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Research article

Can China's Developmental Peace Be an Alternative to Liberal Peace? A Critical Feminist Interrogation

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Abstract

A growing body of literature within international relations (IR) has attempted to understand China's approach to peacebuilding, so-called developmental peace, mostly in relation to critiques of liberal peace. The literature shares an assumption that developmental peace is distinct from liberal peace and discusses whether Chinese peacebuilding efforts might function as an alternative to the liberal approach. The discussion largely draws on conventional IR perspectives involving only limited engagement with critical scholars. It therefore lacks analysis of hierarchies related to gender and local power relations. By contrast, this article critically interrogates existing arguments to examine the extent to which developmental peace differs from liberal peace and in what sense it can be seen as an alternative. Informed by feminist IR, the article explores three core elements of developmental peace: developmentalism, the absence of the political and South-South cooperation. It shows that developmental peace largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of liberal peace by marginalising women and minority groups, and failing to prioritise local needs. Based on these findings, it argues that China might be an emerging actor that, in a nominal sense, can diversify the field, but that developmental peace does not constitute an alternative perspective in any substantive sense.

Keywords: *developmental peace, liberal peace, feminist IR, China, peacebuilding*

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Introduction

A growing amount of work has been done to better understand the Chinese approach to peacebuilding, referred to as 'Chinese peace' (Kuo 2015), 'peace through development' (Wang 2018) or, more commonly, 'developmental peace' (He 2017). The emergence of developmental peace is primarily understood as part of China's increasing interest in participating in the global governance system. Rationalist studies tend to understand developmental peace in connection with the realist interpretation of China's rise. They share a sceptical view that China is driven by its self-interest (Richmond and Tellidis 2014; Berthelemy 2011; Mohan & Power 2008; Gong 2020). They also assert that developmental peace can be understood as China's realpolitik struggle for maximising its power (Huang 2013; Hirono, Jiang & Lanteigne 2019; Adhikari 2021). International relations (IR) research based on constructivism tends to view developmental peace through the lens of ideational factors. Specifically, it interprets this concept as part of China's effort to be perceived as a responsible power on the global stage, aimed at mitigating fears that its rise might not be peaceful (Hirono & Lanteigne 2011; Teitt 2020). Additionally, this approach is seen as a way for China to gain soft power by developing and promoting a different set of norms that may appeal to other countries (Wong 2021). This view emphasises China's distinctive approach, which underlines China's role as an atypical great power, setting itself apart from Western powers (Richardson 2011).

In both literatures, developmental peace is mostly discussed in relation to *liberal peace*, the mainstream form of peacebuilding led by liberal democracies. Both approaches share the assumption that China's developmental peace is distinct from liberal peace, and shape a dichotomous discourse on liberal peace and developmental peace. In most of the literature, the extent to which and how developmental peace constitutes an alternative to liberal peace are central questions. While some argue that developmental peace could complement liberal peace and compensate for its limitations (e.g. Zhao 2011; He 2017, 2019; Wang 2018), others contend that it is more of a disrupter in peacebuilding (e.g. Höglund & Orjuela 2012; de Carvalho & de Coning 2013; Abdenur 2016). Moreover, this growing body of literature has been dominated by conventional IR perspectives and involved only limited engagement with critical scholars. The concept of 'peace' in the literature on developmental peace is conceptualised through a state-centric perspective, which neglects to acknowledge or address inequalities and insecurity at the individual and community levels. As in traditional IR, the discussion on developmental peace has been treated as gender-neutral, reinforc-

ing the assumption that developmental peace and gender constitute two separate fields of inquiry. Thus, analyses of hierarchies, including those related to gender and local power relations, are largely absent.

Against this background, this article provides a critical analysis of developmental peace and interrogates questions within the literature concerning the extent to which developmental peace differs from liberal peace and whether developmental peace can ever be seen as an alternative. The article employs a feminist IR perspective, which allows exploration of the absence, silence and marginalisation as well as the (re)production of diverse hierarchies of power. This ultimately enables a problematisation of the dichotomous discourse on developmental peace and liberal peace.

The analysis demonstrates that China's developmental peace largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of liberal peace by marginalising women and minorities, and failing to prioritise local needs. Based on these findings, the article questions existing arguments about the distinctiveness and complementarity of China's approach to peacebuilding. While China might diversify peacebuilding in a nominal sense, it does not add an alternative perspective in a substantive sense. More specifically, it might serve as a substitute for liberal peace, but it is unlikely to be a better option from the perspectives of women and the marginalised. Through this analysis and argument, the article makes two contributions to the literature on China's developmental peace. First, it enhances the understanding of developmental peace by drawing attention to power dynamics and gendered underpinnings, which are largely absent from the existing literature. Second, by opening up a new discussion informed by critical perspectives, it provides an opportunity to scrutinise the ongoing discussion on whether China's developmental peace could function as an alternative norm.

The following section discusses existing research on China's developmental peace and critiques of liberal peace. The methodology section examines feminist IR theories and the specific methodological approach taken in this article. The next section provides a critical analysis of developmental peace from a feminist IR perspective and discusses whether developmental peace can be seen as an alternative. The article concludes by setting out a future research agenda.

Developmental peace and liberal peace

The growing scholarly interest in China's peacebuilding has produced a considerable body of literature in contemporary IR and developed the concept of developmental peace. The literature on China's peacebuilding efforts emphasises the differences between the principles of developmental peace and liberal peace (He 2021). The core idea is that while liberal democracies promote democracy, good governance and the neoliberal form of market-based economics in their peacebuilding efforts, China's peace engagement primarily emphasises economic

development and a strong central government (Lei 2011). Table 1 summarises the key differences between developmental peace and liberal peace discussed in the literature.

Table 1: Key differences between developmental peace and liberal peace

Key area	Developmental peace	Liberal peace
Actor	China, as part of its expanded engagement in global governance	Mainstream peacebuilding approach led by liberal democracies
Core value	Peace through development, with economic development at the core	Peace-as-governance, with liberal democracy at the core
Political aspect	A strong central government (strengthen the existing government), social stability	Modern political reform, promotion of civil society, the rule of law, human rights, gender equality
Economic aspect	Emphasis on developmental state based on its own experience	Neoliberal economic ideology, market-based economy and free trade
Conditionality/ interference	No interference, no political strings attached	Necessary interventions, conditionality
Approach in practice	Top-down practice, based on South-South cooperation	Top-down and bottom-up, lack of local ownership

Source: Author

Liberal peace

Due to its dominance in post–Cold War peace engagement, liberal peace has been understood as representing the concept of peacebuilding as a whole rather than a particular form of it (Selby 2013). It is characterised by and based on liberal values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law and multilateralism (Richmond 2006; Campbellm, Chandler & Sabaratnam 2011). In practice, liberal peace interventions have largely focused on political reform and institutionalisation such as legal reform, and promotion of civil society and good governance (Sabaratnam 2011). Thus it is also referred to as 'peace-as-governance' (Richmond & Franks, 2009). While the political element of peacebuilding is heavily emphasised, the

economic element does not take up a large part of liberal peace intervention. Nonetheless, it promotes economic development in conflict-affected countries in the form of economic liberalisation with market-oriented development and free trade. As part of the political element, gender equality is highly emphasised in the liberal peace framework, as represented by the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda. The WPS agenda is a global policy norm that includes a range of international efforts to increase the role of women in global politics, and to promote and protect the rights of women in fragile contexts. The WPS agenda is understood as part of liberal peace (Demetriou & Hadjipavlou 2016) and even referred to as 'another piece in the liberal peace jigsaw' (Aroussi 2017: 30).

Although liberal peace has been praised as moderately successful and is still regarded by some as best suited to conflict management, its hegemony has been questioned by critical scholars since the 1990s, following the failure of various liberal peace projects (Richmond 2006). Much existing research engages with the criticisms of liberal peace in order to develop arguments for the complementarity of developmental peace. Liberal peace is criticised from a range of perspectives, including among realist, Marxist, liberal, constructivist, feminist, critical and post-colonial scholars (Richmond & Mac Ginty 2015). Similarly, critiques of the WPS agenda have enjoyed rich and insightful engagement from a multidisciplinary body of literature in law, development studies, politics and international relations (Shepherd 2020). Although these critiques cover a wide range of issues, this section focuses on critiques related to the economic and political domain and those that pay attention to the local, dimensions central to developmental peace and the gender dimensions of each element.

First, liberal peace is criticised for its adherence to neoliberal economic policy. Economic disparities are often not prioritised in liberal peace. For example, critics argue that the WPS agenda has neglected the negative impact of the neoliberal system on women and marginalised groups (True 2012; Hewitt & True 2021). It is also said to have failed to bring economic prosperity or sustainability to post-conflict countries (Richmond 2006; Richmond & Franks 2009), and to have caused gendered harms and inequalities (Duncanson 2016; Bergeron, Cohn & Duncanson 2017). The push for free market reforms is argued to have led to economic inequalities in many contexts. Feminist critics point out that liberal peace with a neoliberal economic ideology has jeopardised the well-being and security of women and other marginalised groups rather than contribute to any improvement. It is well documented that the globalised economic system, including financial and trade liberalisation, has deepened gendered (economic) inequalities in societies and even escalated violence against women (True 2012; Hewitt & True 2021). This is exemplified by how the gendered division of labour has concentrated women's employment in the informal sector and low-skilled, labour-intensive work. In addition, neoliberalist strategies have been criticised for their instrumental ap-

proach to gender equality. For example, 'smart economics' sees women's labour as a means to achieve growth and increase profits rather than in terms of gender equality (Bergeron & Healy 2015).

The political aspects of liberal peace and the WPS agenda have also been critiqued. The heavy focus on state building is seen to come at the expense of addressing root causes of conflicts such as inequalities, lack of accountability, local grievances and ethnic tensions (Hameiri 2011). Imposing and rushing into institution building in post-conflict countries has been criticised as resulting in weak and corrupt governments (Öjendal & Ou 2015). This one-size-fits-all approach, which overlooks the importance of cultural context and local norms, has also faced criticism (Eriksen 2009). In addition, the inclusivity of the scope of WPS policies and practices has been widely questioned, in part due to the language ambiguity in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 which has led to different interpretations of subsequent resolutions, and thus variable implementation in practice (Alvarado Cóbar, Bjertén-Günther & Jung 2018). This language often reduces gender to a women's issue and has excluded other marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ (Kirby & Shepherd 2016; Hagen 2016).

Finally, the critiques highlight the lack of locally driven politics in liberal peace theories and practices. In the same vein, Eurocentrism in liberal peace has been singled out for reflecting the concerns and priorities of the West or the Global North (Sabaratnam 2013). Traditional donors with a liberal peace agenda tend to promote western values and institutions as universal standards, and to overlook the diversity of societies and context-sensitivity (Zaum 2012; Richmond 2011). The WPS agenda has been criticised for its western dominance (Aroussi 2017; Parashar 2016; Pratt 2013; Basu 2016). The agenda has been largely led by traditional western donors shaping priorities and agendas with the support of several UN Security Council resolutions, while the views of non-western donors have often been excluded (Jung & Tsujisaka 2019; Aroussi 2017).

Developmental peace

Developmental peace is often discussed in relation to and differentiated from liberal peace. Mostly, it can be explained by Chinese officials' belief in the relationships between development, social stability and a strong state. Foot names it a 'triadic model', which is summarised as 'development as primary, stability as being equivalent to peace, and good governance as corresponding to pragmatic, effective governance' (Foot 2020: 246). This triadic model can be further understood with historical background. Its primary focus on development, or so-called developmentalism, has been at the centre of Chinese politics. It dates to 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power with its socialist development model, which further evolved with the policy of Reform and Opening Up in 1978. Development has consistently been emphasised as a primary solution to various

issues, such as social stability, by different leaderships. It is exemplified by Deng Xiaoping's legacy on 'development is the absolute principle' and Jiang Zemin's stance on development as 'the party's top priority in governing and rejuvenating the country' (Meng 2023). This notion of comprehensive development has further served as a legacy of humanitarianism in China (Hirono 2013). While one could argue that Western liberalism also entails economic advancement as one of its policy aims, China's developmentalism differs from liberalism in that it is based on collectivism, statism and the preference of cultural particularism (Karmazin 2023). In addition, the emphasis on the state's leading role on stability is associated with both a Confucian understanding of state and communist features of the Chinese political system. Historically, the Chinese state has been understood as the moral agent (Fairbank 1968), and the ideal of a well-ordered state has been seen as a key element of humanitarianism (Hirono 2013). This is evidenced in the statement made by Ambassador Liu Zhenmin in 2009: 'The primary task of post-conflict peacebuilding is to restore the administrative functions of state organs of the country concerned' (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the UN 2009). Within the Chinese political system and culture, the role of non-state actors such as civil society in foreign assistance has been limited.

On the other hand, the Chinese rhetoric of responsible power and the idea of peaceful development (or peaceful rise) are crucial to understanding China's peace engagement as a commitment to making a peaceful international environment more broadly (Richardson 2011). First, the concept of responsible power has been widely used by the Chinese government to promote its commitment to safeguarding peace and promote development (Xinhua 2019). It is often argued that China promotes this term to integrate into the international system and to gain an international reputation as a legitimate great power (Suzuki 2008). Under this rhetorical concept, China has expanded its involvement and influence in humanitarian activities, such as in conflict-affected countries. It is also notable that the concept highlights China's position as an atypical great power, distinguishing itself from Western power (Richardson 2011). Second, in the early 2000s under Hu Jintao, China began to push for the idea of peaceful development, which has been widely used to assure the international community that China's rise would not be a threat. In his address at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2005, Hu Jintao stated that 'China is committed to the road of peaceful development and the mutually beneficial and win-win strategy of opening up. . . . The more developed China is, the greater contribution it will make to the world' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2009). It articulates that China's development would be achieved through peaceful means and would contribute to global peace and prosperity.

Given this historical and political context, the dominant understanding of key characteristics of developmental peace can be outlined as follows. First, as the

name indicates, it is distinguished by its primary focus on the economic aspects of peacebuilding. The concept envisages state-led economic development as a prerequisite for sustainable peace. Infrastructure development in particular is continuously highlighted, which strengthens the relevance of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China emphasises a strong central government to ensure peace and stability and also places the state at the centre of peacebuilding (Foot 2020). Consequently, it is understood to promote government-to-government engagement rather than multilaterally or through direct engagement with local organisations, which leaves little room for civil society (Hirono 2013; Wong & Li 2021). In addition, China's principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries is also applied to developmental peace. Chinese foreign assistance is known to have fewer political conditionalities than western countries' assistance (Strange et al. 2017). In relation to this non-interference principle, the human rights agenda is excluded in developmental peace. China's rhetoric on South-South cooperation is also important. It claims that its relationship with other countries in the Global South is based on mutuality and equality (Asante 2018). By highlighting its position as a developing country, China applies its own experience as a developmental state achieving rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation to other countries in need.

Various approaches have attempted to account for China's increased participation in global peace governance in academic literature. According to Yuan (2022), there are two dominant views on developmental peace vis-à-vis liberal peace: as a challenger and as a status quo actor. First, those who see China as a challenger argue that it is undermining the processes and outcomes of liberal peace. This is exemplified in several historical cases, such as the Syrian Civil War which China framed as terrorism rather than a humanitarian matter (Abdenur 2016). This view is in line with the rationalist approach that understands China's motivations in terms of material interests. Some argue that China's peace engagement is driven by pragmatic needs, such as its own economic interests regarding potential access to natural resources and energy or security concerns (Hirono, Jiang & Lanteigne 2019). Similarly, there is an understanding that China is attempting to obtain global hegemony or to change the international system (Cooley 2015). From this point of view, developmental peace is associated with China's ambition to gain an international reputation, and ultimately to become a great power by developing and promoting a different set of norms that can appeal to other countries (Wong 2021).

Second, there is the perspective that China is contributing to maintain the status quo in peacebuilding rather than attempting to disrupt the international efforts within the framework of liberal peace. Such research sees China as not having revisionist intentions (Alden & Large 2015), arguing that China does not aim to undermine liberal norms such as democracy and good governance, and

remains indifferent to them (Givens 2011). They elaborate further that China positions itself as a supporter of liberal peace suggesting that they align with the liberal peace framework without attempting to propose an alternative peacebuilding model (Richmond & Tellidis 2014). Chinese scholars and practitioners often argue that developmental peace can complement the limitations of liberal peace, suggesting that it can coexist with, rather than oppose as antithesis, the liberal peace framework (He 2019; Yuan 2022). While these two approaches might differ in their understanding of China's intentions, there is a shared assumption. The literature agrees that China's developmental peace is clearly distinct from liberal peace and could function as a positive or negative alternative to liberal peace. This shapes a dichotomous discourse on liberal peace and developmental peace.

Feminist IR as a methodological approach to (developmental) peace

This article argues that the prevailing discourse on developmental peace in the literature examined above is predominately shaped by conventional IR perspectives, with only limited engagement from critical scholars. The existing literature on developmental peace approaches the concept of peace from a state-centric perspective, and is therefore unable to account for various qualities of peace, such as inequalities or insecurity at the individual and community levels. The discussion on developmental peace has been treated as gender-neutral, as if developmental peace and gender are two separate and unrelated entities. Moreover, hierarchies of power, such as gender and local power relations, are overlooked and not integrated into the analysis. This is in contrast to the wide range of theoretical perspectives in liberal peace critiques, which foster a robust debate within IR and show that the current literature captures only a partial picture of developmental peace. This limited understanding raises further questions about how much developmental peace and liberal peace differ.

Against this background, the article aims to contribute to the scholarly discussion by revisiting existing arguments about the distinctiveness of developmental peace. Specifically, it takes feminist IR as a theoretical foundation and uses a feminist perspective to conduct a critical inquiry into developmental peace. Feminist IR scholarly works have successfully brought gender perspectives into the international security realm and attempted to make gender visible in the IR discipline (e.g. Enloe 1989; Tickner 1992). In this theoretical tradition, gender is understood as both an empirical and an analytical category. The former concerns how women and men are differently affected by political processes and consequences. The latter indicates an analysis of a hierarchical system of masculine-feminine differentiations and constructions of masculinity and femininity. Feminist IR scholars have highlighted how conceptualisations of national security and protection both shape and are shaped by gender norms and hierarchies (Åse & Wendt 2021; Tickner & Sjoberg 2011). Others have shown the gendered nature of violence and conflict

(Yadav & Horn 2021), including how violence is deeply rooted in power inequalities and ideologies of male supremacy (Hudson 2009). The gendered nature of peace (processes) has also been documented and theorised (Pankhurst 2008; Duncanson 2016). Scholars informed by feminist institutionalism have provided an analytical tool to examine the underlying gendered assumptions in formal and informal institutions (Holmes et al. 2019). Post-colonial feminist scholars go further, attempting to theorise gendered and racialised dimensions underpinning foreign policy discourse and practice (Achilleos-Sarll 2018; Hudson 2016).

Unlike more traditional IR literature based on realist ideas and a narrow conceptualisation of peace and security, feminist IR conceptualises peace more broadly and takes gender power dynamics into account (Hewitt & True 2021; Duncanson 2016). From this viewpoint, war is a continuous event, especially for the marginalised (Cockburn 2004). Feminist peace research has developed as a field to become a key programme in peace research and IR more broadly. Using gender as an analytical tool, feminist peace research provides both epistemological and ontological frameworks for inquiring into peace (Wibben 2021; Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2021). This means that feminist peace research does not just study gender-related issues in the domain of peace. It also provides critical analysis for a fundamental shift in our understanding of peace, and visions of transformative (gender) power relations inextricably linked to peace (Wibben et al. 2019).

A critical feminist perspective on peace research has several implications. To begin with, feminist inquiry into peace enables researchers to explore absences, silences, marginalisation and power differences in political discourses and practice (Ackerly & True 2008). It also allows us to reveal how intersecting oppressions resulting from hierarchies of different social categories operate and are naturalised (Achilleos-Sarll 2018). In other words, this perspective can shed light on what or who has been silenced or excluded in the real world and in previous studies. For example, it seeks to research the experiences of marginalised subjects of conflicts and peace, such as women and other minority groups, and in doing so to make their presence and agency visible (Peterson 2010). Similarly, critical insights informed by feminist theories can help decolonise and decentre modes of thinking and knowing (Wibben et al. 2019), offer an alternative perspective and challenge the traditional, Eurocentric gaze (Björkdahl & Mannergren Selimovic 2021). Its analytical resources allow researchers to unpack various power dynamics, especially at the intersections of different axes, through what is often referred to as intersectionality. This means that a feminist perspective can advance analytical capacity of the complexities of sexualised, racialised and gendered hierarchies of power (Peterson 2010; Achilleos-Sarll 2018).

This article argues that new knowledge generated through this methodological approach ultimately enables a substantive discussion on the distinctiveness of

developmental peace and in what sense it can serve as an alternative norm in the global governance of peace. First, it provides a lens to zoom in on absence, marginalisation and difference in the discourse and practice of developmental peace. This makes it possible to account for the experiences of marginalised subjects such as women and minorities in relation to developmental peace, a perspective that is currently missing from the literature. This approach also exposes some of the silences, for instance, in the 'apolitical' stance of developmental peace. Second, a feminist IR approach enables an analysis of how China, through its peace discourse, (re)produces gendered and racialised hierarchies of power. China has a unique position as an emerging power and non-traditional actor, as opposed to a traditional power in the Global North. China has promoted its image as an equal partner in South-South cooperation, but has faced much criticism for its neo-colonial practices. Exposing diverse hierarchies of power helps account for China's complex positionality and relationships with other actors, such as traditional actors and local populations. Last, it also helps unpack the underpinning gendered assumptions and practices in institutions – in this case, within developmental peace discourse.

In conducting a critical examination of developmental peace, this article draws both primary source data and secondary sources. By secondary sources, it refers to previous studies in the developmental peace literature. Even as a bourgeoning literature, however, existing empirical studies are insufficient. The article therefore also refers to some of the literature on Chinese aid, international cooperation programmes such as the BRI and foreign policy more broadly. These studies can provide key insights into developmental peace, as its core principles are rooted in Chinese foreign policy rhetoric and overall directions. In addition, primary source data is used to supplement the secondary sources. These sources include: (*a*) Chinese official policy documents published in English; and (*b*) leadership statements related to China's international cooperation. The analysis is limited to the period from 2014 to 2023, after Xi Jinping took office, during which China's presence and influence in global governance grew significantly. The first two were chosen to identify the Chinese government's official stance and policy directions, especially in relation to its peacebuilding and to gender-related issues which are largely absent from existing research. The policy materials proved useful as they offer direct insight into Chinese government's official stance, including objectives, strategies and positions on those issues. They also provide direct access to the official language Chinese government, reflecting the policy and societal discourse. This makes them appropriate for analysing how China (re)interprets and (re)shapes concepts in relation to developmental peace, particularly feminist perspectives which can uncover both visible and invisible narratives underlying these policies.

Analysis of developmental peace from a feminist IR perspective

This article focuses on three core elements: developmentalism, the absence of the political and South-South cooperation. These were chosen as an analytical focus because they represent the rhetoric of Chinese distinctiveness and correspond to the points of liberal peace critiques examined in Section 2. On the basis of this analysis, the article revisits an existing question within the literature: Can developmental peace be seen as an alternative to liberal peace?

Developmentalism

One of the main features of developmental peace is its focus on state-led economic development. The adverse impact of conflict on the economy and socio-economic inequality, and that economic issues are the drivers of conflict and insecurity are well-documented (Duncanson 2019). Developmental peace's approach to economic development seems to have the potential to contribute to sustainable peace in conflict-affected societies (Wong 2021). However, developmentalism in the discourse and in practice requires a more critical investigation that takes account of intertwined power relations.

First, critiques of China's overseas development cooperation may partially apply to the concept of developmental peace considering development is an important component of its peacebuilding efforts, making it a topic worth further exploration. These critiques often highlight China's domination of the local economy and exploitation of natural resources, as well as heavy debt burdens and imbalanced power dynamics faced by numerous countries, exemplified by the so-called debt-trap policy associated with China's lending practices. Such issues have fuelled accusations of Chinese neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism (Asante 2018; Lumumba-Kasongo 2011). However, although China's lending practices are not without issues, it should be noted that the intentions and actual outcomes of its debt-trap policy remain uncertain. For example, Brautigam argues that her case studies do not support the claim that China intentionally entraps countries in debt. She suggests that while Chinese loans may be driven by economic and strategic interests, they lack the malevolent intent implied by the debt-trap narrative. Carmony supports Brautigam's argument by asserting that China is not deliberately engaging in debt-trap diplomacy, though he highlights the potential negative consequences, such as increasing dependency of African countries on China (Carmody 2020). These studies suggest that critiques of China's development cooperation stems from its key characteristics, which involve a combination of expertise, loans, technology and investment –elements that are not only intertwined but also mutually reinforcing. This reflects China's approach to foreign assistance, where its motivations to protect its security and development are seen as indivisible (Jones & Teitt 2020).

While the impact of debt-trap diplomacy remains a subject of debate, its potential negative impact on the local populations is more likely considering its

exclusive focus on state-level engagement and the absence of deliberate policies to promote inclusivity. As highlighted in the previous literature, developmental peace is characterised by a state-centric perspective, with a strong central government and state-led economic development consistently positioned at the core of policy, discourse and practices. This emphasis on statism is deeply embedded in China's developmentalism (Karmazin 2023). This implies less focus on the local population such as lack of direct engagement with local organisations and civil society (Hirono 2013; Wong & Li 2021). This concern has been reflected in some cases such as in Myanmar, where China is argued to have overlooked local needs and local contexts and to have reinforced elite controls in Myanmar (Adhikari 2021). Moreover, the implications of China's involvement through debt-related investments and infrastructure projects have double-edged implications for vulnerable local populations. While there is a potential for positive impacts, such as job creation and improved infrastructure, these projects could also exacerbate existing inequalities and lead to further marginalisation if not managed with careful attention to social impacts. For example, it remains questionable whether these initiatives will result in meaningful job creation for women and minorities, who are often employed in low-wage, low-skilled, precarious positions in large infrastructure projects. This concern is heightened by widespread claims that Chinese companies bring in their own labourers, thereby reducing local employment opportunities and creating uneven development (Brautigam 2009; Carmody 2016).

Furthermore, China's developmentalism in its peace engagement also has significant implications for the gender-related aspects. Specifically, the issue of problematic and gendered developmentalism is evident in the developmental peace discourse, where the focus tends to be on women's socio-economic rights. First, I argue that China's approach to women in the labour force is rooted in an instrumentalist view. Notably, this mirrors the World Bank's practices, which frame gender equality as a driver of economic growth and grounded neoliberal rationality while advocating for more equality (Prügl 2016). In Chinese foreign policy documents and statements, terms such as 'women's socio-economic rights', 'economic autonomy' and 'economic empowerment' are frequently used as rhetoric with reference to promoting gender equality, especially in foreign policy areas (e.g. Permanent Mission of PRC to the UN 2022). This view is in part associated with the women's liberation movement in China, but also with China's state feminism. The latter was heavily based on economic pragmatism and an instrumentalist view of gender equality. China's state feminism has its foundation in socialism and has been exercised with top-down measures with a focus on women's social advancement since the Mao era (1949–1976). Under a proclamation by Mao Zedong 'Women hold up half the sky', women's participation in the labour market has been actively promoted in domestic China, with a background of the need for a female workforce in the national economy when

the CCP came to power in 1949 (Blanchard & Lin 2016; Wang & Zhang 2010; Wang 2005). The state-controlled women's movement in China has traditionally focused on women's affairs rather than gender (power) relations *per se*, especially those that are related to state formulation such as economic participation in the labour market as well as women's reproductive role.

Second, even if China has not integrated neoliberal ideology into its economic policies, some aspects of its practices align with those found in the globalised economic system. The gendered division of labour is a representative example. Research shows that Chinese-owned firms and factories abroad exhibit highly gendered labour practices. For instance, low-skilled work in Chinese garment factories in Angola is predominantly performed by women (Oya & Schaefer 2019). The traditional understanding of the gender division of labour is also shown in its development aid projects. A large proportion of China's aid projects on vocational training and employment entail sewing and embroidery skills development for women, by providing either training or equipment (Custer et al. 2021). This is an area of work in the garment industry that is already female-dominated, understood as labour-intensive and low paid, and risks reinforcing a further gendered division of labour and escalating the feminisation of poverty, and ultimately the gendered unequal distribution of resources.

Such patterns indicate that developmentalism in China's peacebuilding shares several of the limitations of liberal peace. Its practices appear to overlook local needs, making local economic prosperity and even development less likely –a criticism often directed at liberal peace efforts. Furthermore, while China addresses economic concerns and agendas such as poverty and economic growth, it overlooks the issues of economic disparity and inequality. Additionally, similar to neoliberal economic policies, China's approach to promoting economic development is prone to reinforce a gendered division of labour, where women's employment is concentrated in the labour-intensive or informal sectors. By replicating these existing limitations, China's heavy emphasis on economic development in peacebuilding is unlikely to lead to substantially improved conditions.

The absence of the political

The 'apolitical' stance of China's foreign policy has been widely discussed. It is explicitly promoted through the rhetoric of non-interference, and respect for the local socio-political situation and for sovereignty. By 'apolitical' or the absence of the political, this article does not imply that China's peace engagement is truly non-political. Instead, it challenges this rhetoric and problematises the implications of this claimed apolitical stance. Using a feminist perspective to uncover what is invisible or even silenced in the discourse, this article argues that this deliberately apolitical stance should be regarded as a highly political act, characterised by its silence on key elements of peace.

To begin with, China does not address the issues of human security, human rights and other liberal democratic values, which can result in local people being left behind (Wong 2021). Its foreign policy stance of non-interference reduces the human rights agenda in peacebuilding to the right to development. The effects have been documented in various contexts. Höglund and Orjuela (2012) show how China privileged the regime in Sri Lanka using the principle of sovereignty, which stood by during or fuelled human rights violations. China has been criticised for its engagement with the Sudanese government at the beginning of the Darfur conflict, which perpetuated the conflict and human rights violations (International Crisis Group 2017). This is echoed in the case of Myanmar, where the bilateral relationship is based on a policy of non-intervention. China's exclusive engagement with the military government and local elites through arms sales and aid has marginalised local populations (Wong & Li 2021; Adhikari 2021).

In addition, this apolitical stance is associated with indifference to or ignorance of gender relations. Zhang and Huang (2023) argue that China has not integrated gender norms into its foreign assistance because gender equality is regarded as a domestic affair in which foreign actors should not intervene. However, China's approaches to and implementation of the WPS agenda have been documented in several studies (Liu 2019; Li 2022; Hamilton, Pagot & Shepherd 2021). These show that China implements the WPS agenda in UN peacekeeping operations (PKOs) focused on humanitarian assistance to women affected by conflict (Liu 2019). Moreover, there is an explicit focus on socio-economic development in the context of promoting gender equality abroad (Cai 2021). China has promoted women's health, education and training, and poverty alleviation through its aid projects, donations to UN agencies and other South-South cooperation projects (Cai 2021). Remarks by President Xi Jinping at the Global Leaders' Meeting in 2015 also reflect that China pays specific attention to social development in areas such as education, training and the employment sector, as a means of supporting gender equality (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2015).

However, China's foreign policy pays insufficient attention to an agenda on women's political participation, which is limited to its commitment to the WPS agenda. Issues of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are also notably absent from the peace and gender-related agenda in Chinese foreign policy. This contrasts sharply with traditional western actors, for whom women's political participation and SGBV are central to the liberal peace framework, especially the WPS agenda including through their national action plans (Hudson 2012). This omission can be partly attributed to the close association of the issues of women's participation and SGBV with gender power imbalances, which are both silenced in China's discourse and practice, and partly by China's own limitations. The absence of women in Chinese politics was highlighted after the 20th Party Congress, where none of the 24 Politburo members were women (Master 2023).

Similarly, LGBTQ+ issues are invisible in Chinese foreign assistance in the context of gender equality and foreign policy more generally. This should not come as a surprise, given the alarming status of LGBTQ+ rights in mainland China and the government's silence on the matter (Jeffreys 2017).

This demonstrates that China's peacebuilding policy direction and practice fall short of the political aspects of peacebuilding, particularly due to its silence on key elements of peace related to power imbalances. It seems clear that the limitations of developmental peace rest on its exclusionary practices. It overlooks a number of key elements of the well-being and security of women and other marginalised groups, such as human security, women's political participation, SGBV and LGBTQ+ issues. It also condones human rights violations in various contexts, potentially contributing to the perpetuation of conflict. It has illustrated that the feminist perspective, employed as a key analytical lens, has been crucial in uncovering these silenced aspects, particularly those affecting marginalised groups.

South-South cooperation

A core element of developmental peace is China's attempt to differentiate itself from traditional actors by suggesting that it can offer an alternative to conflict-affected countries and the global governance of peace. This is in line with the framework of South-South cooperation that China promotes as a comprehensive strategic and cooperative partnership based on political equality, and mutual trust and learning (Asante 2018). Within this framework, China has emphasised its distinct position as a developing country and invoked a common identity with sharable experiences that challenge the donor–recipient binary (Mawdsley 2012). It is argued to be best understood in the context of relationality, which goes beyond the traditional binary donor–recipient relation and the material aspects commonly emphasised in mainstream views on foreign aid (Benabdallah 2022). Using a feminist perspective, this article unpacks both the discourse and practice of South-South cooperation. Specifically, it utilises the analytical tools of the feminist lens to explore power dynamics and the complexities of racialised and gendered hierarchies.

Mawdsley (2020) shows that ideas on sexuality and gender are not confined to North-South relations, but also ingrained in the South-South relations. She argues that racialised and sexualised hierarchies, which are mostly discussed in a North-South context from a postcolonial perspective, have been deepening in South-South cooperation too (Mawdsley 2020). Cultural and national superiority can be observed in China's discourse on developmental peace. China's focus on state-led economic development in peacebuilding is driven by the idea of sharing its own experience. Within this discourse, the binary between who gives (teaches) and who receives (learns) is clear – that is, who plays a superior role and who is assigned a subordinate role. This is in line with what Nyíri frames as the 'Chinese

discourse of modernisation', which is that 'China can transmit its own advanced experience to those less fortunate' (Nyíri 2013).

This also operates a form of gendered hierarchy. In elaborating on an example of Chinese PKO medical units in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), a white paper on China's participation in PKOs states that 'Touched by the love and care from the units, children in the village called the female members their Chinese mothers' (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2020: 10). Portraying Chinese women peacekeepers as carers reveals problematic practice of creating a racialised and sexualised hierarchy of power. This not only perpetuates China's conservative gender norms – emphasising women's motherhood – but also postulates a hierarchical parent-child relationship between itself and the local population in the DRC.

Similarly, the other end of peace, where China's peace engagement takes place, is largely absent but also 'otherised'. Adhikari (2021) argues that Chinese conflict management in Myanmar has overlooked local needs and local contexts, and reinforced elite control, complaints that have frequently been directed at liberal peace. It is also worth noting that China understands the WPS agenda as part of its peace engagement in conflict-affected countries, rather than an issue of gender equality that is applied to its own society and governance (Liu 2019; Asante 2020). Within its official engagement with the WPS agenda, such as in the UN Security Council Open Debate on WPS, China frames itself as a provider or supporter (Hamilton, Pagot & Shepherd 2021). This replicates the binary understanding of itself as a donor and of others as mere recipients, a limitation of the WPS agenda highlighted by feminist scholars.

Finally, China attempts to export its own concerns and agendas rather than prioritise local needs and perspectives. Despite the rhetoric on equal partnership and South-South cooperation, it replicates the limitations of traditional western actors by overlooking local needs and priorities, as well as locally driven politics. This is particularly evident in its influence on vulnerable local populations, including women and minority groups, who are often the most affected by peacebuilding interventions. This echoes previous research findings that China's asymmetrical relationship with African countries does not fundamentally differ from the African-Western relationship (Tull 2006). The racialised and gendered hierarchies embedded in developmental peace reproduce and reinforce the power imbalance between donor and recipient. In this sense, since it largely replicates rather than addresses the limitations of liberal peace, it is questionable whether China's developmental peace can be seen as an alternative.

Conclusion

This article analyses the concept and practice of China's developmental peace through its three core elements: developmentalism, the absence of the political

and South-South cooperation. It employs a feminist perspective, which allows for a focused examination of the absence, marginalisation and differences in the discourse and practice of developmental peace. In particular, this approach makes it possible to account for the perspectives of marginalised subjects, such as women and minorities, in relation to developmental peace, while also addressing the complexities of power relations by exposing diverse hierarchies of power. The article finds that China tends to overlook local needs in its foreign assistance, pays little attention to economic inequalities and reinforces the gendered division of labour. The analysis further shows that China's apolitical stance in its peace discourse and practice has several limitations, especially in relation to the marginalisation of local people and the exclusion of human rights, as well as issues related to the gender power imbalance. Furthermore, despite the rhetoric on equal partnership, racialised and gendered hierarchies are embedded in developmental peace discourse and practice.

Based on these findings, the article argues that China largely replicates and reinforces the limitations of the traditional peacebuilding approach by marginalising women and minorities, and in failing to prioritise local needs. It argues that China does not provide an alternative approach to the global governance of peace. This questions China's identity as a non-traditional, emerging actor in global governance. With its own approach and agenda, China might have been able to diversify a field that has been dominated by traditional western actors. However, the outcomes of developmental peace efforts are unlikely to be so different from existing approaches. From the perspectives of vulnerable local populations, including women and marginalised groups, developmental peace is unlikely to offer a better alternative. The analysis demonstrates the need to challenge the established western–non-western dichotomy, or the binary understanding of traditional and emerging actors, in the literature.

By problematising the understanding of developmental peace in the existing literature, this article makes two contributions to the literature on China's developmental peace. First, it has increased the understanding of developmental peace by revealing absences, silences and marginalisation. The feminist IR approach has enabled an analysis of complex power dynamics within developmental peace, such as racialised and gendered hierarchies of power, and rhetoric such as equal partnership under South-South cooperation. This analysis makes it possible to interrogate the current debate on whether China's developmental peace can serve as an alternative norm.

While this article generates useful insights and makes contributions, it also raises new questions for future research. First, this relevant area of academic research would greatly benefit from empirical studies on the gender dimensions of developmental peace, especially regarding its implications on the ground. As some researchers point out, the question of gender in China's foreign assistance, such as

the BRI, is largely lacking in academic literature and policy research (Ruwanpura & Ferdoush 2023). It would be particularly essential to examine gendered implications of China's infrastructure development projects considering the crucial role of infrastructure in peacebuilding and China's heavy focus on infrastructure in its foreign assistance. Moreover, China's foreign policy is often criticised for its inconsistency, and the principles of developmental peace at a conceptual level do not necessarily correspond to actual practices and effects on the ground. Empirical studies on discrepancies between principles, policies and practice, as well as on intended and unintended consequences, would contribute significant new knowledge and enable a more systematic investigation of the extent to which developmental peace can be seen as an alternative.

Second, the broader implications for women and marginalised populations of China's increasing participation in the global governance of peace should be further explored. This article finds that developmental peace cannot compensate for the weakness of liberal peace with regard to the various power imbalances, such as gendered inequalities and racial hierarchies. This suggests that developmental peace would be less likely to provide an alternative option for marginalised communities and individuals. However, what China's increased involvement in peacebuilding would mean for the peace and security of marginalised populations remains unclear. The extent to which a changed dynamic within the global governance of peace would affect the lives of women and other marginalised locals remains to be seen.

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