

Interview – Brian Wong

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Brian Wong is a geopolitical strategist and advisor publishing extensively on Sino-American relations, statecraft in Asia, and the intersection of nascent technologies, political philosophy, and public policy. Currently pursuing a DPhil in Politics at Balliol College, Oxford, Brian's primary research examines the responsibilities borne by citizens residing under authoritarian regimes for their states' injustices. He also co-founded and was Editor in Chief for three years at the Oxford Political Review. Brian has taught modules in politics to undergraduate students at Oxford and Stanford Universities (latter on exchange). They have presented on Sino-American relations and Chinese foreign policy at Tsinghua, Carnegie-Tsinghua Center, Stanford, the Young China Watcher and Tufts Conferences, and advised leading MNCs on macro risks in Asia.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

My areas of research are multiple – and perhaps at times seemingly disjointed. I am first and foremost a researcher in political philosophy: I'm interested in questions of what citizens residing under authoritarian regimes owe towards one another, but also the reparative responsibilities (used here in a rather encompassing manner) that they accrue in relation to state-perpetrated injustices. This area builds on my pre-existing work and interest in post-colonial theory and historical injustice – the intersection of analytical moral and political philosophy, critical theory, and activist theory – thus comprises the bulwark and bedrock of my normative theorisation.

There is also another side to me. I'm equally invested in questions of statecraft in East Asia, specifically, the relationship between Chinese domestic attitudes, nationalism, and its foreign policy, as well as the agency and foreign policy agenda of small and medium states, nations, and sub-state actors. I draw upon a combination of historical and ethnographic data points in facilitating my research on this front and have also worked extensively in seeking to articulate a nascent framework by which China and America can come to manage existential risks in a responsible and coherent manner. Thus, I do not possess a unified and singular area of interest but an intriguing dyad that straddles international relations and political philosophy. The commonality, I suppose, is the hope that we can push academic discourse in the West beyond traditionally defined domains and boundaries within spheres of Anglo-American political theory and international relations. The world is a vast space with huge methodological and normative variety across its peoples. It's only fair, in my view, that the voices, views, and truthful beliefs of a wider range of individuals are reflected in the way we practice academic research and thinking.

I was drawn to theorize about coloniality and colonialism through my upbringing, as a citizen born and raised in Hong Kong, a city with an intriguing and complex relationship with its colonial past, and educated through a largely Anglo-centric international education. I have always found questions over the normative unjustifiability and impermissibility of colonialism, as well as over how we can materially bring about genuine transformative and rectificatory justice in post-colonial settings, a fascinating topic to research and from which to derive practically applicable principles and heuristics. My transition into researching authoritarianism and authoritarian justice, on the other hand, was inspired

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by a synthesis of my lived experiences, with my fascination in the works of Hannah Arendt and Iris Marion Young, whose conceptions of responsibility beyond liability not only resonate deeply with me personally, but have also provided me with a genuinely profound set of theoretical musings and prompts.

Similarly, my interest in East Asian statecraft – and the decisions and sub-statecraft of small and medium actors in shaping international relations and geopolitical dynamics – was sparked by my experiencing first-hand the interplay of great power politics and Sino-American tensions over my home city. The drastic changes in Hong Kong over recent years attest to how macro-level tussles between great powers, in interacting with meso-level frameworks and micro-level stakeholders, could yield rather surprising results.

How does your research help you better understand historical and present injustice in non-democratic countries?

My research can be disaggregated into a few sub-components, and I'll just flag them here to be clear and upfront. The first revolves around devising a nascent theoretical account explaining why reparative responsibilities are salient and normatively grounded in the context of historical injustices, even if we're talking about ones that empirically brought about allegedly more benefits than harms for certain subsets of individuals within these former colonies. I am intrigued by how we can render theories of reparative justice resilient and robust against objections such as the Non-Identity Problem, consequentialist brute-force justifications and defenses of colonialism (which I find both abhorrent and logically faulty), and the charge that reparative claims arising from property rights arguments are both limited in scope and rest on flimsy epistemic grounds. In my MPhil research, I developed a substantive framework and argument that does not only neatly circumvent or address these challenges, but also seeks to (albeit with limited success!) offer prescriptions as to how we can repair victims that have long ceased to exist. Without straying too much into the technical woodworks and details of posthumous rights, cultivating this theory has enabled me to better make sense of the nature of the relations that bind our predecessors and previous generations to us today. It has also allowed me to recognise the room for maneuver and advancement of justice notwithstanding the material and knowledge-centric difficulties of accurately gauging parts of the colonial and history picture.

As for present injustices – which are also the bulwark of my current DPhil research – there are three prongs that I find helpful in pushing me to think deeper about the world we inhabit, but also serve to illuminate critical dimensions concerning justice under authoritarian states. The first is this: we really aren't particularly good at taking authoritarian regimes – and their distinctive logics and systems – as a serious and separate sphere of academic study. When embarking upon this thesis, I was hit by a broader, methodological reflection upon the paucity of research that looks specifically at the authoritarian context as a distinctive setting and cluster of conditions that could bear upon the normativities of key questions of interest. I've always been struck by comments suggesting that "Hey, maybe it's high time that we did not look at authoritarian regimes purely through lenses of 'This is almost democratic, let's pretend it is.', or 'Let's not go there, it's not democratic'." I think it's high time that more political theorists (not saying there aren't excellent theorists who indeed engage in this tradition – besides Arendt and Young, Avia Pasternak is one, and Catherine Lu is another) looked at contexts where there exists an overbearing, stifling, and potentially innately persecutory state, and reflected upon the implications for both evaluation and prescription in these contexts. This methodological question, in and of itself, is worthy of substantial exploration.

The second, is that authoritarian regimes have complex relations with their own people. Such relations in turn shape the nature of moral responsibilities borne by their citizens – and beyond. There is a tendency on the part of generic, public-facing commentaries on non-democratic regime types to homogenise through caricatures and simplistic characterisations – whilst in practice, as raised by folks ranging from Milan Svolik to Juan Linz, there exists much room and space for categorising authoritarian regimes into sub-categories that better and more aptly map onto the distinctive relations they respectively share with their citizens. I do not believe any account of authoritarian regimes should take an innately rosy or condemnatory view to them – instead, it is imperative that criticisms of them be made in relation to specific and distinctively present features that exist in such regimes.

The same need for heterogeneity and nuance in analysis (without slippage into reckless apologeticism) also applies to our theorising about who should be deemed responsible under such governments. We may be tempted to argue

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that all in Russia should be held responsible for Putin's atrocious and vulgar invasion of Ukraine; or that all who lived under the Apartheid regime should bear responsibility for the racial segregationist policies implemented in South Africa then. Yet such conclusions – without further fine-graining and clarification based upon the nature of the relations between the regime and its people, and specific groups within said people – would be both hasty and overtly unnuanced.

The final insight, and one that I hope to impart given the distinct geopolitical and moral contexts in which we operate, is that there is always room to do more, but agency comes often in unexpected ways. I was once asked by a helpful academic mentor and colleague if I genuinely thought there was any point in establishing the existence of responsibilities to repair in authoritarian contexts. The answer I gave was, "Of course." It may not be easy, it may not be glamorous, and it certainly won't be as straightforward as throwing together a tea party in the garden. Authoritarian contexts are uniquely treacherous, debilitating, and can get incredibly pernicious when it comes to those seeking to advance (radical) changes to the unjust status quo. Yet the solution to such practical impenetrability is neither to turn to grand-standing and lofty statements (it's easy to criticise from the outside, and it's even easier to virtue signal about authoritarian regimes without thinking through how to process and deal with them pragmatically), nor to resignation and fatalism. We can and must do more. As for what and how we can do it – well, that's part of my research too, I suppose. Suffice to say there's no clean-cut and easy answer...

How does your experience as a scholar and researcher connect to your efforts in advancing ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ rights in East Asia?

East Asia is an incredibly heterogeneous and diverse conglomerate of different entities, communities, and societies. It is also a region that is steeped in a multitude of cultural traditions – some of them more aligned with Queer rights and equality, others less so. There's almost always more nuance to the tenets and nature of beliefs than what is proffered or conveyed through the news and popular discussions. Similarly, on the subject of BAME rights, whilst many advocates of racial justice correctly and justifiably target the 'West' for its systemic failings in relation to the rights of persons of colour, as well as tackling the structural white supremacism that undergirds parts of its social structures, what I find equally troubling is the racism and sectarianism that manifests in Asia, whether it be from Chinese populations towards migrant workers from Southeast Asia, or the Hindutva-sparked discrimination against Muslim minorities in India, or, indeed, broader concerns revolving around accessibility and treatment of ethnic minority migrant workers in Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia and Indonesia. None of these is to say that the defects of the West should be excused. I'm merely of the view that racial and ethnic equality ought to matter wherever and whenever. We should not operate with the assumption that simply because of the colonial history that binds Anglo-American-European ex-empires, there could thus be no racism from individuals who do not come from such backgrounds.

LGBTQ+ rights are an issue for which I have long fought and written and worked on, as both an activist and theorist. I cannot claim to have done nearly as much as I'd have liked to for the movement: most of my advocacy revolves around step-by-step changes oriented towards the eventual universal de-pathologising and de-criminalising Queerness throughout East Asia at large, and specific policy proposals concerning LGBTQ+ individuals residing in Hong Kong and Greater China. These are the domains in which I feel that with my limited expertise and political capital, I can most exert influence – but even then, my efforts alone make no difference. It is the assiduous and defiant commitment of grassroots activists, NGO and non-profit workers, and leading scholars and writers who have collectively advanced the movement in the way it has over the past decades in the region. For this, I must express my admiration and appreciation for these far more qualified and experienced individuals that have done much, much more for the movement. Where I do think I can play a role, is to demonstrate through a combination of historical and archival analysis, as well as conceptual framing and reframing, that Asian values are indeed most compatible with Queerness; that the assertions of those who portray homosexuality as allegedly anathema to 'traditional family values', are in fact not only narrow-minded and bigoted, but also reflect erroneous judgments and flawed understandings of Asian history and anthropological norms.

As for ethnic minority rights, I can't claim to be an expert or changemaker with regards to such rights in the region at large. East Asia is far too vast, and the malaise confronting migrant and ethnic minority populations too eclectic in

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kind, for me to address all of these problems adequately. For me to claim to be doing so, would be a misjudgment and misstatement. Where I direct most of my attention and time to, naturally, is Hong Kong – a city where, notwithstanding its international reputation and status, remains rather close-minded and unduly reactionary on matters of racial equality. The ubiquity of stereotyping, the prominence of discrimination, and the socioeconomic disparities that exist between BAME migrants and the majority Chinese population, are issues that I care for deeply and personally. Some of my closest friends in Hong Kong are not Chinese, and it embarrasses and pains me to hear of the casual and routinised racism that confronts them on a daily basis. A mundane routine for those in positions of racial and ethnic privilege, could well be a precarious ordeal for those in the minority.

What are the most productive ways to facilitate open and genuine dialogue between Hong Kong and China?

Whilst I had previously written about the need for ‘genuine and open dialogue’ between Hong Kong and the central authorities in China, frankly I have come to the conclusion that such a proposal is, whilst necessary, not only insufficient in tackling the multitude of problems afflicting Hong Kong today, but also insufficiently attractive towards the vast majority of citizens in Hong Kong, who may well have lost faith in dialogue as a tool of societal reconciliation and transformation.

Hong Kong’s problems – which include, by the way, its relations with its own country (China) – are manifold. In my view, these issues are best epitomised by a four-level pyramid. The first constitutes the rampant inequalities, structural barriers, and social immobility that prevent 20% – 30% of the city’s population from unlocking their potential in lives, consigning them to fates of structural deprivation, poverty, and/or the mortgage treadmill and trap. The second is the intransigence and increasing lack of competitiveness of our local economy and industries. It is clear that we cannot depend upon finance and real estate alone to make our city’s ends meet; such industries may line the pockets of a select privileged few, yet are unlikely to come to the financial rescue of low-skilled and mid-skilled labour that find themselves precipitously outcompeted in a perennial race to the bottom, coupled with the structural unemployment in which they find themselves redundant. The city’s aging population, paired with these factors for uncompetitiveness, has generated a ticking time bomb that the government must resolve swiftly and promptly.

The third concerns the dangers of complacency and inward-looking obstinacy in the government-political-bureaucratic apparatus. There is a generalised feeling – even if exaggerated and perhaps inaccurate – that the Hong Kong government is out of touch with the ordinary folk that toil away in keeping the city running. To give credit where credit’s due, I certainly think there are individual bureaucrats, politicians, and political leaders that have sought to bridge the gulf and commit themselves to servicing the population at large. This remains the case today. It is imperative that the government sees the mistrust between the public and itself as more than just a matter of optics. It is also a matter that calls for an overhaul to the modus operandi of public consultation, deliberation, and policymaking – more devolution to the people over municipal and district-based affairs, more inclusion of potentially dissenting and oppositional voices. These are all low-hanging fruits that should and must be implemented with urgency.

Finally, there is the elephant in the room: Hong Kong’s identitarian crisis – one that leaves and sows deeply rooted embitterment and antagonism between a sizable portion of the city’s population, and the rest of China. I refuse to believe that the relations between mainland and Hong Kong are necessarily zero-sum, but it is clear that the political establishment leaves much to be desired when it comes to winning over the hearts and minds of the Hong Kong people – in relation to their self-identification and perceptions towards China. This has indubitably been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has rendered mainland-Hong Kong travel effectively nigh-impossible.

All four levels to the pyramid “stack.” They mutually reinforce one another and compound in fostering an atmosphere where the frustrations of Hong Kongers are directed towards mainland China. When throwing into the mix the past decade of incredible social turbulence and contentious politics, it is no wonder that the relations between most Hong Kongers and the mainland remain incredibly tense. I don’t think the administration could afford to neglect the voices of these Hong Kongers – many amongst whom are youth. Their voices must not and should not be erased or neglected. It is imperative that those who want to fix Hong Kong strive their very best to actually improve the lives of

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those who have been and still are left behind. Without reforms, dialogue means very little. Without change, dialogue would be just talk – and talking doesn't get us anywhere.

What are you currently working on?

There are a few. First and foremost, I'm finishing up my DPhil thesis, which looks at the intersection of reparative justice, structural injustice, and authoritarian regimes. This thesis has also taken me in all sorts of interesting directions – including spinoff papers on the distinctive nature of authoritarian regimes, questions over political obligations under such states, and a methodological-critical enquiry into why exactly, indeed, existing literature seems to neglect the particularity of authoritarian regimes and tend to treat them as regimes that are either a) beyond the scope of theoretical analysis, b) almost-democratic, c) effectively 'barren' contexts in which no responsibilities can be meaningfully assigned or upheld. I am also developing a new and enriched interpretation of Arendt's writings – seeking to reconstruct her canon in light of the democratic rollback across America and Eastern Europe (no less inspired by Barbara Walter, Timothy Snyder, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt's excellent writings).

Second, I've been pressing on with my investigation and deep-dive into Asian statecraft, spending a fair bit of time currently on unpacking China's complex reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as how Sino-Russian relations are likely to play out over Central Asia. I've also taken a more proactive and targeted interest in the relationship between China's millennial generations, their attitudes towards their country and foreign states, and the country's future political and economic trajectories. To me, it's imperative that theorists keep themselves grounded and applied through consistent and constant referencing and analysis of practical case studies. Hence my interest in Asian geopolitics also complements and enriches my ability to theorize about non-democratic regimes.

Third, I have been working on articulating a distinctly political and politically sensitive account of effective altruism – one that coheres with and reflects the wonderful work currently undertaken by the EA community in transforming the way we engage in life and career choices (and not just philanthropy). I thoroughly enjoyed William MacAskill's recent magnum opus, for instance, on what owe towards the future – though I would certainly push back a little on his handling of the procreative asymmetry and broader weighing calculus over the best vs. worst-case scenarios of humanity's future trajectory. I suppose this does come down to what we make of our own agency... and how much of an impact we could assign to ourselves or take on qua political or moral agents.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

Don't let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do. Take on board as much advice as you'd like – learn from mentors, peers, predecessors, and those who have more insights and experience than you about the world. But at the end of the day, the choice is yours, and not others, to make. Back yourself.