Be My Friendly Reviewers: How China Shapes its Reviews in UN Human Rights Regime

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Abstract

Authoritarian states are often a vulnerable target of naming and shaming for their rights abuses and atrocities. I show that China can shield itself from severe criticisms in the UN human rights system. Its economic clout as an important financier to middle powers can be a source of influence over its human rights reviews. How do material incentives from China affect the leniency of state-to-state peer reviews of its human rights conditions? I argue that trading for lenient reviews is possible, but its effectiveness depends on the extent to which reviewing states prioritize economic benefits over normative principles. Using text-based coding of over 90,000 UN Universal Periodic Review reports, I demonstrate that countries with strong economic ties through Chinese overseas development projects tend to offer more lenient reviews of China's human rights record. This effect, however, is conditional: it is particularly pronounced in the "middle" countries whose stance on human rights norms is neither too aligned with nor distant from China's. The "distant" group, furthest from China's human rights vision, remains resistant to offering lenient reviews as a return. Contrary to the conventional belief that human rights monitoring mechanisms are either deeply politicized or mere window dressing, I find that the peer-review monitoring system does

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have normative resilience: that commitment to the democratic value of human rights matters. I highlight the nuanced interplay between economic interests and norms in states' interactions: authoritarian great powers using economic incentives in exchange for favorable human rights reviews do not always succeed in doing so.

1 Introduction

In the liberal norm-based human rights regime, authoritarian states are often targeted for naming and shaming due to their rights abuses. Both state and non-state entities from the Global North use various tools to assert their monitoring power. However, in the multilateral UN human rights regime, China paradoxically appears far from vulnerable to such monitoring. It receives mild criticism, gentle suggestions and support of its welfare-based human rights principle. According to anecdotal evidence, during a pivotal Universal Periodic Review session — where, like all UN member countries, China undergoes peer reviews every five years — China has lobbied non-Western countries to "praise" its human rights conditions (Farge 2024).

China is an important financier of development projects in the Global South. Its material influence can add stock to its lobbying efforts in international organizations. How do material incentives from China affect the leniency of state-to-state peer reviews of human rights conditions in the United Nations? I argue that trading for lenient reviews is possible, but its effectiveness depends on how reviewing states value economic benefits over normative principles. The more the Global South relies on China's financing, the more inclined they are to refrain from criticizing its human rights practices.

However, support is not unconditional or unlimited. I find that states' willingness to provide lenient reviews is bounded by their predispositions toward human rights norms. Depending on countries' predisposition to human rights norms, they are characterized into three groups: cold, middle and warm. Only those in the middle group are swayed by China's financial incentives to subsequently provide more lenient reviews. The warm countries have already shown leniency toward China to begin with, while the cold countries remain quite critical despite receiving financing projects from China.

The current norm-based human rights regime is designed to discipline norm-defiant states.

However, when states have the opportunity to review each other's performances in human rights in a multilateral setting at the UN, rather than relying on NGOs and media, the regime is deeply politicized: showing leniency to allies and strictness to adversaries (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Kim 2023). This pattern is not entirely surprising, as scholars have found that large countries, such as the United States, often utilize financial incentives to influence the votes of smaller countries in the UN Security Council or General Assembly (Vreeland and Dreher 2014; Dreher, Nunnenkamp, and Thiele 2008).

Recently, there has been growing concern over how countries, notably powerful authoritarian regimes like China and Russia as well as other democratic backsliding countries have sought to undermine well-established Western liberal norms within international organizations (Binder and Payton 2022; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023; Pauselli, Urdínez, and Merke 2023). Considering China's dual agenda of promoting alternative norms while leveraging its significant economic influence, the challenges to existing liberal norms within international organizations are significant. Specifically focusing on the United Nations, recent studies indicate that countries receiving substantial aid and loans from Beijing or experiencing a surge in exports to China tend to align their voting behavior more closely with China's positions (Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. Strange, et al. 2022; Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021). It would come as no surprise to observe China exerting material influence to shape smaller states' behaviors in the UN, a phenomenon often discussed in the well-established literature on vote-buying.

When norms conflict with interests, the material camp believes that material interests typically take precedence. However, this may ignore the enduring importance of values. Small and middle powers have played an important role in establishing and expanding human rights throughout its history and into the present. Several examples illustrate this. Latin American countries united to advance the language of human rights in the UN Charter, and

advocated for drafting the founding document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Sikkink 2017; Cerna 2014). New democracies in post-war Europe were much more eager to commit to The European Court of Human Rights than established democracies (Grewal and Voeten 2015; Moravcsik 2000). The Global South united to overturn the proposal by powerful countries to set up an ad-hoc international court and instead helped consolidate a permanent International Criminal Court (Simmons and Danner 2010). They continued to uphold the commitment even when they faced significant challenges from great power (Kelley 2007). More recently, small states like Ecuador (and it is not alone) have been active in promoting new and progressive business human rights to constrain the actions of large corporations in the UN working group (Ruggie 2013).

My work engages with an important question in the literature of political economy and human rights: can financial power influence the human rights regime? A simplified answer is yes, but only conditionally. Previous work highlights that the vote alignment of smaller states can be influenced by their economic relationships with more powerful counterparts (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009; Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. M. Strange, et al. 2022). Previous work shows how smaller countries resisted economic coercion by the great power, the United States, in response to the creation of the International Criminal Court (Kelley 2007). In parallel, I show that when smaller states are attached to human rights norms, they are less susceptible to economic incentives provided by a rising power, China. The finding is surprising. Writing a lenient review to appease a country's major economic partner, donor, or financier seems relatively costless, while a harsh review on a public platform may have significant consequences. This study shows that despite the potential economic repercussions, countries that consistently uphold liberal principles still prioritize human rights norms over immediate material interests.

My research challenges some important findings on the UN human rights regime. Recent studies suggest that states' reviews in the UPR are products of geopolitics maneu-

vering, cheap talk or window-dressing (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Voeten 2018; Kim 2023). My research illustrates that this state-to-state review mechanism reflects more complex calculations as countries balance normative principles, geopolitical dynamics and economic incentives. The UPR serves as more than mere political theater; it is a platform where human rights norms are actively contested.

In this study, I leverage state reviews of China conducted within the UPR, a mechanism administered by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) designed to assess the human rights records of all UN member states. The UPR provides a valuable opportunity for investigating how states articulate their positions regarding the state under review and how, over time, they craft a desired image within the international human rights regime. Across the three completed cycles of the UPR, countries have collectively made 90,938 recommendations to states under review. During each cycle, every country has a chance to undergo review and to review other countries. Hence, it is possible to systematically analyze states' behaviors as reviewers and their performance when being reviewed.

I apply text-mining techniques to measure the content of these reviews and the dyadic relationships between reviewers and states under review. Specifically, I develop two measures from the UPR texts: a *review harshness* score to quantify the dyadic relation between a reviewer and a state-under-review — assessing how harsh state A's review to state B; and a cosine similarity to gauge the similarity and divergence between states' reviewing record with a baseline state reviewing record. These two measures allow me to analyze the dyadic relationship between any country pairs. In this paper, I anchor one end of the dyad to China and examine how other countries' reviews vis-a-vis China evolve over time.

I also investigate the degree to which the leniency of reviews of China changes in response to external economic incentives from China. These incentives include the sum of overseas development project inflows, new overseas development projects, and debt relief measures

between cycles. This set of information is extracted from the latest version of AidData that documents Chinese overseas development projects (Custer et al. 2023).

Leveraging the time lags between reviews, I model the effect of economic incentives on states' review leniency. My findings indicate that countries receiving larger amounts of total aid inflows from China's overseas development projects tend to provide more lenient reviews of China's human rights record. I also find that China gets additional economic leverage by initiating new projects or proposing debt relief negotiations with the countries already depend on China as their foreign financier. Those receiving larger economic incentives are more inclined to write lenient reviews to China.

However, not all countries are susceptible to such influence. Countries very distant from China's vision of human rights are not swayed by such economic incentives. Material interests often prevail over norms, but this is not always the case. Countries whose commitment to liberal principles of human rights is strong tend to prioritize norms over material interests.

2 Human Rights as Rising China's Achilles' Heel

China has become a prominent financier of development projects in the Global South. Since 2013 when China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has invested heavily in various projects in BRI member countries. 147 countries are officially part of the BRI as of 2022 (Nedopil 2022). Over 22 commitment years, about 21,000 projects covering natural resources, infrastructure, cybersecurity and other sectors have been undertaken across 165 low- and middle-income countries (B. C. Parks et al. 2023, p. 1). From 2008 to 2021, Chinese overseas development finance committed approximately 83 percent of the total amount lent by the World Bank and its partnering banks in the same years (Global Development Policy Center 2023). China is clearly expanding its influence in the Global South. Outpacing G-7 countries, China has become the world's single largest source of development finance in

developing countries, providing grants and loans of around $80 billion a year before 2021 (B. C. Parks et al. 2023, p. 1). Despite a recent more statist economic policy turn at home after the Covid period, it has gained leverage by locking in other countries' dependence upon China for their future economic growth.

How does China's capital power as a major financier translate to influence over other issue areas of international cooperation? Most immediately, China shapes the ecosystem of foreign aid. China's aid and loans are so-called "easy money" with little or no political conditionality. Unlike the Western donors who typically attach conditions related to human rights, democracy and good governance to their aid packages, China provides aid and lends to almost all the countries, including those characterized as corrupt or at high risk of bankruptcy. When many developing countries can turn to China as an alternative source of financing, traditional Western donors are witnessing diminishing influence over the conditions they once stipulated in their economic deals.

China's economic power also permits it to establish new rules, clubs and followers. China has invested in establishing alternative multilateral financial institutions. It established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as an alternative to the World Bank, attracting over 100 members (Qian, Vreeland, and Zhao 2023). China also hosted several summits for regional organizations such as the BRICS to foster closer South-South cooperation to counteract the West. Finally, across all U.N. General Assembly votes cast between 2000 and 2021, Global South's votes align China's votes 75% of the time as opposed to only 25% with the U.S. (Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. M. Strange, et al. 2022).

What about the potential for increasing its leverage in asserting human rights leadership? China has demonstrated its ambitions in shaping international order and asserting greater global leadership. However, shaping the liberal-based human rights regime is a challenging task. Human rights have been a sensitive issue for a rising authoritarian regime like China. It poses the toughest challenge for its foreign and domestic policy, as the very term "human

rights" often serves as a code word for subverting non-democratic regimes (Nathan 1997). Consequently, there exists an inherent incompatibility between its political system as an authoritarian regime and the underlying liberal value of universal human rights, which emphasizes civil and political rights. Authoritarian leaders find it unappealing to fully integrate to embrace the liberal principle of the human rights regime.

China, a major authoritarian country, has reason to be particularly resistant to the current liberal-based human rights norms. However, despite China's resistance to the underlying principle of the human rights regime, it actively seeks recognition and global leadership in this area due to the high political salience of human rights. China cannot simply walk away from the well-established international regime because it plays a critical role in serving as a symbolic anchor for China to show it can adhere to global rules and norms expected of great power. Indeed, it has been very cooperative and engaged in the UN-based human rights regime (Inboden 2021). Human rights can be likened to an Achilles' heel for China in both its global and domestic governance as it rises. Hence, China's rhetorical approach to human rights has involved a delicate balance between asserting state sovereignty and acknowledging the universality of human rights, aimed at minimizing the political costs of taking unpopular stands (Weiss 2019).

While China's authoritarian regime might suggest difficulties in its participation in the existing human rights regime, this assumption overlooks China's capability to influence how that regime functions. The human rights regime is composed of many non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch that constantly monitor states' human rights conditions. China is much less vulnerable within the UN in which China enjoys significant decision-making power (Fang, Li, and Sun 2018; Fung and Lam 2021). Similar to many councils and working group in the UN, the UN Human Rights Council is an inclusive multilateral forum where small member states can play key roles (Vreeland and Dreher 2014; Donnelly 2013). This embedded norm of inclusiveness motivates China

to emphasize the importance of working within the UN and seeking a leadership role in it (Inboden 2021).

3 Playing the Existing Game, Well

Since Xi assumed power, China has actively resisted compliance with the civil and political rights underpinning the current liberal-based norms. Topics such as universal values, citizens' rights, and freedom of the press are prohibited for research and teaching at all levels of education as these discussions are perceived as a threat to China's political system (Economy 2014). Official narratives often downplay civil and political rights, seen as values underpinning democracies, to lower importance. They instead place greater emphasis on economic rights that supplied by technocrat autocracies (Ji 2022). China's selective prioritization of these norms appears to resonate with its domestic audience and serve as a foundation for exerting influence beyond its borders.

As China seeks to undermine shared understandings of liberal norms and promote its version of human rights ideals, it is believed to appeal to like-minded autocracies and efficient technocrats. Despite China's aspirations for global leadership and investments in normative power to challenge the current system, however, it remains far from proposing a full-fledged alternative order to challenge the substance of the existing liberal one. The current liberal-based human rights regime is based on the appeal of widely endorsed universal norms (Simmons 2009). While states may vary in their degrees of compliance with the regime, none openly challenge the principle that protecting individuals' civil and political rights or freedom of speech "is the right thing to do" (Johnston 2008; Risse 2000). The core idea of human rights as rooted in liberalism remains largely unquestioned in principle. Suppose China aims to eventually replace the current American-led human rights regime and establish a new norm-based "club" that cheers for its own human rights ideals. It is par-

ticularly difficult for China to attract other club members to sign up for a new norm-based international human rights club led by an autocracy.

The key to evaluating the success of norm challengers rests on much support they can garners among other states (Urpelainen and Van de Graaf 2015). Recognizing the conflicting domestic interests of adhering to liberal norms and the inherent difficulties of replacing the existing normative order, China's best option is to play the existing game, well. It can use its economic leverage to influence other states in the current UN-based peer-review monitoring mechanism to improve its standing. As China plays a long game in prioritizing a different set of human rights norms from within, the liberal-based human rights regime, once considered the cornerstone of the international liberal order, now faces scrutiny. We see evidence that the Chinese official narratives relegate civil and political rights to much lower importance and place economic rights to the highest rank in interacting with other members in the UN, and such narrative resonates widely with the Global South (Dai and Lu 2024).

To what extent do these efforts begin to influence norms? Other states might strategically appease China by endorsing its vision of human rights in order to signal their affinity to China. They do not necessarily have to believe in the welfare-based conception of human rights. Slow and subtle norm changes, however, usually begin with the process where states play the game strategically before they internalize new norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). In this case, what is particularly worrisome to the existing liberal order is the prospect that states bending to the vision an illiberal economic power will ultimately have wider effects on core norms over time.

4 Expectations

Drawing inspiration from the classic work discussing money and influence in the UN Security Council (Vreeland and Dreher 2014), I advance the following expectations about

states' reviewing behavior when economic interests clash with norms. The governments of rich and powerful countries with economic leverage, such as China, care about how their human rights review appears at the Human Rights Council. In contrast, countries from the Global South care more about obtaining new infrastructure projects or unconditional loans from donors to appease their constituencies. They may also seek new sources of funding for unfinished projects or request extensions for repayments of existing obligations. These economic concerns may well take precedence over writing critical recommendations to fulfill its human rights commitments.

When writing human rights reviews, country delegates do not always need to lie or misrepresent their preferences. As reviewers, countries only need to select areas where recommendations are light and encouraging to the state under review, or remain silent on sensitive issues that the state under review finds shameful to address in a public forum. Unlike the casting of votes, there is little risk of being accused of being a liar or complicit in atrocities.

Countries can bypass the current liberal norms when reviewing China and instead opt for an alternative standard to inflate its human rights performance. For like-minded autocratic countries with similar visions of human rights, it appears to be a straightforward choice as they may genuinely believe that China has made improvements in alleviating poverty and improving the welfare of its citizens. China may also be a model that their country can or has already followed. In this case, there is no obvious trade-off because these countries' normative principles are already aligned with China's visions. These countries have already been predisposed to China's notion of development-based human rights and are very much inclined to the alignment. Economic incentives would do little to change their behaviors.

For countries somewhat more critical of China's human rights conditions, using a standard that is more lenient toward China does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of liberal norms. They may prioritize continuing to receive China's aid packages over publicly shaming China on the international stage while upholding established liberal norms. Consequently,

they choose to focus on other legitimate aspects of human rights norms but portray China more positively or refrain from commenting altogether.

Exceptions arise when governments have strong and sincere preferences regarding specific human rights violations, prompting them to speak up. In many instances, countries that share similar perspectives on human rights norms with the country under review, or have not traditionally been strong advocates for liberal human rights norms or specific human rights on the global platform, often find it more convenient to draft lenient reviews. Hence, I have two hypotheses. First, economic incentives can co-opt countries to engage in mutual exchanges in a low-cost peer review setting — mitigating reputation risks associated with accusations of dishonesty, norm-breaking, or complicity in disrupting a norm-based institution.

H_1 (Mutual Exchange): Countries receiving high economic assistance from China tend to be less critical of China's human rights conditions.

The effects, however, are heterogeneous and conditional. Economic incentives do not always work as intended. I divide countries into three groups based on their predisposition to the core liberal human rights norms. The first is the *close* group, "genuine followers." Their human rights visions are proximate to China's welfare-based human rights norms or find China's model of development inspiring and appealing. Genuine followers will write lenient reviews to China sincerely where the nudge of economic incentives is not necessary. The second is the *distant* group, "noble" states. They more strongly value and commit to liberal human rights norms, so material incentives may never be high enough to deviate from normative principles. The third group is the *middle* group —- neither strongly committed to liberal norms or opposed to them —- are more likely to be swayed by the economic incentives inducement from a major donor like China.

H_2 (Swaying the Middle): Countries not having a strong predisposition to liberal

human rights norms are more receptive to China's economic incentives. Their review leniency is more susceptible to change.

5 The UPR as the laboratory

I will test my hypotheses using the Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory. The UN human rights regime allows states to socialize through communication, reflection and action on predominantly normative practices with respect to human rights. The UN Human Rights Council has set up a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) system that holds member states accountable to their peers' recurrent reviews of the treatment of their domestic population. The UPR is a comprehensive and elaborate multilateral human rights mechanism where states are the primary actors in reviewing each others' human rights practices. The monitoring power lies in a formal forum-like peer review institution to "give equal treatment to all the countries and allow them to exchange best practices" (UN News - Human Rights 2018). States' peer reviews, based on regular assessments of policy performance and compliance with international organizations, have the potential to push states to make real changes (Carraro, Conzelmann, and Jongen 2019). In its ideal version, the UPR, like other international institutions, can provide a "neutral, depoliticized or specialized forum" for comments, critiques and recommendations for improving human rights (Abbott and Snidal 1998, p. 10).

In practice, the UPR is far from neutral (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Búzás 2021). States tend to review selectively, harshly condemning their adversaries while being lenient towards their friends and allies (Terman and Byun 2022; Terman and Búzás 2021; Meyerrose and Nooruddin 2023). They may focus on topics where the state under review has performed particularly well or poorly. In the former case, they adopt a cheerleading role to encourage the state under review to continue its practices and maintain progress. In the latter case, the state under review is called out to implement remedies. Hence, the actual

contents of different recommendations range from praise to shaming in a wide rhetorical continuum. For that reason, the UPR is a laboratory we can use to test the power dynamics among states whether as a reviewing state or a state under review. As a recurrent monitoring mechanism, multiple cycles of reviews provide reliable data to detect changes in states' review records and human rights stand over time.

There have been three complete cycles[1] of Universal Periodic Review so far as of 2023. Each 4.5 to 5 years is called a UPR cycle. During each cycle, it takes about 13 sessions —three sessions each year to review all countries exactly once. At each session, about 14 countries are reviewed. Every five years or so, on a rotational basis, all 193 UN Member States undergo an interactive review of the human rights situation, with 100% participation rate so far.

In principle, when a state is under review, delegations of all other countries can review and issue recommendations. A body of information is made available to reviewing states before they issue their recommendation. It includes factual documents from a self-assessment report compiled by the state under review, observations and comments compiled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the human rights conditions in the state under review, as well as opinions from other stakeholders including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and national human rights institutions. Reviewing states are encouraged to meet with NGOs and local stakeholders in the state under review to gather information on the state under review. During a typical 3.5-hour review session for each state under review, reviewing states can ask oral or written questions and make recommendations. During the UPR, each member acting as a reviewer has approximately 45 seconds to provide as many (or as few) recommendations to the state under review, although they also provide written commentary.

Since reviewing states have limited space to ask questions and issue recommendations,

[1]Cycle 1 (2008–2012), Cycle 2 (2012–2016), and Cycle 3 (2017–2021)

states tend to use their monitoring power selectively to mention issues they are most concerned about. They reduce the complex reality of five years in a country to a condensed statement with comments and recommendations of its human rights conditions. Through this selection, I infer that the statement reflects the most critical and meaningful problems in the country under review from the perspective of the reviewing state. Following the review sessions, a report is compiled to summarize the discussions, capturing the key comments and recommendations made by the reviewing states. This report serves as a resource for the state under review, allowing them to choose which recommendations to implement before the next review cycle. The written report is then made available on the UN Human Rights Council's website.

The timeline of sessions for the ongoing cycle is publicly available, enabling states to anticipate when they will be under review and prepare accordingly. Recommendations from the first session in April 2008 through the 37th session in November 2020 are accessible on UPR Info (Info 2023), covering the full data of three complete cycles. When China was under review, the review sessions occurred in 2009, 2013 and 2018, respectively (Council 2023).

In sum, the Universal Periodic Review captures recurring interactions wherein states have one opportunity per cycle to be reviewed (as a state under review), but multiple chances to give recommendations to other countries (as a reviewing state). It serves as a unique mechanism that addresses a comprehensive array of human rights issues, as opposed to treaty monitoring mechanism that focuses on specific rights. It is also an inclusive multilateral mechanism where all UN member states participate and give peer reviews to each other, as opposed to experts making recommendations or NGOs publicly shaming rights-abusive states. Therefore, the UPR mechanism entails special leverage to study how states communicate and advocate their vision of human rights norms, while also considering the geopolitics and economic ties between countries.

6 Converting Text to Number: Coding Textual Information in UPR

The analysis is based on over 90,000 states' recommendations from three complete cycles in the forum-like peer review system, UPR. I use a number of text-mining tools to explore the meaning of and around countries' reviews. While this data set provides ample opportunities to study reviews at the dyadic level, I primarily analyze reviews China received: how harshly is China reviewed by any given state? I also measure countries' predisposition to human rights norms based on their reviewing records of all the other countries (not limited to China). By comparing the reviewing records of various countries with those of China, I assess the degree of similarity or divergence in their invocation of human rights norms during the review process.

6.1 Measuring Recommendation's Leniency

I analyze the UPR data compiled by *UPR Info*, a non-profit organization that supports access to information for all key UPR stakeholders of the UPR (Info 2023). The data includes all recommendations made during the three cycles of the UPR. For each recommendation, UPR Info records information about the time of the review session, reviewer, state under review, the verb choices used in each recommendation conveying the necessary level of changes, and specific issue(s) addressed from a set of 56 non-mutually exclusive issue tags hand-coded by *UPR Info* researchers. Each recommendation may address multiple issue tags. *UPR Info* also publish their codebook[2] to justify why different issue tags are attached to the recommendation. Following Terman and Byun (2022), I also cluster the 56 issue tags

[2]Codebook can be found here: https://www.upr-info.org/sites/default/files/general-document/2022-05/Database_Issues_explanation.pdf

into 8 issue topics.[3] Each recommendation can cover more than one issue topic. In sum, the textual information in each recommendation is succinctly encapsulated through different issue topics.

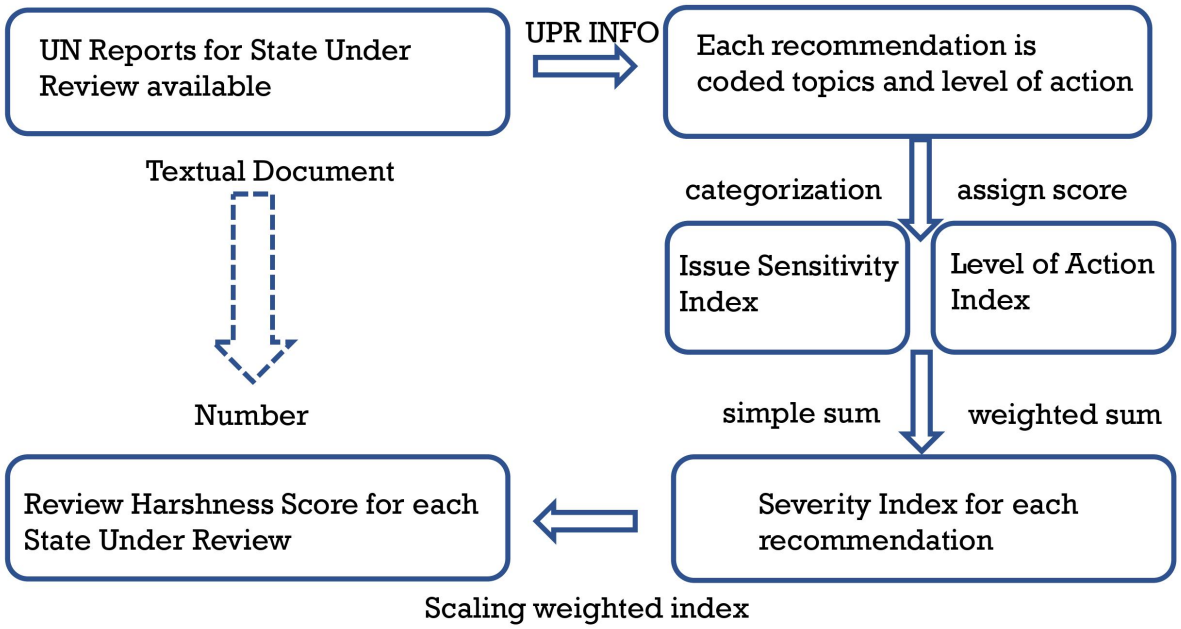
Figure 1 summarizes the complete process of using text-based coding to identify instances of review harshness in UN Reviews. The objective is to systematically turn the texts in the public documents "UN Reports for State Under Review" into comparable numerical scales for each of the states under review. This hypothetical score can reflect how well the state under review has protected its citizens' rights in the past five years, from the perspectives of its peer members in the UN.

At the recommendation level, the *Recommendation Severity Index* is a composite measure with two components: issue sensitivity and level of action. I create the issue sensitivity index ranging from 1 to 3, with 3 indicating the most sensitive issue topics. Civil and political rights, physical integrity rights, and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities have a high issue sensitivity score of 3. These negative rights including freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from torture or cruel treatment, and the right to a fair trial, are closely related to liberal principles (Qi and Nathan 2014). Migration and labor, protection of vulnerable populations, seeking to protect vulnerable individuals, have medium sensitivity, scoring 2 because they are related to specific groups of populations rather than concerning the entitled rights of the general population. These two types of rights are also emerging issues in the human rights regime. Since the topics of socioeconomic rights, governance and public services and general/other do not have impacted persons but are more concerned with the state's obligations to fulfill people's needs and desires, these topics of positive rights have

[3](1) Civil and Political rights, (2) Governance and Public Services, (3) Migration and Workers, (4) Physical Integrity Rights, (5) Racial, Ethnic and Religious Minorities, (6) Social and Economic Rights, (7) Protection of Vulnerable Populations, and (8) General/Other, Appendix I shows which issue tags fall into different issue topics.

low sensitivity, scoring 1. Note that each review recommendation can cover one or multiple issue topics.

Figure 1: From text to number: explaining the process of creating a measure of review harshness score



For example, the Czech Republic (also known as Czechia) recommended China to "review laws and practices in particular with regard to ensuring protection of the freedom of religion, movement, protection of the culture and language of national minorities, including Tibetans and Uyghurs" (Info 2023). Based on the UPR Info classification, this recommendation was coded with the issue tags as follows: "Freedom of movement," "Freedom of religion and belief," and "Minority rights." Then each falls into three higher-level clusters of issue topics I identified: "civil and political rights," "Migration and workers," and "Racial, ethnic and religious minorities." Each topic was given a pre-defined score of issue sensitivity as explained; in this case, the issue topics in this particular recommendation have "high," "medium" and "high" sensitivity. The final issue sensitivity score is determined by the maximal rule, meaning that a review recommendation will receive a score of 3 if one of its

issue topics has the highest issue sensitivity score. It means as long as a recommendation mentions a right closely related to liberal principles and protected by a democratic regime, it will receive the highest issue sensitivity score. In this specific example, this review's issue sensitivity score is 3. I reiterate the same process to calculate the issue sensitivity score for each recommendation.

On the level of action, each recommendation begins with a verb to indicate the urgency and level of action needed for the state under review to change its course. Recommendations range from requesting the state under review to conducting minimal action (i.e. continuing the course), to conducting specific action for policy changes. Based on the level of action, each recommendation receives an action category score: a recommendation that receives 3 entails a high level of action, recommending the state under review to conducting policy change or a specific action to improve the country's human rights conditions. Recommendation receiving 2 entails a medium level of action, usually related to a general element of improvement. Lastly, in cases where a recommendation pertains to sharing information, providing technical assistance or emphasizing continuity of current practice, it receives 1, indicating a low level of action.

The severity of each recommendation is determined by a composite index, calculated as a simple weighted sum of the issue sensitivity score (70%) and the level of action score (30%). A lower severity index indicates a more lenient the recommendation. I assign a higher weight to the issue sensitivity score because it largely influences whether the recommendation is a sincere criticism or a diplomatic gesture. For instance, when China receives reviews from other states regarding racial, ethnic and religious minorities — a topic with high sensitivity score — the reviews are very likely to be critical, suggesting a need for significant action. It is rare to observe countries complement China on this issue topic; if they intend to offer praise — suggesting a low level of action, they typically raise other issues, such as providing

social welfare to the population — a topic with a low sensitivity score. Hence, issue topic plays a crucial role in determining the severity of each recommendation.

To illustrate what lenient reviews look like, here is an examples of lenient review recommendations given by Thailand (these are all the recommendations they issued to China in Cycle 2 and 3).

Thailand recommended China to:

- "Look into the possibility of establishing the national human rights institution in China." (Cycle 2)
- "Keep up its efforts in raising awareness among law enforcement officers and security personnel throughout the country." (Cycle 2)
- "Continue efforts to develop measures to eliminate discrimination against persons with disabilities, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." (Cycle 3)
- "Further enhance international cooperation in the field of human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals, including through technical cooperation and capacity-building and South-South cooperation." (Cycle 3)

Thailand[4] tends to be very supportive of China in its UPR reviews. In Cycle 2, the focus was primarily on issues related to Governance and Public Services. In Cycle 3, Thailand expanded its scope to include the topic of Protection of Vulnerable Populations, making it a slightly more critical reviewer compared to the previous cycle. It is worth noting that the level of action is continuously minimal, encouraging China to "continue efforts" to protect persons with disabilities. Furthermore, Thailand also praised for its facilitation of South-South cooperation, again, a topic with low sensitivity to human rights. Throughout both

[4]Note that after the 2014 coup d'etat ousting the democratically elected government, Thailand underwent a significant time of military government and experienced an authoritarian turn. 2014 was in between China's review sessions of Cycle 2 and 3.

cycles, Thailand mainly used suggestive and positive verbs such as "look into," "keep up the efforts," "continue efforts," and "further enhance." They read closer to compliments. Hence, these recommendations are light, easy to embrace, and positive.

6.2 Aggregation: Review Harshness Score at the Country Level

Since each state under review can receive hundreds of review recommendations in one session, measuring review harshness at the country level requires aggregating the severity index for each recommendation. However, a key challenge in this aggregation process is to balance the quality and quantity of reviews. The number of reviews each state receives and the severity index of each review recommendation can vary greatly, potentially leading to either an overemphasis on quantity or an underemphasis on quality in the aggregation process. In other words, there is an asymmetry of the variations between the quantity and the quality of the reviews. A country can receive anywhere from over 200 reviews and as few as 20 reviews, while the quality of its review, as defined by the review severity index, only ranges from 2 to 6 or 0 to 1. To address this issue, I use the scaling weighted index to calculate the review harshness score for each state under review.

The crucial step in calculating the review harshness score, which combines indices with different matrices, is to rescale the number of reviews each state receives so they fall within a comparable range to the severity index. This rescaling step ensures that the final score is based on a fair comparison so we do not put a mice and an elephant on the same scale. After rescaling, the numbers of reviews range from 1 to 3. For example, Egypt received 321 review recommendations in Cycle 2. To calculate the scaled weighted index for Egypt in Cycle 2, I rescale the number of reviews from 321 to 1.85. I calculate the average weighted severity index of the review recommendations, resulting in 2.2. The final score for Egypt is the sum of the scaled numbers of total reviews and the weighted severity index, resulting in a final score of 4.05.

When using the country-level review harshness score, I can directly answer the following question: How harsh is country A's review of China compared to country B's? Although this study primarily focuses on the reviews China receives, this series of measures opens many opportunities to compare countries' behaviors, both in terms of how a reviewing country reviews others and in terms of how it is reviewed by others.

6.3 Measuring States' Predisposition of Human Rights Norms

I now turn to address the issue of modeling the reviews that countries give of China's human rights performance. After extracting all the topics covered in each recommendation, I create a state-topic vector by grouping the topics by all the reviewing states. Each state-topic vector represents the number of topics covered in the aggregated recommendations that reviewing states make in different cycles. In this manner, each reviewing state's review record is translated into a state-topic vector. Specifically, we extract topics from China's review record to construct a vector as the baseline.

To measure similarity in countries' review records, I conduct text similarity analysis based on countries' reviewing record vectors. In particular, I calculate a cosine similarity between each pair of reviewing states and China as follows. First, I construct a matrix where the distribution of each country's state-topic vector is compared to that of China's state-topic vector. Then I calculate the cosine similarity[5] between the two vectors of a country pair: China—reviewing state.

[5]A cosine value of 0 means that the two vectors are orthogonal and have no match. The closer the cosine value to 1, the smaller the angle and the greater the match between vectors.

Table 1: How China and the U.S. reviewed other countries over the three cycles

Terms	**China as reviewer**	**U.S. as reviewer**
Public services	21	151
General and others	35	40
Migrants and Labors	49	72
Physical integrity rights	99	468
Protection of vulnerable population	180	471
Race, ethnicity and religious minority	75	152
Social and economic rights	377	61
Civil and political rights	3	345

Table 1 is an example of a matrix of topic distributions of a country pair: China as reviewer—U.S. as reviewer. I highlight two specific rights in blue and red for comparison purposes. China as a reviewer has issued recommendations that mention social and economic rights 377 times, whereas the U.S. has done so only about 61 times. Conversely, China only issued recommendations related to civil and political rights 3 times. The U.S., in contrast, devoted significant space to these core issues. The cosine similarity between the U.S.'s and China's reviewing records is 0.51, suggesting a low similarity level and little overlap in terms of the counts of topic distributions. Cosine similarity formalizes the intuition of comparison by modeling each state's human rights records as a point in a multidimensional topic space. The closer two scripts are in this space, the closer the cosine of the angle between two vectors, the more similar their normative positions are.

By repeating this process, I obtain a review similarity score for each country pair: China—reviewing state. Reviewing records' cosine similarity here serves as a measure of the similarity between the reviewing states' aggregated human rights reviewing records and China's. A high similarity score in the China-country pair is deemed highly aligned between the interpretations of human rights norm.

7 Model Specification

The dependent variable is the *review harshness score* illustrated in sections 6.1 and 6.2. The independent variables in this study are aid flows and economic incentives between cycles of the UPR. I use the newest version of data collected by AidData's Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0 (Custer et al. 2023) for Chinese aid inflow between the five-year gap of cycles[6]. The dataset has been broadly used by scholars to examine the causes and consequences of Chinese aid (Dreher, Fuchs, Hodler, et al. 2021; Dreher, Fuchs, B. Parks, A. Strange, et al. 2022; Isaksson and Kotsadam 2020; Blair and Roessler 2021; Brazys and Vadlamannati 2021). I use the *total Chinese development flows per capita* (population in constant in 2010), measured in constant US dollar prices in 2021, capturing both Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and Other Official Flows (OOF) for aid recipient countries annually over the 2000—2021 period.

A second set of independent variables is the increase of newly initiated overseas finance projects or the total amount of debt relief negotiated within the current development projects financed by Chinese government institutions in between cycles. The information is coded from the detailed project descriptions available from AidData's Global Chinese Official Finance Dataset 3.0 (Custer et al. 2023). I categorize the recipient countries into three groups based on the changes in the distribution of Chinese new overseas finance projects: a group receiving zero or negative net increase, and groups receiving "small" or "large" increases in development projects, distinguished on whether the net project increase is more than the median of the total new projects. Countries receiving large increases in development projects are candidates for the binary variable, *large economic incentives*.

The variable debt relief is a categorical variable for total debt relief by country. A

[6]Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 2: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2008 and 2012 (pre-Cycle 2). Chinese aid flow per capita for pre-Cycles 3: Aggregated Chinese development flow per capita between 2013 and 2017 (pre-Cycle 3)

debt relief program could involve wiping out the debt altogether if the country is close to bankruptcy. More specifically, a debt relief program may include renegotiating a lower interest rate, settling the debt with alternative assets, or rescheduling payment. It was relatively uncommon for China to grant debt relief before 2018 (the start of Cycle 3); hence, the total number of debt relief is relatively small. Having debt relief is automatically a large economic incentive in this study. In short, the binary variable, *large economic incentives*, is coded as 1 if a recipient country receives large increases in the number of new development projects from China or negotiations in debt relief programs from China between Cycles 3 and 2 (or 2 and 1).

The other key independent variable is a measure of the proximity of states' predispositions in human rights norms with China in UPR, illustrated in section 6.3. To measure countries' human rights stand distance, I use the classic *cosine similarity* method to calculate the distances between each pair of reviewing states and China on their reviewing records. A high similarity score in the China—country pair is deemed highly aligned between the two countries' stand in human rights norms. A country's cosine similarity of aggregated recommendations over three cycles can be classified as belonging to the "distant" group with China's reviews (0%—33% percentile of cosine similarity), "middle" group (34%—66% percentile of cosine similarity) and "close" group (66% percentile and higher). The full set of countries with cosine similarity is included in Appendix B.

The covariates include data extracted from the existing data sets. To measure the ideology proximity between countries, I use the average voting distance with China in the UN General Assembly (Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey 2009). Countries' regime type is extracted from V-dem, taking into account various dimensions of democracy and autocracy: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy (Coppedge et al. 2020). The Political Terror Scale (PTS) measures physical integrity rights violations perpetrated by state actors documented by the human rights reports from Amnesty International,

Human Rights Watch and the U.S. State Department (Score 2023). The construction of PTS in our models also follows the same choices as above: the average PTS scores for three prior-cycle-review sessions respectively. A country's economic condition is measured by GDP per capita is also taken into consideration.

In sum, the unit of analysis in this dataset is country-cycle. In other words, each reviewing country will appear twice in the stacked dataset by cycles. Since the review sessions for China happen every 5 years, the constructed variables have different time dimensions. For example, the dependent variables, *review harshness score*, is primarily calculated from the raw scores based on recommendations the states provide to China in Cycle 3 and Cycle 2. The independent variables are the averages of the economic incentives between the two cycles, and similar for other control variables where yearly count data are available. In other words, the time lags in this design are the key: the independent variables lag before the data-generating process of the dependent variables. The latent variable, *cosine similarity*, however, does not vary across cycles.

To test hypothesis 1, in equation 1, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t, $X_{i,t-1}$ is an indicator for total Chinese development flows per capita of review country i in the pre-cycle period, and $cov_{i,t-1}$ are voting distance in the UNGA, PTS score, GDP per capita, regime type.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i,t-1} + cov_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \tag{1}$$

To test hypothesis 2, in equation 2, same as above, $Y_{i,t}$ is the review harshness score of review country i in cycle t, $Z_{i,t-1}$ is a binary indicator for economic incentives (whether the reviewing country receives a large economic incentive or not in the pre-cycle period), T_i is a dummy variable for cosine similarity measuring countries with different dispositions of

human rights norms with China (countries are divided into three groups: distant, middle, and close), and $cov_{i,t-1}$ are the same set of covariates in the previous analysis.

$$Y_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_i + \beta_2 Z_{i,t-1} + \beta_3 (T_i \times Z_{i,t-1}) + cov_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{i,t-1} \tag{2}$$

I implement a series of ordinary least squared models to estimate the effect of economic incentives on review leniency to China. Economic incentives are modeled as either a long-term relationship between the two countries or a short-term treatment variable in between review cycles, where states are in different strata of the proximity of perceptions of human rights with China. In all models, I include fixed effects for different review cycles to take into account the long-span between different cycles of reviews and use standard errors that are robust toward arbitrary heteroskedasticity.

8 Results

8.1 Testing the "Mutual Exchange" Hypothesis

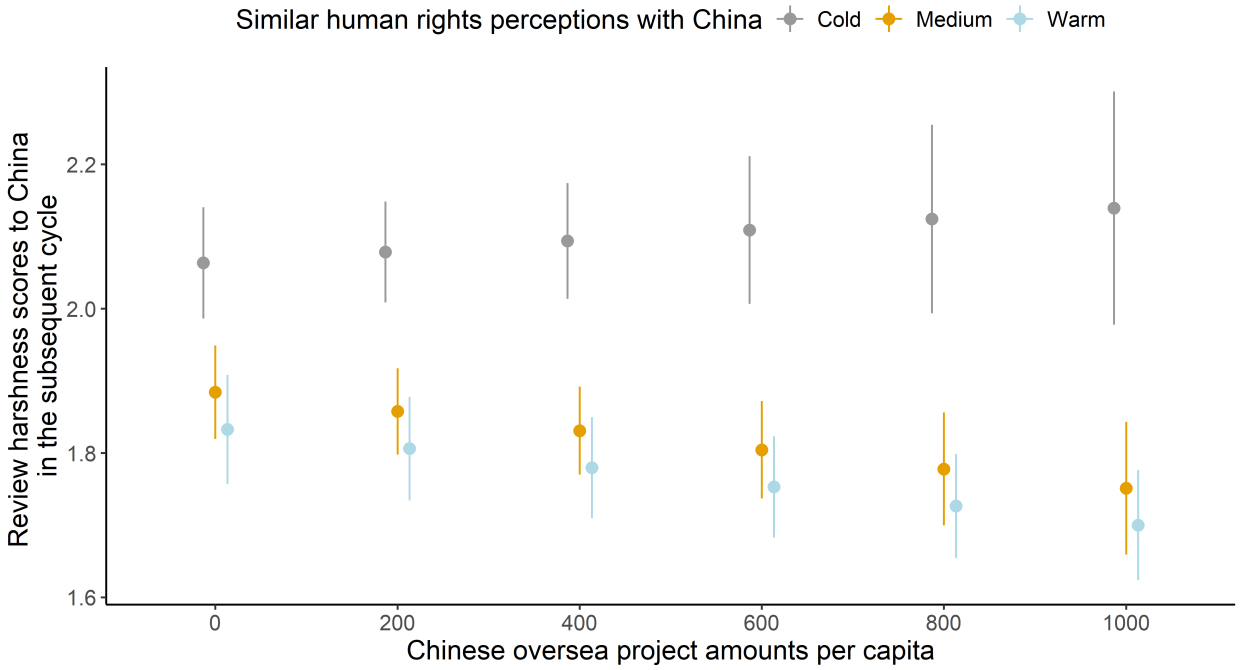
Model 1 in Table A2 supports the hypothesis that countries receiving larger Chinese aid inflows per capita, on average, give lower review harshness scores to China in the subsequent review cycle. This indicates the extent to which countries receive larger financial assistance from China improves China's human rights reviews in the UPR. The marginal effects are substantial. One standard deviation increase in Chinese aid inflow per capita, which is 2765 US Dollars, will lead to a decrease in review harshness score by 0.35, relative to its mean value, 1.9 out of a total of 3. To put this result in perspective, countries with a review harshness score of 1.55 (1.9−0.35) are in the lenient group of reviewers (below the 33 percentile of the review harshness score).

Model 2 considers covariates only. Comparing Model 2 and Model 1, all the coefficients

in covariates have the same directions but slightly different effect sizes. Adding the key independent variable of interest adds to the existing explanations of how countries behave when giving human rights reviews to their peers.

Model 3 reports the results of Chinese overseas finance project flow conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions in human rights norms (illustrated in Figure 2). Consistent with the findings in Model 1, particularly for middle and close country groups, when they receive higher Chinese overseas project amounts per capita before the review cycle (ranging from 0 to 1000 dollars in the X-axis of Figure 2, countries' review harshness scores decrease. There are no significant statistical differences between the close and middle groups: both tend to respond with less critical reviews of China after receiving a higher inflow of Chinese aid flow per capita. For the medium group, if countries receive more than $600 per capita in project aid, their harshness score drops to the baseline review level of the close group. The distant group, on the other hand, behaves differently from the middle and close groups. Confidence levels increase as the project amount increases because there is a risk of extrapolation for the distant group; very few countries in the distant group actually receive such a high level of Chinese overseas development projects (a distribution graph shown in Figure 4 later). The review harshness score tends to marginally rise as Chinese project inflow increases in countries categorized under the distant group. Hypothesis 1, stating that countries reviewing high economic assistance from China tend to be less critical of China's human rights conditions, is supported.

Figure 2: Chinese aid inflow (per capita) and recipient countries' review harshness scores towards China



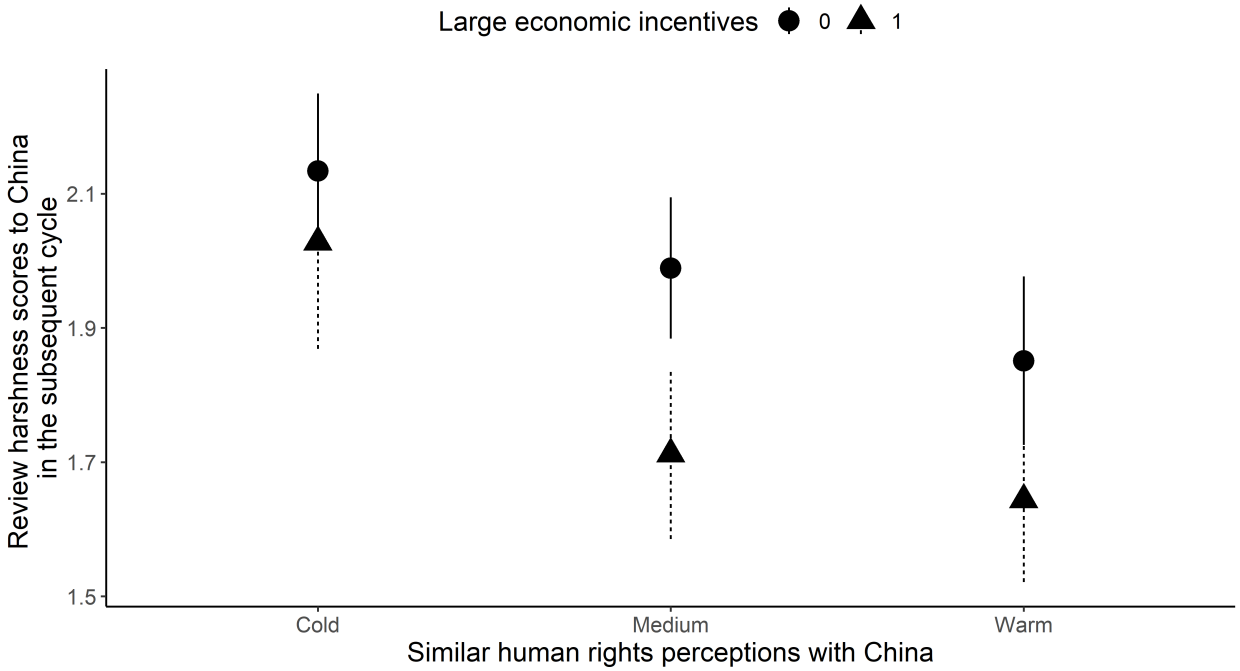
8.2 Testing the "Swaying the Middle" Hypothesis

The subsequent analysis tests hypothesis 2: Countries not having a strong predisposition to liberal human rights norms are more receptive to China's economic incentives. Conversely, countries with a strong predisposition to liberal human rights norms are harder to sway. Figure 3 shows the heterogeneous effects of the material incentives on norm shifts. The full result and model specification for this regression model are included in Model A3 in Appendix C. In particular, I report the results of large economic incentives on review harshness scores conditional on the proximity of countries' perceptions of human rights norms. I control for the covariates that can impact both whether countries get the economic incentive treatment and provide less critical reviews. Those are the pre-treatment review harshness score in the previous cycle, political terror score, UN voting distance with China, GDP per capita and regime type. I also implement fixed effects on cycles.

Figure 3 supports the hypothesis that reviewing countries respond to large economic incentives with more lenient reviews of China on its human rights conditions in the subsequent cycle. The effects hold across the board: countries with large economic incentives, measured by larger amounts of new overseas development projects and the occurrence of debt relief negotiation review China less harshly in the subsequent review cycle than those without large economic incentives from China in between the review cycles. The magnitudes of effects are conditional on the extent to which countries share similar perceptions of human rights norms with China. Countries in the "distant" group have the furthest proximity to China in perceiving human rights norms as more critical of China's human rights conditions, followed by the "middle" group and "close" group.

Although countries with large economic incentives tend to be more lenient toward China on average, countries in the medium group are the most sensitive to the economic incentives. The drops in the review's harshness score are not only statistically significant, but also with pronounced the effect size: their reviews of China are now as lenient as the average reviews in the close group. In other words, reviewers in the middle of the proximity of China's perception of human rights norms are most responsive to the large economic incentives they receive from China. They are less critical of China's human rights conditions than those not receiving similar levels of economic incentives.

Figure 3: Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China

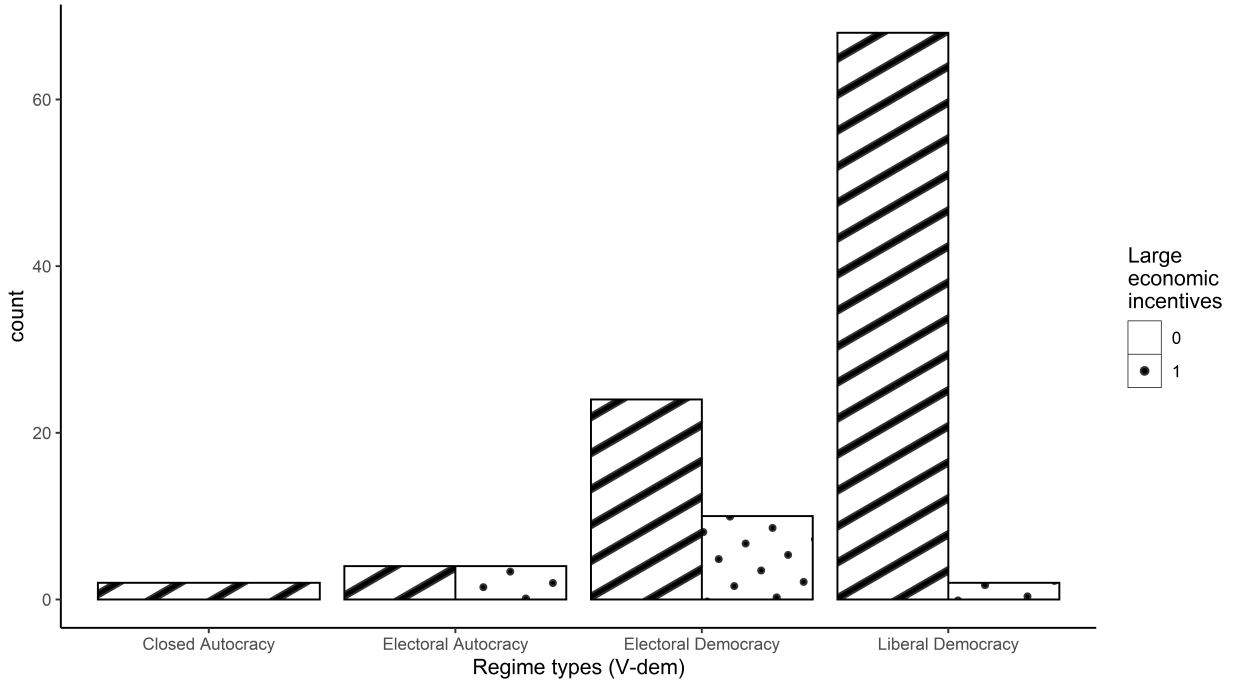


For countries in the "close" group, there may have already been significant Chinese aid inflow (aid inflow per capita as a control variable in this model, Model (1) in Table A3) so there is not much room for a higher increase in the number of new development projects. However, the second component of the economic incentives, debt relief negotiations, still provides China with a high degree of economic leverage with countries in financially stressed situations. Despite this leverage, there is limited room for change in leniency. Given the close reviewers already exhibit a low degree of harshness in their reviews, they have little flexibility to become even less harsh.

For the "distant" group, economic incentives do not change the severity of their reviews much. These countries are less responsive to China's financial influence when formulating their human rights assessments of China. Many of them adhere to their own human rights frameworks, which often diverge from China's, leading to an even more critical view of its

human rights situation. They are reluctant to write a lenient review of China even after receiving large economic incentives. Both countries with and without significant economic incentives maintain a critical stance, suggesting that their perceptions are resistant to change even in the face of monetary inducements.

Figure 4: Distant group's (furthest proximity to China in perceiving human rights norms) regime types and the amount of economic incentives distribution



One may wonder what countries' key characteristics are in the "distant" group. I provide information on the countries that have the furthest distance of human rights norms compared to China. In Figure 4, I show one obvious feature of these 60 countries: regime type as measured by V-dem (2020). Notably, the majority of these countries are liberal democracies and most of them do not receive China's large economic incentives (a large amount of new development projects or debt relief negotiations). Yet, a handful of these distant countries that champion the liberal principles of human rights (hence, distancing from China's vision of human rights norms) are electoral democracies or even autocracies. Latin American coun-

tries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Paraguay that have a tradition of actively promoting universal human rights in the UN and beyond are in this distant group. Post-Soviet Union countries such as Poland, Slovakia and Romania are also in this group, possessing a more liberal view of human rights. They are in the category of "Electoral Democracy" and also have a higher proportion of large economic incentives from China. Nonetheless, although countries in the distant group have various levels of liberal democracy as measured by V-Dem they are not sensitive to China's economic incentives due to their strong commitment to the liberal principle of human rights norms.

The empirical findings provide a deeper understanding of states' reviewing behavior in the context of the UPR. By considering the proximity of their original perception of human rights norms with China, I show that large economic incentives do not necessarily sway individual states' reviewing behaviors in favor of China, while holding other relevant factors constant. "Distant" reviewers are too hard to influence, and "close" reviewers exhibiting leniency have less room to move. Only those in the middle are more susceptible to changes in their review leniency responding to material incentives. Importantly, these changes can be significant enough to align their reviews with those of "close" reviewers, indicating the strong influence of China's economic leverage.

9 Does UPR Matter? A Case in UN Resolution Votes

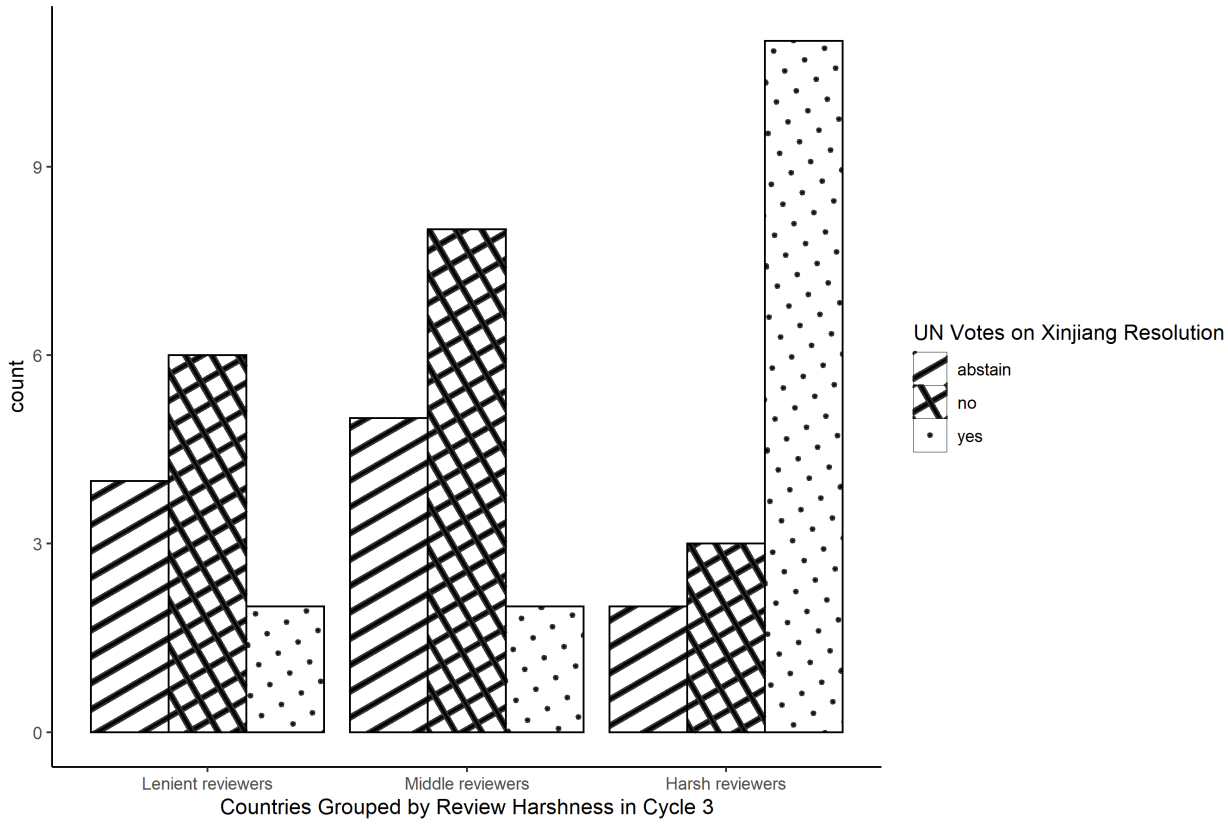
The global perspective on China's human rights issues varies significantly, with viewpoints differing outside the United States and its allies. China's Ambassador to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva, Chen Xu, told a reporter confidently in September 2022, "The developing world will reject all anti-China initiatives initiated by Western countries" (Times 2022). It indeed turned out to be the case. On controversial human rights issues, UN states' votes reflect the geopolitical rivalries between China and the West.

In October 2022, the U.S. and its allies sought to hold a debate on China's alleged rights abuses against Muslim Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The UN Human Rights Council rejected the draft resolution by a vote of 17 in favor, 19 against, and 11 abstained (Rakhmat and Purnama 2023). The proposal to maintain this issue on the agenda failed to secure a majority vote (Wintour 2022). This open ballot marked a major diplomatic victory for Beijing and a setback for the West's moral authority in human rights issues. By itself, it was a display of Chinese political power in the international human rights regime as of today.

Many parties expressed regret with respect to some Muslim-majority countries' votes on this Western-led motion. Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, said "we are really disappointed by the reaction of Muslim countries," and those who voted "no" had effectively supported China to block discussions in the UN (Farge 2022). Among 19 countries voting "No" to the draft, seven countries are among the Human Rights Council members representing the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC): Indonesia, Somalia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Sudan. Five among 11 countries voting abstained were countries in the OIC: Benin, India, Gambia, Libya, and Malaysia.

Can reviewers' leniency in the most recent complete Cycle 3 in UPR predict how they cast votes on this sensitive UN resolution regarding China? Figure 5 represents the relationship between how countries voted on a United Nations resolution regarding Xinjiang and how these countries reviewed China in Cycle 3 of UPR.

Figure 5: Countries' review leniency to China in UPR Cycle 3 and their votes in the UN resolution related to Xinjiang issue



Based on countries' review harshness scores, these 47 countries[7] again are divided into three groups: "lenient," "middle" and "harsh" reviewers. Harsh reviewers predominantly voted "yes" to the resolution. The distribution of votes on this particular resolution relevant to China's human rights abuses showcases that countries' sentiments in UPR to some extent are correlated with their degree of support to China in the UN voting on sensitive issues. The UPR is only one of the many venues in which China is seeking to influence the UN human rights regime. Genuine followers and middle countries susceptible to China's financial influence support its initiative in contesting the liberal roots of human rights norms.

[7]Among them, 10 countries did not review China in Cycle 3 so they are dropped out from the sample.

10 Conclusion

I use the UN Universal Periodic Review as a laboratory to examine how China leverages its economic influence to shape the reviews conducted by other states in the human rights regime. Previous work shows that this peer review system, UPR, is political, with reviews primarily driven by states' bilateral relationships. Here I show that reviews can also be shaped by economic power, but with constraints.

Using text-based coding, I convert publicly available UN reports into a numerical scale, capturing the instances of leniency in these review documents. Each recommendation receives a severity index score. Then I balance the quantity and quality differences of recommendations each state receives, enabling a fair comparison of the review harshness scores at the dyad level. This set of measures enables us to examine and compare the behaviors of countries from two perspectives. First, we can analyze how a country, acting as a reviewer, assesses and reviews other states. Second, we can evaluate how a country is reviewed by its peers in the international community. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and comparing the review dynamics among countries, shedding light on their interactions and relationships in the peer review process.

In this study, first, I show that China is not necessarily vulnerable in the UN-based multilateral human rights regime. While the universal periodic review system opens opportunities for countries to advocate their vision of human rights norms and exercise their monitoring power as peers, their reviews and interactions are affected by economic and geopolitical as well as normative considerations.

Using original text-as-data measures and a research design that capitalizes on the time lags between review cycles, I demonstrate that countries receiving more financial assistance from China tend to be less critical of its human rights records. Considering different levels of economic incentives between the review cycles, I find that reviews from countries receiving

more new China-funded development projects or a debt relief deal tend to offer less critical reviews than countries that do not enjoy similar levels of economic incentives from China. However, the influence of economic incentives on reviewers' attitudes is contingent upon their underlying perceptions of human rights norms and values. Countries closer to the liberal principles of human rights exhibit greater reluctance to adjust their reviews leniently in response to China's economic incentives. Those in the middle are more sensitive to the financial perks.

So far I have presented additional evidence that when countries participate in the United Nations Universal Periodic Review system, they consider factors beyond simply assessing the human rights conditions of the state under review or the bilateral relationships between the reviewer and reviewee. Reviews conducted in the UPR are shaped by the vested interests of the reviewing states. When China is under review, many of its main aid beneficiaries refrain from taking critical stands on sensitive issues that may antagonize the Chinese government, such as civil and political rights, ethnic minority rights or religious rights. Instead, they praise China or simply urge it to continue its efforts in enhancing certain human rights that the government is proud of. These recommendations can be seen as a form of reciprocity or favor, akin to "scratching China's back." Furthermore, we observe these types of light recommendations are more common among countries receiving larger aid inflows from China or greater economic incentives between the review cycles.

However, this study also highlights the limitations of using financial incentives to influence normative decisions within human rights regimes. It is exceedingly challenging to manipulate countries' human rights reviews through economic incentives when those states strongly adhere to liberal principles of human rights. Even though China is one of the dominant economic powers, providing projects, loans and assistance to many recipient countries, many delegates from those countries are reluctant to write lenient reviews or offer disguised praise for China.

It is indeed surprising to observe that the state-to-state review system, the UPR, is not entirely politicized. Not all states are co-opted, especially considering that China is the largest trading partner for over 100 countries in the world. Some states still take their commitments to the international community seriously and strive to uphold international norms (A. Chayes and A. H. Chayes 1993; Kelley 2007; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), despite China's rising power. We can identify "genuine followers" that continue to adhere to the liberal-based international norms when it is relatively convenient to endorse an alternative norm. As seen in numerous instances within the human rights regime, economically powerful countries do not always get what they want in a normative setting. Future research can delve into why these country delegates might opt to risk unsettling their country's primary economic partner or financier, particularly when there are no apparent benefits to remaining faithful to upholding human rights principles in the UPR by interviews.

In future research, it would be valuable to explore the broader network of states' reviews beyond China within the UPR framework. The UPR text data enable an investigation of a network of reviews where such a network will illuminate the key players in driving the politicization of UPR, thereby uncovering the intricate interplay between norms and geopolitics in the state review process. In other words, we have the opportunity to identify sincere reviewers and strategic reviewers and quantify under what conditions their choices converge or diverge. The network analysis can revolve around the great powers as the central node, revealing which countries tend to be lenient or harsh reviewers and the extent of leniency compared to others. Moreover, we can ascertain which countries demonstrate greater alignment with global powers such as China or the United States, and how these conditions and connections may evolve over time. Adopting this network approach will enrich our understanding of the complex dynamics of states' interactions within international organizations, especially when norms and interests collide.

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Appendix A Tags under each issue topic

1. **Civil and political rights**: "CP rights - general, Civil society, Elections, Freedom of association and peaceful assembly, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of the press, Freedom of movement, Human rights defenders"

2. **Public services**: "Corruption, Public security, Human rights education and training, Counter-terrorism, Privacy, National Human Rights Institution"

3. **Migrants and labors**: "Asylum-seekers - refugees, Freedom of movement, Labor, Migrants, Internally displaced persons"

4. **Physical integrity rights**: "Justice, Death penalty, Detention, Enforced disappearances, Extrajudicial executions, Human rights violations by state agents, Impunity, Torture and other CID treatment, Disability rights"

5. **Race, ethnicity and religious minority**: "Freedom of religion and belief, Minorities, Racial discrimination, Indigenous peoples, Statelessness and the right to nationality"

6. **Social and economic rights**: "Environment, Right to land, Right to water, Economic, social and cultural rights, Right to development, Poverty, Right to education, Right to Food, Right to health, Right to housing, ESC rights - general, Business and Human Rights"

7. **Protection of vulnerable population**: "Disabilities, HIV - Aids, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, Rights of the Child, Trafficking, Women's rights"

8. **General and others**: "Special procedures, Technical assistance and cooperation, UPR process, General, Others"

Appendix B Cosine similarity with China

	Reviewers	Cosine all	Cosine C1	Cosine C2	Cosine C3
1	China	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
2	Cuba	0.99	0.94	0.97	0.96
3	Venezuela	0.99	0.95	0.96	0.94
4	Brunei Darussalam	0.97	0.90	0.97	0.97
5	DPR Korea	0.97	0.94	0.84	0.94
6	Oman	0.96	0.87	0.91	0.96
7	Saudi Arabia	0.96	0.92	0.88	0.96
8	Viet Nam	0.96	0.99	0.94	0.95
9	Dominican Republic	0.93	0.76	0.84	0.89
10	Eritrea	0.93		0.89	0.88
11	Solomon Islands	0.93		0.73	0.87
12	Yemen	0.93	0.94	0.90	0.83
13	Cambodia	0.92	0.98	0.88	0.85
14	Bangladesh	0.91	0.84	0.93	0.79
15	Equatorial Guinea	0.91	0.67	0.91	0.95

16	Fiji	0.91		0.75	0.91
17	Haiti	0.91	0.75	0.74	0.87
18	Palestine	0.91	0.86	0.93	0.82
19	Syria	0.91	0.93	0.63	0.86
20	Vanuatu	0.91		0.25	0.89
21	Ethiopia	0.90	0.79	0.87	0.90
22	Libya	0.90	0.91	0.79	0.93
23	Singapore	0.90	0.94	0.90	0.90
24	Mauritius	0.89	0.79	0.67	0.94
25	Qatar	0.89	0.92	0.81	0.88
26	Sri Lanka	0.89	0.96	0.90	0.84
27	Algeria	0.88	0.81	0.83	0.89
28	Bhutan	0.88	0.97	0.89	0.79
29	Iran	0.88	0.89	0.83	0.89
30	Laos	0.88	0.93	0.84	0.83
31	Malaysia	0.88	0.78	0.88	0.90
32	United Arab Emirates	0.88	0.84	0.90	0.81
33	Angola	0.87	0.92	0.83	0.86
34	Kuwait	0.87	0.89	0.88	0.72
35	Zimbabwe	0.87	0.94	0.73	0.65
36	India	0.86	0.73	0.80	0.88
37	Marshall Islands	0.86			0.86
38	Myanmar	0.86	0.96	0.93	0.78
39	South Sudan	0.86		0.88	0.81
40	Sudan	0.86	0.98	0.78	0.81
41	Tanzania	0.86	0.84	0.79	0.63
42	Bahamas	0.85		0.52	0.85
43	Guinea	0.85			0.83
44	South Africa	0.85	0.88	0.85	0.79
45	Trinidad and Tobago	0.85	0.68	0.90	0.79
46	Djibouti	0.84	0.87	0.87	0.81
47	El Salvador	0.84	0.66	0.85	0.80
48	Bolivia	0.83	0.87	0.66	0.76
49	Cameroon	0.83	0.78	0.23	0.84
50	Maldives	0.83	0.82	0.82	0.82
51	Pakistan	0.83	0.86	0.82	0.79
52	Uzbekistan	0.83	0.81	0.84	0.82
53	Barbados	0.82	0.88	0.29	0.80
54	Comoros	0.82		0.78	0.76
55	Holy See	0.82	0.86	0.85	0.57
56	Tajikistan	0.82	0.92	0.77	0.51
57	Bahrain	0.81	0.88	0.88	0.73

58	Jamaica	0.81	0.60	0.84	0.85
59	Monaco	0.81	0.69	0.88	
60	Somalia	0.81	0.73	0.78	0.55
61	Turkmenistan	0.81		0.79	0.65
62	Afghanistan	0.80	0.78	0.77	0.78
63	Lebanon	0.80	0.94	0.80	0.73
64	Nigeria	0.80	0.88	0.86	0.65
65	Peru	0.80	0.77	0.65	0.84
66	Portugal	0.80	0.82	0.82	0.79
67	Azerbaijan	0.79	0.80	0.64	0.77
68	Egypt	0.79	0.85	0.83	0.58
69	Kazakhstan	0.79	0.85	0.74	0.77
70	Madagascar	0.79	0.70	0.75	0.76
71	Mauritania	0.79	0.86	0.84	0.63
72	Belarus	0.78	0.71	0.75	0.84
73	Gabon	0.78	0.77	0.74	0.72
74	Republic of Congo	0.78	0.84	0.83	
75	Serbia	0.78	0.77	0.71	0.83
76	Democratic Republic of Congo	0.77	0.85	0.65	0.78
77	Iraq	0.77	0.76	0.75	0.72
78	Kenya	0.77		0.73	0.75
79	Nicaragua	0.77	0.80	0.68	0.64
80	Senegal	0.77	0.80	0.80	0.72
81	Seychelles	0.77		0.64	0.75
82	Thailand	0.77	0.71	0.81	0.77
83	Finland	0.76	0.77	0.78	0.64
84	Kyrgyzstan	0.76	0.85	0.84	0.66
85	Guyana	0.75			0.75
86	Indonesia	0.75	0.82	0.74	0.74
87	St Vincent & the Grenadines	0.75		0.75	
88	Burundi	0.74	0.92	0.80	0.60
89	Cape Verde	0.74	0.72	0.69	0.80
90	Morocco	0.74	0.81	0.70	0.73
91	Bulgaria	0.73	0.79	0.77	0.71
92	Lesotho	0.73	0.69	0.49	0.75
93	Russian Federation	0.73	0.89	0.72	0.65
94	Turkey	0.73	0.79	0.76	0.67
95	Ecuador	0.72	0.73	0.78	0.69
96	Nepal	0.72	0.81	0.68	0.65
97	Timor-Leste	0.72	0.76	0.79	0.66

98	Colombia	0.71	0.81	0.76	0.64
99	Cote d'Ivoire	0.71	0.78	0.66	0.64
100	Tunisia	0.71	0.88	0.54	0.66
101	Jordan	0.70	0.75	0.63	0.70
102	Panama	0.70	0.74	0.74	0.70
103	Albania	0.69	0.73	0.78	0.65
104	Armenia	0.69	0.77	0.77	0.57
105	Benin	0.69	0.76	0.68	0.70
106	Honduras	0.69	0.81	0.68	0.67
107	Macedonia FYR	0.69	0.70	0.73	0.60
108	Sierra Leone	0.69		0.75	0.63
109	Japan	0.68	0.66	0.65	0.73
110	Mexico	0.68	0.57	0.74	0.72
111	Namibia	0.67	0.70	0.77	0.57
112	Philippines	0.67	0.86	0.63	0.64
113	Israel	0.66	0.66	0.73	0.67
114	Republic of Korea	0.66	0.75	0.67	0.69
115	Togo	0.66		0.70	0.63
116	Uganda	0.66	0.77	0.70	0.57
117	Burkina Faso	0.65	0.79	0.70	0.61
118	Spain	0.65	0.59	0.71	0.63
119	Botswana	0.64	0.86	0.57	0.67
120	Brazil	0.64	0.63	0.69	0.60
121	Central African Republic	0.64	0.69	0.56	0.68
122	Ghana	0.64	0.79	0.63	0.59
123	Luxembourg	0.64	0.67	0.63	0.60
124	Paraguay	0.64	0.70	0.67	0.63
125	Slovenia	0.64	0.57	0.71	0.63
126	Ukraine	0.64	0.78	0.69	0.58
127	Romania	0.63	0.78	0.71	0.58
128	Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.62	0.55	0.72	0.58
129	Greece	0.62	0.81	0.69	0.55
130	Iceland	0.62	0.67	0.60	0.61
131	Malta	0.62	0.66		0.60
132	Uruguay	0.62	0.73	0.62	0.64
133	Cyprus	0.61	0.75	0.56	0.64
134	New Zealand	0.61	0.57	0.67	0.57
135	Georgia	0.60	0.67	0.60	0.57
136	Hungary	0.60	0.65	0.58	0.62
137	Costa Rica	0.59	0.76	0.59	0.64

138	Mozambique	0.59	0.76	0.58	0.52
139	Netherlands	0.59	0.54	0.62	0.63
140	Canada	0.58	0.50	0.63	0.61
141	Chile	0.58	0.65	0.63	0.55
142	Croatia	0.58	0.71	0.63	0.57
143	Germany	0.58	0.58	0.62	0.59
144	Mongolia	0.58		0.50	0.57
145	Slovakia	0.58	0.53	0.63	0.52
146	Argentina	0.57	0.58	0.57	0.60
147	Mali	0.57	0.75	0.61	0.49
148	Norway	0.57	0.57	0.63	0.56
149	Poland	0.57	0.57	0.61	0.58
150	Belgium	0.56	0.51	0.59	0.57
151	Italy	0.56	0.54	0.63	0.52
152	Montenegro	0.56		0.50	0.59
153	Zambia	0.56	0.71	0.66	0.53
154	Austria	0.55	0.58	0.57	0.54
155	Moldova	0.55	0.50	0.58	0.56
156	Niger	0.55	0.79	0.47	0.46
157	Andorra	0.54		0.71	0.49
158	Australia	0.53	0.61	0.57	0.54
159	Rwanda	0.53	0.69	0.60	0.48
160	France	0.52	0.46	0.53	0.58
161	Ireland	0.52	0.52	0.62	0.48
162	Sweden	0.52	0.48	0.58	0.52
163	Chad	0.51	0.75	0.53	0.34
164	United States	0.51	0.57	0.56	0.47
165	United Kingdom	0.50	0.62	0.51	0.51
166	Denmark	0.49	0.50	0.45	0.54
167	Guatemala	0.49	0.71	0.56	0.42
168	Switzerland	0.49	0.56	0.51	0.53
169	Liechtenstein	0.47	0.81	0.50	0.43
170	Lithuania	0.46	0.57	0.52	0.39
171	Czechia	0.45	0.45	0.47	0.44
172	Estonia	0.45	0.72	0.42	0.49
173	St Lucia	0.41		0.44	
174	Swaziland	0.39	0.59	0.26	
175	Latvia	0.32	0.29	0.42	0.28
176	Samoa	0.08	0.22		

Table A1: Summary of text similarity between China's human rights scripts and other countries' scripts when they review other countries across three cycles

Figure A1: Top 25 countries sharing high proximity (warm in orange) and low proximity (cold in green) with China's vision of human rights

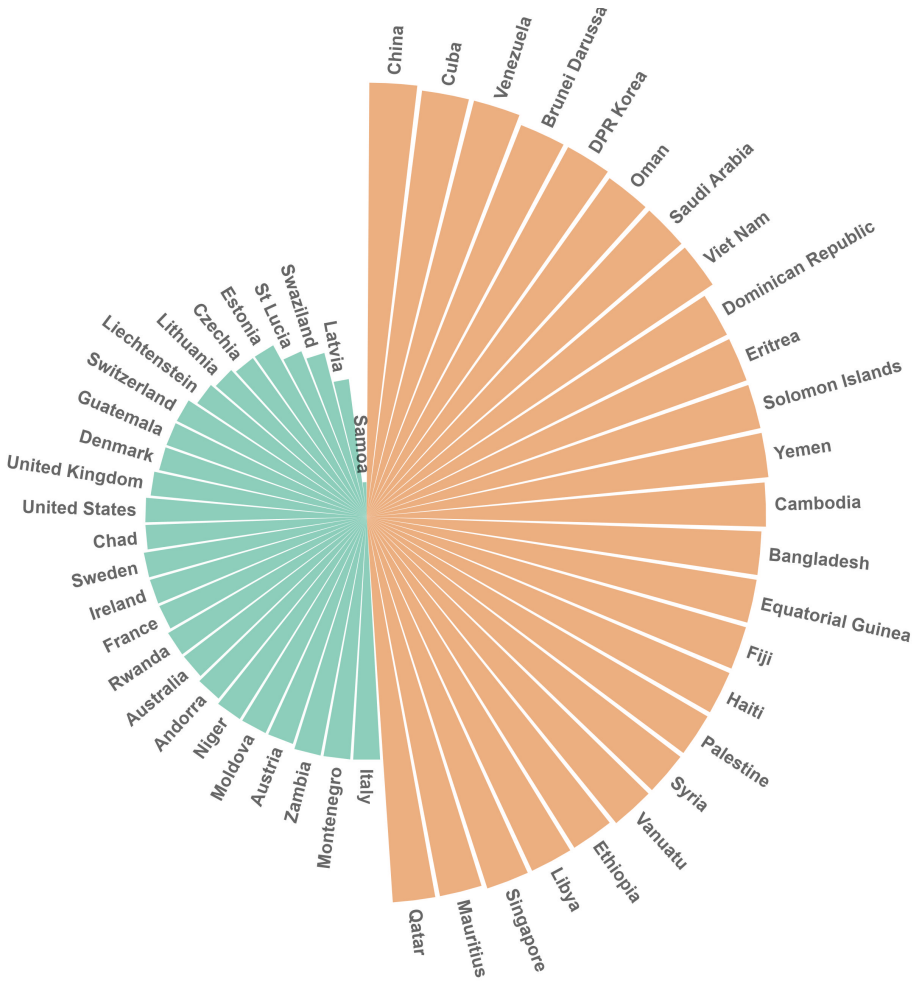

Table A2: Correlations between Chinese aid inflow per capita pre-cycles and recipient countries' review harshness scores to China in UPR

	Dependent variable:		
	Review harshness score to China		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Chinese aid flow per capita	−0.0001***		0.0001
	(0.00005)		(0.0002)
Cosine similarity (medium)			−0.179*
			(0.103)
Cosine similarity (warm)			−0.231*
			(0.120)
Political Terror Score	−0.102***	−0.084**	−0.090**
	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.040)
UN Voting Distance with China	0.030**	0.031**	0.023*
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.014)
GDP per capita	0.00000	0.00000	0.00000
	(0.00000)	(0.00000)	(0.00000)
Regime type (V-dem)	0.785***	0.878***	0.580***
	(0.162)	(0.160)	(0.186)
Aid flow * medium group			−0.0002
			(0.0002)
Aid flow * warm group			−0.0002
			(0.0002)
Constant	1.658***	1.514***	1.883***
	(0.171)	(0.166)	(0.207)
Cycle Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	221	221	221
Log Likelihood	−169.615	−163.926	−184.232
Akaike Inf. Crit.	355.230	341.852	392.465
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	382.416	365.640	433.243
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table A3: Correlations between large economic incentives and countries' review changes to China in UPR, conditional on countries' proximity of perceptions of human rights norms with China

	Dependent variable:
	Review harshness score
Large economic incentives	−0.238
	(0.155)
Cosine similarity (medium)	−0.301**
	(0.117)
Cosine similarity (warm)	−0.373***
	(0.133)
UN Voting Distance	0.023*
	(0.014)
Political Terror Score	−0.096***
	(0.036)
Chinese aid flow per capita	−0.0001*
	(0.0001)
Incentives*Similarity (medium)	0.021
	(0.184)
Incentives*Similarity (warm)	0.012
	(0.189)
Constant	2.366***
	(0.151)
Regime Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	224
Log Likelihood	−160.723
Akaike Inf. Crit.	343.446
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	380.974
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix C Results: Complete models