With China's rise as a world power, understanding what the country's political elite thinks is no longer a matter that just concerns China or China scholars. This thesis contributes to knowledge of China's future political elite through long-term research among students at the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU), whose graduates form a key talent pool for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These students' attitudes, ideas, and convictions will, therefore, in the not too distant future, have a direct impact on the behaviour of China's foreign affairs establishment.

This research pairs a Constructivist approach to International Relations Theory with Political Anthropology, particularly the Anthropology of the State, as a means of 'studying up' and thus enriching the positivist approaches currently dominant in explaining and interpreting China's global activities.

In circumstances where people are being intentionally trained as representatives of the state, understanding how they conceptualise what the state is and does is critical to understanding how that state will operate in the international arena. Based on long-term interactions with CFAU students, this research explores the 'social imaginary of Chineseness' that permeates every aspect of students' worldview. Through the subjects in the curriculum and the control of the practices of their everyday lives, the CFAU experience teaches students both what worldviews are appropriate for future foreign policy officials, and at the same time carefully precludes other ways of seeing the world. The thesis examines students' views of history; obligation and social relations; power and governance in the nation-state; and China's role in the world.

The research concludes that prevalent views of China's foreign policy which uncritically accept the 'reality' of the state as a central actor neglect the innumerable variations of what a 'state' can mean to the people who constitute it. While my students at CFAU did share many views in common with this approach to understanding international relations and diplomacy, their views diverged dramatically in regard to the question of why states would act in certain ways in the international system. My students were convinced that a unique 'Chineseness' fundamentally underpinned China's international behaviour.

The thesis reveals how this shared sense of Chineseness is created and maintained among China's future elite and shows that the clear geo-political entities imagined by dominant approaches to international relations are not universal, but held together by convention and shared belief.