics in debates and negotiations.

But Inboden argues that Beijing’s evolving actions towards the human rights regime have a wider importance. She asks: “Will a rising China threaten or accept the liberal international order?” (p. 2). If it does threaten that order, how might it seek to change global institutions in the future? From the evidence in this book, not very much. Certainly, the book provides no more indication that Chinese officials have been deeply socialised in human rights norms than twenty years ago. But Inboden also finds that Beijing has not yet sought to break up or hollow out the regime, even when it posed a direct challenge to the Chinese Communist Party’s policies at home.

By tracing through Chinese officials’ responses to the establishment of the Convention against Torture and the UN Human Rights Council, and its participation in the International Labour Organisation, Inboden argues that China has instead been a “taker” and a “constrainer” of the human rights regime. In other words, as officials worked out through the 1990s how to effectively deflect scrutiny over China’s own actions, they have generally “taken” the rules and norms of the regime—but have also sought to make sure to “constrain” the regime from being significantly strengthened. The argument is a persuasive one, although the determination to fit Beijing into categories of “taker” and “constrainer” is sometimes more confusing than illuminating, and the two categories often blur into one.

Nevertheless, the book’s discussions of the human rights regime’s negotiations and debates are thorough and incredibly detailed. Inboden draws on over seventy

interviews with Chinese government and party officials, diplomats and officials from around the world, as well as on extensive archival research. These discussions throw up some fascinating anecdotes—such as the sheer extent of China’s lobbying to defend itself from scrutiny at times, and the often surprised reactions of other foreign diplomats. Such anecdotes are buried slightly too deeply in the book’s dissection of the minutiae of the committees and debates to make it always an easy read, but the sheer richness of the discussions of Chinese diplomats’ behaviour in negotiations means that it should be required for any university courses analysing China’s role in international organisations.

Explaining the behaviour is much more difficult, however, and on this the book has mixed success. Inboden first highlights Beijing’s determination to avoid scrutiny of its own human rights policies. She points to the “1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown as a searing experience that results in the Chinese leadership’s abhorrence for censure of its record” (p. 241). The conclusion certainly fits the facts—Chinese leaders became visibly more suspicious of the human rights regime after being repeatedly beset by criticism in the early 1990s. But this argument leaves open some crucial questions. No countries like scrutiny of their human rights records—but as Inboden points out in one of the most interesting sections of the book—not all countries engage in the furious lobbying that China does. So why did this censure matter so much to China? Why did Chinese leaders so hate being subject to critical UN resolutions? Does scrutiny from the human rights regime automatically turn all countries against it – and why? Or is it just China that has reacted in this way?

An answer may lie in Inboden’s second explanation—the Chinese leadership’s strongly ingrained pre-existing ideas about the importance of state sovereignty and the invalidity of universal human rights norms. But as authors like Allen Carlson have shown, Chinese views towards state sovereignty are often malleable, strongly asserted or neglected as needed in a given situation. While Inboden does acknowledge this, she states that they “appear to be genuinely held beliefs” (p. 229). This is a big claim, with important implications for Beijing’s future actions towards human rights scrutiny at home and abroad. But the book gives little evidence to support it—and to be fair it is very hard to do so. Genuine commitments to state sovereignty look a lot like rhetorical tools to deflect international

attention. Examples of Chinese officials seeking to deny subcommittees access to places of detention may well reflect long-standing PRC distaste towards non-state actors, but might equally just be an attempt to avoid any independent scrutiny.

The most interesting explanation is Beijing’s desire to be seen an “agreeable and cooperative international actor” (p. 231)—because it tells us something about how China’s role in the human rights regime has evolved over time. It explains why Beijing chose to engage with the regime in the first place, but also why it has not sought to take the regime apart as the country’s power and influence has grown. And while the book does not discuss it, the desire to protect this image also helps us understand Inboden’s first explanation—why Beijing cared so much about scrutiny from the human rights regime in the early 1990s.

And indeed, the most fascinating parts of the book all come when recounting Chinese officials’ attempts to manage the country’s international image. They give us an insight into the early days of the 1980s, and how Chinese leaders sought to use the human rights regime to manage the unfamiliar outside world. They illuminate how Chinese officials later chose to back away from proactively impeding the work of the regime; and why, when they did try to weaken its reforms, officials stayed out of the limelight and saved their more aggressive rhetoric for smaller audiences. These were tactics that were all shaped, as Inboden shows, by officials’ growing familiarity with the regime through the years.

*China and the International Human Rights Regime, 1982–2017* will be a highly useful resource for policy-makers or academics seeking in-depth analysis of Chinese leaders’ and officials’ approach to international institutions, including their negotiating and debating strategies. The most lasting impression of the book is one that Inboden actually plays down: which is just how important maintaining a positive international image has been for Chinese leaders. Throughout the book we see how China’s treatment of the human rights regime is shaped by competing impulses—impulses to maintain China’s international image as a benign power; and impulses to promote its image as a cooperative supporter of the international order. How Chinese leaders balance these impulses will be a crucial factor in shaping the country’s future interactions with the human rights regime.