

*The EU's Human Rights Dialogue with China: Quiet Diplomacy and its Limits*

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This meticulously researched book examines the European Union's human rights dialogue with China between 1995 and 2010. Those who seek a short answer to the question of whether the EU's efforts have paid off could read the author's last few words in her conclusion chapter, which characterize the dialogue as "impotent." For those who have studied China's human rights diplomacy, the book confirms what they already know or suspect about the nature and effect of the discreet European diplomatic engagement with Beijing in the human rights arena.

However, this book is highly valuable for students of Europe–China relations and human rights diplomacy. For analysts of Chinese human rights diplomacy, even though the author's conclusion broadly confirms what they already know, the book provides fascinating detail. Readers can learn much about the European side of the exchange on incidents that they may have studied, and find important corrections to their understanding of events.

Unlike high-profile US–China human rights diplomacy, the European Union and China have adopted a confidential, quiet method of dialogues. As the author explains, EU human rights dialogue was managed by the rotating president's national foreign ministry in coordination with a working group within the Council of the European Union until 2011, when the European External Action Service began operating. Thus, the EU management of the dialogue was less coherent than the Chinese, giving some negotiation advantage to Beijing. It also meant a poor institutional memory of the dialogue on the European side. The Chinese side presumably has a better archive, but it is not open. The book makes a major contribution to studies of EU–China diplomatic relations thanks to the author's dozens of interviews with European participants and to her access to some internal documents, particularly the 234 personal files from Ángel Viñas deposited at the EU's historical archives in Florence. As the director for multilateral political relations and human rights at the European Commission in 1997–2001, Viñas supervised the EU–China human rights dialogue. The author has utilized these primary sources as well as secondary sources to effectively trace the evolution of the EU–China official human rights exchange, which has been shrouded in secrecy. One learns far more from this book than any existing literature about the hidden tensions and occasional compromises for a decade and a half.

For those interested in Chinese foreign policy and China–EU relations, this book is also highly important. It is interesting to know, for example, that the Chinese officials took a more offence-oriented approach after the start of the global recession and the Euro crisis. The Chinese government gained greater confidence in its political system because of the crises, and Kinzelbach confirms observation of a more assertive overall Chinese foreign policy in this period.

If so, why does the Chinese government continue to engage in an exchange that could be interpreted as putting Beijing in a humiliating position? Why does the EU continue to make diplomatic efforts for something that has not been terribly effective? Kinzelbach has struggled over these larger questions. Her conclusion seems particularly pessimistic. At the same time, she starts her book with the correct observation that the situation for some Chinese dissidents could have been worse without European intervention.

How should we think about EU–China human rights exchange then? Kinzelbach hints at, but does not fully develop, a broader analytical framework that would treat this bilateral official exchange as a multilevel, multidimensional game. The EU has to do something about human rights in China due to its genuinely held political convictions and standing among democracies in the world as well as societal pressure. But it faces strong limitation on how much it can do, due to its still fragmented organizational features, China’s rising power status and the EU’s seemingly counterproductive confrontation with Beijing in the past. In particular, the EU has strategic and economic interest in maintaining a stable relationship with China. In an ideal world, the Chinese government would prefer to have zero external criticism or action related to its domestic politics. But the Chinese government has reluctantly accepted the political reality that democratic countries will be concerned about human rights and it is thus better to manage the human rights issue by creating a “safe” bureaucratic process behind doors. Besides, the China-EU model is clearly better for the Chinese government than its periodic contentious human rights exchange with the United States. The early years of the global financial crisis seemed to give the Chinese government some hope that it could end what it viewed as a necessary evil in the meaningless exchange. But Beijing’s more assertive stance has invited a strong backlash, which ironically makes people more aware of its human rights and more willing to explain tension with China by referring to its non-democratic political system. In short, one could think about the EU–China human rights dialogue as an equilibrium between the two sides, which also has a society–state dynamic.

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*The Compelling Ideal: Thought Reform and the Prison in China, 1904–1956*

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In his exceedingly well-researched new volume, *The Compelling Ideal: Thought Reform and the Prison in China, 1901–1956*, Jan Kiely makes an important contribution to the literature on prisons, social control and the rehabilitative ethos in 20th-century China. Kiely frames the book within a discussion of Chinese Communist thought-reform projects, but the core of the book focuses on the last years of the Qing dynasty and the first decades of the Republic to trace China’s engagement with “the compelling ideal” that animated the work of modernizing nationalists around the world in the 20th century – namely, the belief that with the right methods, states could transform diverse and even deviant populations into communities of ideal citizens. The book affirms the existence of powerful continuities across the 1911 and 1949 divides, highlighting that the concept of *ganhua* – reform motivated by “an emotionally inspired moral conversion” – informed theories and concrete practices in late Qing, Republican, wartime and finally Communist prisons. What sets Kiely’s work apart from much of the other scholarship on prison rehabilitation is the fact that his story is told through the richly evocative voices of the individual prisoners, wardens and prison instructors who fashioned and refashioned 20th-century Chinese penology.

The book’s first five chapters demonstrate Kiely’s mastery over a dizzying array of published and archival sources. He explores the way various state agents,