

Pak Nung Wong

# Destined Statecraft

Eurasian Small Power Politics and  
Strategic Cultures in Geopolitical Shifts



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Cultures in Geopolitical Shifts



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*To Claudia*

# About the Book

This book is intended to make a substantial contribution to a few interconnected subfields in international relations. First, it is the growing interests in Pierre Bourdieu's sociological works among the international relations scholars. Second is the geopolitical shifts characterized by the US 'pivot to Asia' policy and the emergence of a new global order partially triggered by China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative, which were both launched in the 2010s. Third is the small power politics, which concerns about how the small powers survive and thrive in world politics. Fourth is the study of strategic cultures, which asks what is the better, if not the best, theoretical tool and empirical scheme to capture strategic culture.

The main goal of this book is to conduct a global-historical, comparative and inter-regional empirical application of Bourdieu's post-structuralist theory for attaining new theoretical advances in the subfields of small power politics and strategic cultures in international relations. This application is conducted against the larger backdrop of the post-WWII US-China competition, which is characterized by geopolitical containment and geoeconomic counter-containment.

To achieve this goal, this book argues that Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' is the key concept to devise a new theory of practice of statecraft. Integrating it with the existing theoretical strand of African-Asian critical realism (which was developed by the author and his colleague Prof. George Klay Kieh Jr. in 2014), a habitus-inspired critical realist statecraft agenda—destined statecraft—entails the proactive, agile, humble and operating-on-the-ground approach to constantly detect, identify, accept, embrace and make good use of the already-given geopolitical, political-economic and strategic-cultural structuring structures in order for the small power to take full advantage of the circumstances, earn surprising political gains and make maximal economic benefits from the ever-changing, often uncertain and sometimes volatile situations. The strategic gist of this destiny-remaking process of the small power is dubbed as 'go with the flows'. It refers to the strategist's patience, calmness, resourcefulness, wisdoms and capability in discerning, grasping and going with the embedded structural flows of the often complexly morphing situation so that one would be able to generate the best outcomes out of the least inputs.

Pulling empirical materials from a wide array of historical case studies from Asia and Europe of the pre- and post-war periods, this book is interwoven by the strategic wisdoms and applications of such remarkable Eurasian strategic thinkers in both ancient and contemporary times as Thucydides, Sun Tzu, Kautilya, Halford Mackinder and Karl Haushofer. Apart from being used as a key text for advanced courses in statecraft and geopolitics, this book is deliberately written in lucid and straightforward language so that the diplomats, policy-makers, national development planners and security practitioners of the Eurasian small powers would find it accessible.

**Keywords:** Africa, Asia, Europe, International relations, Geopolitics, Small power politics, Statecraft, Strategic cultures, US-China competition

# Preface

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Bath, UK  
2017

Pak Nung Wong

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# Book Review

In *Destined Statecraft*, Professor Pak Nung Wong addresses an interesting yet rarely handled topic of how small powers engage in foreign policy in a dynamic, fast-paced world. Most literary works on world politics revolve around great powers, based on the deeply ingrained belief that their decisions shape the world order, whereby middle and small powers merely sustain their destinies under their influence. Seldom do we come across a book where small powers are at the center of its focal point.

Professor Wong defies such conventional notions and writes that there does exist considerable maneuvering room for small powers, on the premise that they have an accurate understanding of their given circumstances and status quo. What is idiosyncratic in Professor Wong's approach to international relations is that he places the concept of strategic circumstances in parallel with Bourdieu's sociological principle of "habitus". Employing diverse theories ranging from Thucydides to Sun Tzu to Karl Marx, Professor Wong goes on to interpret historic events and current situations from multiple angles.

*Destined Statecraft* enriches our understanding of global affairs by presenting a perspective where small powers are no longer in the periphery, but take up the main narrative. This standpoint is all the more valuable in an age where the proactive decision-making of small powers often goes unobserved. Professor Wong's *Destined Statecraft* offers a fresh lens for discerning world issues, helping to extend the reader's vision beyond the exterior towards a greater perception of the world we live in.

Seoul, Republic of Korea

Ambassador Mr Sungnam Lim  
Vice-Minister of Ministry of Foreign Affairs

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Remaking the Small Powers' Destinies

**Abstract** This introductory chapter will contextualize the US–China geostrategic shifts and an emerging global order as the background to study Eurasian small power politics. In reference to the strategic and sociological thoughts of Thucydides, Sun Tzu and Pierre Bourdieu, I shall start to develop a post-structuralist perspective of small power politics. I will delineate the definitions of two key concepts: ‘destined statecraft’ and ‘destined agency’. A subsequent literature review of China’s ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative will identify several existing theoretical approaches. Building on these instructive works, I will state the purpose of this book is to illustrate how the Eurasian small powers respond to these global changes as both opportunities and challenges to remake their own destinies.

**Keywords** China–US relations • ‘One Belt One Road’ initiative • Small power politics • Destined statecraft

### 1.1 The Melian Fate Reconsidered

This book is an attempt to articulate a more comprehensive statecraft for the smaller powers not just to survive in world politics, but also to thrive in it. It is a corrective to a common reading of the ancient Greek strategist Thucydides’ most cited quote —‘while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must’—a realist ultimatum for war issued to the small Mediterranean island of Melos by the Athenian Empire of ancient Greece, whose territories stretched across Mediterranean Europe and Asia Minor (Thucydides, 1998: Book 5, Chap. 89).

During a truce with Sparta in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.), in 416 B. C., the Athenian conquistadors sent the ultimatum to the Melians of Melos, a tiny island polity in the Aegean Sea inhabited by the colonists from Sparta. It is often interpreted as if the Melians were catastrophically slaughtered by the more powerful Athenian forces because they failed to recognize their own fate as a weak small power was to either surrender or be destroyed. As they refused to surrender to

Athens, all the Melian men were eventually executed, and the women and children were enslaved—a realist tragedy widely believed to be inevitable.

This ultimatum issued from the Athenian conquistadors did not only reflect the spirit of realism already haunting ancient Eurasian international relations, but it also embodied the doctrinal ideology of fatalism to other Sparta-related Aegean small powers—to surrender or be destroyed by the Athenian great power. The ultimatum therefore suffered from a great power, if not imperialist bias, which conceived the Athens–Melos international relations only from a perspective of realist fatalism. In the present global context where great and small powers continue to dominate our international political life, this ancient Greek small power's tragedy warrants our revisit.

## 1.2 The Problem: Destined Statecraft—Optimal Fate-Remaking

This book is my full-fledged response to this incomplete view of ancient Greek small power politics. While I contend that the small powers will do what they can, I will argue that the small powers can have more options than just either surrender or be destroyed. The small powers are not easily kicked around, and they are not easily threatened, bullied and defeated by the great powers. Moreover, they are all in the active self-remaking processes along their own unique trajectories towards their own destined visions of great-power-hood; thus, inherently, they are competing against the existing great powers, for not just power, but also for what constitutes/defines greatness, and for the rule-setting capacity that would shape a global order concomitantly binding the great powers. In other words, though a small power does not have the equal power with a greater power, it can still be competitively equal or equally competitive, as far as it never gives up to find innovative ways to survive and thrive. As the small will to compete with the great, there are new strategies to be invented and deployed. The statecraft of the small power politics is the key to unlock these creative strategies of the seemingly vulnerable and weak in this book.

There are two key issues to be clarified here. First, what do I mean by statecraft? Second, what do I mean by destiny/fate? In the light of Bourdieu's (1977) post-structuralist notion of the 'habitus', which refers to the deep-seated yet constantly self-changing structuring structures, these two key concepts are interconnected. By statecraft, I mean the instituted practices and creative strategies that a small power is constrained/enabled to deploy and devise by a summated complex of the uniquely given geopolitical, economic and strategic-cultural structures. By fate/destiny, I mean the limited yet constantly changing varieties of developmental trajectories or evolutionary pathways of a small power can pursue. The variety is often preselected, predetermined and made possible by the already-given geopolitical, economic and strategic-cultural structures, which are however constantly

changing on their own as they continue to interact with other deep structures in the international arena and of the other powers.

Three practical reasons are important here (Bourdieu, 1998). First, it is in the interests of the small power to fully know, embrace and utilize its own deep and situational structural constraints. Second, it is in the interests of the small power to know, embrace and utilize the structural constraints effecting from another power, may it be of great or small. Third, it is in the interests of the small power to know, embrace and utilize the constantly changing structural circumstances generated from the international arena. The collection, accumulation and analysis of these structurally embedded knowledge of one self's state and others states are what the state's intelligence and security apparatuses are used to perform. As Sun Tzu once reminds us,

So it is said that if you know yourself and the enemies, you can win numerous battles without jeopardy. If you only know yourself, but not your opponent, you may win or you may lose. If you know neither yourself nor your enemy, you will surely lose every battle (Sun Tzu, 1981: Chap. 3).

I will argue in this book that the best knowledge of the self and others is the knowledge of the *habitus*.

To effectively integrate these Eurasian concepts, reasons and wisdom all together, the notion of 'destined statecraft' is introduced here. Destined statecraft refers to the context-sensitive art of governing the state affairs along the interface between the two interpenetrating realms of domestic affairs and foreign relations, for which the small power's strategists and policy-makers strive developing the state in accordance with the most suitable policy options reflecting the core national interests. This is to choose the optimal—viz. the destined—trajectory of national development towards its own vision of great-power-hood, which is often very special and therefore difficult to replicate.

The destined developmental pathway is selected when the strategists and policy-makers are able to accurately identify, humbly recognize and acceptingly embrace all the structural constraints given, thus enable them to astutely utilize these constraints to devise the most appropriate state strategy and policy options. The destined agency of the small power is the most desirable form of agency of statecraft. It generally refers to the wisdom to discern, policy-making craftsmanship and policy-implementation capability to go with the flows of the given internal and external structural forces so that they can be used to enable the optimal results of national development to be effected.

In line with the 1955 Afro-Asian Bandung conference spirit (Kahin, 1956), destined statecraft is a post-colonial state-building agenda holding that there is no 'the best' model to follow in this world. Every small power can be the champion of its own model of development, simply because each one of them is uniquely situated within their own already-given structural constraints. Nevertheless, there can always be a better model, but this should be determined in the terms of the small power concerned, not by the other powers. The dangerous peril that the small power should therefore avoid is to uncritically imitate another power without

attaining a sufficient level of self-knowledge about its own structural constraints and its optimal fate-remaking option.

To empirically illustrate how the Eurasian small powers can remake their destinies, I am going to contextualize two geostrategic shifts that have taken place in the early 2010s, which involve two competing great powers in the global scene—China and the USA.

### 1.3 Shifting Poles: Conceptualizing an Emerging Global Order

#### 1.3.1 *The 'One Belt One Road' Initiative: Background, Goals and Strategies*

In September and October of 2013, shortly after resuming the supreme power as the President of the People's Republic of China in March 2013, President Xi Jinping (习近平) announced two high-profile initiatives during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia—the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'twenty first-century Maritime Silk Road', respectively (Xi, 2014: 315–324). The former initiative aims to build a complex of economic corridors connecting China with the inland countries in Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The latter initiative aims to build a maritime trade network connecting China with the countries in East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Oceania and the Americas. These two initiatives were then combined and are widely known as the 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) initiative, which is translated from the Chinese phrase '一带一路' (*yidai yilu*). Since its inception, the background, motivations and grand strategy of this ambitious initiative have been a main topic of public debates, both in China and overseas.

Since the socialist China embarked upon the liberalist market reform and adopted the open door policy in 1978, China's global development can be divided into two phases. The first phase spanned from 1978 to 2010. Deng Xiaoping and his successors succeeded in using the economic reform to attract substantial foreign direct investments and technological transfers to China. This period recorded very significant volumes of annual economic growths, which is often recognized an economic miracle (Lin, Cai, & Li, 2003). In this period, China's national development policy was by and large still in line with Deng's principal statecraft strategy—'韬光养晦' (*taoguan yanghui*), which may mean 'to hide one's capabilities and bide one's time'. Deng recognized that China needs time to rebuild its strengths from the past traumas. As a peaceful international environment is very desirable for national rejuvenation, China therefore should prevent herself to be perceived as a threat to the world, nor could China afford war and conflict.

The second phase started sometime in 2010–2011 before Xi Jinping rose to the helm of the Chinese state power in 2012 and 2013. In 2010, China historically

surpassed Japan to be the world's second largest economy, putting itself into the position right after the USA—the world's largest economy and lone superpower. This, however, strengthened the threat perception of China's rise especially to the US policy-makers. In the late 2011, the administration of former US President Barack Obama (2009–2017) formally announced the signature 'pivot to Asia' policy, which did not only ignite new debates in the USA, China and Asia, but also brought new uncertainties to China's relations with her Asian neighbours (Clinton, 2011).

In response to these nuanced changes, although the Xi administration appears to adhere to Deng's strategic dictum, Beijing also added a new strategy, '有所作为' (*yousuo zuowei*) or '奋发有为' (*fenfa youwei*), which has the similar meanings —'to accomplish something' and 'striving for achievement', respectively (Wang, 2014; Yan, 2014). In this new era, while Xi continues to adopt Deng's reformist principle, a new but puzzlingly self-contradictory economic phenomenon emerged in China towards the late 2000s. The 2008 global financial crisis caused a significant shrinkage of global demands for China's products and manufacturing capacity. To avoid China's national economic growth to be affected by the global economic recession, the Chinese government adopted a fiscal stimulus package policy to greatly enhance the governmental expenditures in order to generate internal demands for sustaining the domestic economic growth. A substantial portion of these expenditures was used to construct large-scale infrastructures such as highways, speed-rail networks, electricity supplying networks and housing facilities.

A consequence of this fiscal policy is the creation of the present-day overcapacity problem. In general, the problem of overcapacity exists when a country's industrial production facilities have not been fully utilized, which cause economic shrinkage and slowdown. In China, a significant number of shipyards, cement-making plants, steel-making plants and energy facility-making plants have become either unproductive or idle (Wong, 2017). Since 2010, despite the overcapacity problem, whereas the Chinese economy has started to experience slowdown after more than two decades of continued staggering growths, China's outward investments had historically surpassed the total amount of the foreign investments in China.

Facing this unprecedented watershed in China's economic transformation and a rapid-changing, uncertain international environment, the Xi administration recognized the need of comprehensive state policy adjustments in order to maintain China's long-term peaceful rise and sustainable economic growth, which can only be achieved by developing a new international cooperation model of mutual benefits. A purpose of this new model is to further extend China's overseas commodity markets and facilitate effective channelling of the needed overseas natural resources to fuel China's industrialization and economic development. It is intended to resolve the overcapacity problem in two counts. First, by identifying new overseas markets for China's products and excessive industrial capacity, the overcapacity problem would be gradually absorbed by new overseas demands for not just the Chinese commodities, but also China's means of production for building large



infrastructures such as seaports, road networks, railways, energy supplying networks and energy plants. Second, by finding new supplies of overseas natural resources, the existing overcapacity could be transformed into other capacities in demand (Wong, 2017).

This Chinese global development initiative was created against the background that complexly interweaves China's national economic development with her multifaceted foreign relations with a range of countries of diverse cultural-religious, political, economic and geographical differences. In the public knowledge that the Xi administration has adopted a more proactive, assertive and high-profile approach than his predecessors, the OBOR initiative is devised to achieve the following objectives to build a 'community of shared destiny' (Chinese: 命运共同体; *min-gyun gongtong ti*) (Wong, 2015a):

- To strengthen international policy communication in order to craft strategies and policies conducive to common economic development.
- To strengthen international transportation networks, including transnational railways and road infrastructures.
- To strengthen and promote international free trade. This consists of removing trade barriers, decreasing transaction costs and capacity-building to address financial risks.
- To strengthen the exchanges of international currencies. In particular, it aims to encourage the use of local currencies to conclude international trade deals and transnational payments.
- To strengthen the people-to-people exchanges, mutual understanding and communication.

In association with the OBOR initiative, the China-led alternative global financial system was swiftly established in 2014 and 2015 through the newly formed international financial institutions of the New Development Bank (BRICS Bank, 2014), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB, 2014) and the Silk Road Fund (2015). Gathering a significant number of Western and non-Western countries as the founding members of these institutions, this alternative system is established in parallel and inevitably, in competition with the US-led Bretton Woods system in which the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Japan-led Asian Development Bank (ADB) have constituted the post-Second World War liberal world order. The former is known to fall into the orbit of the 'Beijing consensus' while the latter operates along the course of the 'Washington consensus'. In general terms, whereas the 'Beijing consensus' adopts an interest-based, exchange-oriented transactional model in international cooperation, the 'Washington consensus' adheres to the liberalist values and mission to include and socialize the developing countries into the rule-abiding citizens of the liberal global order. Both of them were nonetheless trumpeting proponents of the neoliberal globalization agenda since the Cold War ended in the early 1990s.

What would be the implications of these global changes for the small powers? There is a clear need for us to identify and analyze the challenges and opportunities

these geopolitical shifts would bring to the small powers. To devise a suitable framework of analysis of small power politics, a review of the existing theoretical approaches of the OBOR initiative should be in place first.

### ***1.3.2 Existing Approaches of the OBOR Initiative***

#### **1.3.2.1 Critical Constructivism**

The existing scholarly literature of the OBOR initiative can be mainly categorized in several theoretical approaches: critical constructivism, defensive realism and liberalist institutionalism as well as global financial capitalism. In the first place, the approach of critical constructivism suggests that OBOR entails an ambitious grand strategy to use economic leverage to build a Sino-centric ‘community of shared destiny’ in Asia, which will in turn ‘make China a normative power that sets the rules of the game for global governance’ (Callahan, 2016: 228). Building upon the rhetoric of the ‘China dream’ (Chinese: 中国梦; *zhongguo meng*), OBOR signifies a clear shift from Deng Xiaoping’s strategic wisdom of ‘hiding capability and lying low’ (*taoguang yanghui*) to the more proactive articulation of ‘striving for achievement’ (*fenfa youwei*) by the Xi Jinping regime (Poh & Li, 2017; Sorensen, 2015).

In particular, the proponents of the critical constructivist approach suggest that these rhetorical shifts have brought significant policy and material changes in both the domestic governance and foreign relations realms of China. These include the establishment of the National Security Commission in 2013 chaired by President Xi Jinping. Apart from overseeing and monitoring all governmental bodies, it enjoys the relative superior power to craft and coordinate new policies internally and externally (Sorensen, 2015: 66). Another significant policy change is the creation of an alternative financial institutional system which gives China normative power to shape the regional order. This includes the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015. The rhetorical shifts reflect Beijing’s wish to actively shape a more favourable and peaceful international environment for China’s national rejuvenation (Sorensen, 2015; Yan, 2014).

However, informed scholars also pointed out that despite China’s efforts in advocating the ‘peaceful rise’ rhetoric in which the principle of ‘non-interference’ is said to be upheld in its foreign policy, China’s actual performance to adhere to these rhetoric and principle in critical issues such as the South China Sea territorial dispute has been undermined by its increasingly assertive stance and proactive imperatives (Nie, 2016; Poh & Li, 2017). A main contribution of the constructivist school is therefore to show the discrepancy between rhetorical articulation and *realpolitik* performance in the OBOR initiative. To explain this discrepancy, the approach of realism would do a good job.