THE GRIFFITH-TSINGHUA ‘HOW CHINA SEES THE WORLD’

Chinese Scholars' Debates on International Responsibility
By MAO Weizhun
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This project is supported by a research Grant (No.16-1512-150509-IPS) from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.
Project Introduction

How to understand China’s rise and its implications for Asia and the world is an imperative task for both scholars and policy makers. China has become the second largest economy next to the United States since 2010. China is also the major trading partner for over 140 countries in the world. As United States-China relations will define the next century, it is essential to build mutual understanding for policy makers. If strategic distrust is a major obstacle in US-China relations, as Kenneth Lieberthal and Jisi Wang have suggested, deepening our understanding of Chinese perceptions and views on international relations will be a crucial task for bridging the perception gap and mitigating the strategic distrust between the two nations.

This project aims to make sense of China’s rise in world politics through examining Chinese International Relations (IR) scholars’ perceptions and debates on key issues in international relations and Asian security. This project will deepen our understanding of Chinese scholars, especially regarding how they perceive world politics and how they can impact Chinese policy making via internal debates. There are two parts in this project. First, we organize and conduct onsite surveys of IR scholars at the annual conference of the Chinese Community of Political Science and International Studies in Beijing. Second, we examine the internal debates among Chinese scholars over international politics, Asian security, and Chinese foreign policy.

With generous support from the MacArthur Foundation (grant No. 16-1512-150509-IPS), the Griffith Asia Institute is able to successfully collaborate with Tsinghua University’s Institute of International Relations to carry out the survey research as well as conduct the research project on the Chinese IR debates through expert conferences and other academic exchanges. This working paper series will feature major Chinese scholars’ analyses of internal debates and our survey findings.

We appreciate your comments and suggestions very much.

Kai He and Huiyun Feng (Co-Chief Investigators, Griffith University)
Xuetong Yan (Lead Project Collaborator, Tsinghua University)
Chinese Scholars’ Debates on International Responsibility

Abstract

“International Responsibility” has become one of the most significant topics in Chinese International Relations studies over the last decade. Although growing numbers of scholars have focused on this issue, there remains a low awareness of the need to explore its roots in China’s academia, and to investigate the internal debates that display the different Chinese perceptions of international responsibility. This article provides a discourse-activation framework to explain why Robert B. Zoellick’s speech polarized China’s attention on international responsibility. It moreover constructs a typological framework based on dimensions that include the nationalism–internationalism orientation and degree of fulfilling international responsibility. It singles out three camps of scholars and their respective viewpoints on international responsibility and China’s relevant policies in this regard, and demonstrates the “divergent convergence” feature that characterizes the debate on the topic. In addition to this structural analysis, the article also summarizes the overall trend from 1950 to 2015 of the preventative to projecting preferences apparent in China’s academic studies and political discourses on international responsibility. Subsequently, the article briefly investigates the possible factors affecting convergence and divergence of perceptions of international responsibility, which imply that fulfilling international responsibility is crucial to China’s growing presence on the global stage, and that Chinese academics’ attention to international responsibility should focus on collaboration towards improving the effectiveness of China’s assertive behaviour in international affairs.

Acknowledgements

This working paper is a revised version of the author’s article “Debating China’s International Responsibility” in the Chinese Journal of International Politics 10, no. 2 (2017): 173-210.
About the Authors:

MAO Weizhun is Associate Professor in International Politics at the School of Government and Researcher at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Development Studies, Nanjing University. He holds the Doctor's degree in Social Science (Dr. rer. soc) awarded by Universität Konstanz in 2015 and a PhD degree in International Relations from Renmin University of China in 2012. His research interests include International Institutions and International Responsibility.
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Mao Weizhun

Introduction

“International responsibility” has been on China’s International Relations (IR) research agenda for more than one decade. In September 2005, Robert B. Zoellick (2005) gave a speech on the United States’ China policy at the National Committee on US-China Relations, proposing that China act as a “responsible stakeholder” rather than “just a member”, which would help the US and China work together and “sustain the international system that has enabled its success”.

Zoellick’s remarks had at least two impacts on both theoretical and policy-related studies in China. On the one hand, they started the collective large-scale research endeavors on “international responsibility”. In fact, China showed some hints of “obsession” with Zoellick’s ideas, in particular with the statement of “responsible stakeholder” (Stratfor 2005). Deng Yong (2015: 119) finds the diffusion of “responsible power” in China “extraordinary”. As shown in Figure 1, from 2005 to 2010, there is a stable increase in the number of studies with the keywords relating to international responsibility. Therefore, it is also interesting to investigate the following question: why and how has Zoellick’s speech triggered the emergence of China’s large-scale focus on international responsibility?

In addition, Zoellick’s speech catalyzed a series of debates on China’s own foreign policies towards the US. For example, some Chinese policy advisors optimistically highlight the impact of this speech on Sino-US relations as a way to “alleviate the wave of ‘China threat thesis’”, which indicates “a comparatively reasonable and pragmatic tone” for the US view of China (Yuan 2006). However, another group shows a relatively unfriendly attitude to this new American term. They regard the new idea of “responsible stakeholder” as a variant of hostile arguments such as the “China threat thesis” and the “China collapse thesis” (Ma 2007).

In addition, there have been several internal debates about various terms related to the concept of “international responsibility”. Since then, Chinese scholars have shown divergent
attitudes, especially when the terms “China’s responsibility”, “responsible power” and “international responsibility” are closely intertwined. Some have embraced this concept of “responsibility”, because it indicates a strategic change in US’ China policies and it potentially emphasizes the irreplaceable role of China in the international order. In contrast, others warn of the possible trap set by the US in line with its long-time containment policies towards China. In a long-term perspective, most Chinese scholars have finally accepted the concept, which shows an aspect of increasing convergence in the debate, despite different opinions in applying international responsibility.

As a result, it is necessary to investigate the following questions: to what extent and why do Chinese scholars diverge in their views of international responsibility? What factors affect the divergence and convergence of Chinese scholars’ attitudes towards international responsibility? In fact, it seems that China’s attitudes on international responsibility experienced an unusual evolution process, featuring an unanticipated start, internal debates, and unintended consequences on China’s international performance.

**Chinese Attention Shift to International Responsibility**

It has not been easy for China to shift its attention to international responsibility after Zoellick’s 2005 speech.

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1 In addition to international responsibility (guoji zeren) and international obligations/duties (guoji yiwu), there are some other synonymous terms in Chinese that are related to international responsibility and connected to China’s role within the scope of international responsibilities, such as responsible great powers (fuzeren daguo), responsible states (fuzeren guojia), responsible developing countries (fuzeren de fazhanzhong guojia), great power responsibility (daguo zeren), great power undertaking (daguo dandang), responsible China (fuzeren de zhongguo), China’s responsibility (zhongguo/woguo zeren), global responsibility (guanjia zeren) and China’s undertaking (zhongguo/woguo dandang), etc. It calculates the number of articles with the title containing the above keywords in CNKI as the indicator of China’s academic studies.
Zoellick’s 2005 speech. To be exact, Zoellick reactivated Chinese discussions of international responsibility, as there were some discussions concerning international responsibility before 2005, which had lost their momentum. Hence, this study analyzes the historical development of Chinese attention to international responsibility before 2005 through both the academic debates and the dimension of political discourse.

On the Academic Discussions before 2005

Chinese IR scholars acknowledged the significance of international responsibility within the context of national power in the 1980s. In August 1987, the first nation-wide IR conference with more than 80 participating scholars was held in Shanghai. They argued that national power is closely connected with international responsibility/obligations (Tian 1987: 58). Also, in the 1980s, the term “international obligation (guoji yiwu)” was used in academic journals to refer to China’s contribution in terms of foreign assistance, which shows China’s internationalism (Xiao 1987).

In the 1990s, international responsibility became more relevant, which indicated China’s increasing willingness to integrate in the international community. China’s academic concerns regarding international responsibility synchronized with scholars in other countries and regions. For example, in 1994, Young Seek Choue (1995), the rector of Kyung Hee University in South Korea, argued that the three major countries in East Asia (China, Japan and South Korea) should contribute to the global community and human future. Hou Jiaju (1995), an economist from Taiwan, called for China to integrate into the global society, fulfill its responsibility in the international community, and share the Chinese experience with others.

Furthermore, Yan Xuetong (1996: 207–208) proposed that China should bear more “political responsibilities” to match its increasing power, which would eventually become “China’s important interests”. Nevertheless, he cautioned the pitfalls of accepting international responsibility, because there is no common definition and the strong countries actually define this term (Yan 2001: 37). In addition, Wang Yizhou (1999) highlighted “responsibility with its related interests” as one of China’s three quests of twenty-first century foreign policies, paralleling development and sovereignty. Other scholars regarded fulfilling international responsibility as one of China’s regional strategies in the early 2000s (Tang and Zhang 2004; Xiao 2003).

In the meantime, scholars outside China also started to deliberate on China’s responsibility in the very process of its rise. For example, when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1999, scholars like Zhang Yongjin and Greg Austin (2001) attempted to analyze China’s diverse attitudes on the “responsibility of its rising power in international relations”.

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On the Political Discourse, 1949–2005

“International responsibility” appeared in China’s political discourse in an even earlier period. Taking articles appeared in the People’s Daily (Renmin Ribao) as an indicator, Figure 2 proves that the term “international responsibility” is not new at all. China started to demonstrate its first wave of advocating international responsibility from 1949 to 1965. This wave was mainly associated with Chinese enthusiasm for internationalism on the international platform, in which the term usually functioned as a propaganda tool in disputes between China and the Soviet Union. It also indicated China’s willingness to participate in international affairs and ease its isolation imposed by Western powers. From 1966 to 1989, China’s references to international responsibility showed sporadic distribution as a result of a series of influential events. Despite coming back to an international platform, China remained in an isolated and self-centered situation: regaining its UN seats was only a symbol of Chinese international legitimacy. During this period, China emphasized the significance of fulfilling responsibility to world peace when interacting with other powers such as Britain and Japan.

In fact, China revived its active willingness regarding international responsibility around the last decade of the twentieth century. Hereby, China attempted to show its own responsible face towards the US. For example, Deng Xiaoping asserted that China is an honest and a responsible country in 1988 (Sun 1988). In 1992, Qian Qichen proposed China as “a responsible great power in the world” when discussing Sino-US relations (He 1992). When Jiang Zemin met with Bill Clinton in 1994, he declared, “the two countries will assume more and more responsibilities for maintaining peace in the world” (citing from

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*The figure sets the number of news that contain guoji zeren as the measurement indicator.*
Yan 1996: 207–208). In addition, China exhibited responsible performances at regional platforms in the mid-1990s. Its reputation as a responsible country grew as it responded to the 1997 financial crisis by assisting its neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. In 1999, China officially set its own image as a “peaceful, cooperative, and responsible great power” (Office of Policy Studies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1999:4).

Diverse Responses to International Responsibilities in China

As a simple roadmap, China’s intellectual attention to international responsibilities can be traced back to the 1980s (Tian 1987: 58), but its primary development was triggered by its response to the Asian Financial Crisis (Niu 2008; Xing and Zhan 2008). In 2005, Zoellick’s statement on “responsible stakeholder” greatly drove China’s academic discussions to the first climax with a series of debates concerning international responsibilities and Chinese foreign strategies. Furthermore, China’s transformation of foreign policies under new leadership boosted a new wave of debates, thanks to new political declarations in fulfilling international responsibilities.

During China’s intellectual process on international responsibility, different impetuses propelled international responsibility studies further, bringing both structural divides and processual convergences in China’s relevant scholarship. In fact, diverse and even conflictual viewpoints emerged within China. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze Chinese studies on international responsibility from a “within” perspective.

A Typological Framework of Nationalism versus Responsibility

This paper assumes that Chinese academic divergence is affected not only by ideological positions on the nationalism-internationalism continuum, but also by academic evaluations of the extent to which China has fulfilled its responsibilities. On the one hand, the academic orientation of nationalism can act as a typological criterion for scholars’ categorization of international responsibility. China’s foreign policy is usually shaped by nationalism as well as internationalism (Chen 2005). As one kind of foreign policy, international responsibility is closely related to an ideology of nationalism, as well as its counterpart internationalism. Qin Yaqing and Zhu Liqun (2005) argue that China, as a responsible member of international society, has to abandon parochial nationalism and follow a new internationalism. Shambaugh (2013: 25–36) distinguishes between nine kinds of contending discourses on Chinese global identities, constructing a spectrum from nationalist to internationalist and to globalist positions; he implies that nationalists tend to refuse international responsibility while globalists would like to take on “an ever-greater responsibility”. Deng Yong (2015: 117–118) argues that China’s identification as a “responsible power” is actually manipulated by its “nationalist impulse” and “realpolitik calculations”.

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On the other hand, China’s academics show their divergent positions about the desirable extent of fulfillment of China’s international responsibility. Theoretically, “responsible agency” is actually “a matter of degree” (Williams 2006). It should be noted that the extent of a given scholar’s position on China’s fulfillment of international responsibility is not necessarily related to the spectrum of China’s global identities from nativist to globalist; for example, both nativists and selective multilateralists demonstrate a negative attitude towards international responsibility (Shambaugh 2013: 22–36). Mao Weizhun (2016) depicts a typological framework on international responsibility based on the degrees of fulfilling responsibility and the roles of responsibility undertaken. In this model, different extents of fulfilling responsibility reveal various perceptions on the necessity, possibility and prospects through which China understands international responsibility in different settings.

Figure 3 shows the academic orientation of Chinese scholars into a continuum from nationalism to internationalism, which spans from an isolated state to an open position. Simultaneously, it follows the dimension of responsibility from negative to positive approach. In sum, Chinese viewpoints on international responsibility can be categorized into three groups: averting, accommodating, and advocating.

**The Averting Camp: It’s a Trap!**

In spite of traditional emphasis on responsibility and the awakening of Chinese IR scholars (Wang 1999; Yan 1996: 207–208; Yeophantong 2013), many scholars and policy advisors are still highly vigilant against the proposal of international responsibility (Shambaugh
This camp keeps a conservative and even isolated stance on nationalism and negative opinions regarding international responsibility. There are three arguments that are generally put forward to support this viewpoint.

First, they mostly emphasize the morally accountable dimension of responsibility, and are highly cautious of foreign critics on the causes of a specific crisis. For example, Ma Zhengang (2006, 2010) argues that Zoellick’s speech hides some “subtext”, implying that China is irresponsible and should act according to the ideas of Western countries. Ma’s opinion and his official position as the Director of China Institute of International Studies make him highly influential. Many articles about China and international responsibility cite Ma’s viewpoints (Hu 2007; Liu 2007b; Niu 2008).

Second, scholars are alert to the strategic concepts proposed by the Americans, believing that the argument of “China’s responsibility” is in line with “the China threat thesis” and “the China collapse thesis” (Zhang 2012), and thus thought to be tools of US’ policy of containment against China. Many scholars consider this a variant of “the China threat thesis”, while other scholars directly label it the “US’ China’s responsibility” (Xie and Tang 2006). Zhang Shengjun (2007) regards “China’s responsibility” as an alternative form of imposing pressure on China. Zhang Ruizhuang (2008) is vigilant about responsibility-related proposals (e.g. Responsibility to Protect, R2P), asserting they would overturn the international order and pose challenges to China. Shambaugh (2013:19) observes that Chinese scholars consider the proposal as a kind of “Western effort” to “tie China down” or a tool to “contain China”.

Third, this group pessimistically predicted that China’s rise might be interrupted by the burden of taking on more responsibilities. It is true that “China’s responsibility” has been a trial for China’s peaceful development (Liu 2007a). Some directly consider “China’s responsibility” to be a huge threat to China’s development security (Zhang 2012). Given China’s rise and the relative decline of the US, the Chinese, including the scholars, do not believe that the US will easily accept this situation; when the US’ long-term hostility is taken into account, the degree of mistrust increases. As Zhang Shengjun (2007) notes, “China’s responsibility” is a requirement of “Western Anti-China Forces”.

The Accommodating Camp: It’s a Trend!

A second group attempts to accommodate China with the appeal of international responsibility within contemporary international society. They disagree with the judgement of the averting camp, regarding the arrival of “China’s responsibility” and “responsible stakeholder” as not merely challenges, but also as presenting some opportunities (Liu 2007b), when taking a pragmatic approach. In line with this camp, it seems inevitable that...
China must undertake its international responsibilities, because it is not only the international society’s “external expectation”, but also China’s own “development demand” as a rising power (Hu 2007; Niu 2008). For example, Jin Canrong (2009) evaluates the pros and cons of China’s fulfillment of international responsibilities, concluding that China’s benefits will be greater than the relevant costs in the international system. However, this camp also realizes that China may encounter a series of problems when taking on more international responsibilities (Niu 2008; Xing and Zhan 2008). As a result, some scholars give more attention to the approaches to bearing international responsibility rather than totally refusing responsibility (Gan 2010).

What scholars want to accommodate includes the world situation, China’s power, the balance between internal and external expectations, as well as a fair trade-off in China’s capacity between domestic and international responsibilities. First, Chinese scholars partly accept the notion of the “responsible great power” and subsequent “responsible stakeholder” more willingly. In fact, fulfilling international responsibility coincides with China’s interests and China’s identity on the international stage. In addition to Yan Xuetong’s (1996: 207–208) argument wherein bearing responsibility becomes “China’s important interest”, others like Ren Xiao (2007), Liu Hongsong (2004) and Wang Gonglong (2008) highlight the enhancement of public interest, shared interest or integrated interest in international society when China bears relevant responsibility. On the other hand, international responsibility connects with identity-driven willingness. Niu Haibin (2008) argues that international responsibility is a derived duty that a country holds as a member of international society. With its rise, China therefore has to meet both its own demands as well as those of the international community as a responsible great power (Wu 2011). Meanwhile, Qin Yaqing (2003) points out that China’s identity as a responsible great power can increase its security interests and promote interaction between China and the international society.

Second, this group shows cautious attitudes regarding the relations between China’s power and international responsibility. China’s rise has both revived its internal willingness and triggered external expectation in the fulfillment of its international responsibility. For example, many studies focus on the issue of China as a “responsible great power” rather than “China’s responsibility” (Li and Xu 2006; Xing and Zhan 2008). The scholarship has realized the significance of China’s power in the supply-demand structure of international responsibility (Xu 2008). Nevertheless, most Chinese scholars take a prudent approach when they attempt to bridge China’s power and international responsibility. Liu Feitao (2004) argues that power and responsibility together construct the preconditions of great power identity, highlighting that responsibility is actually “adequate exertion of powers”. Therefore, Chinese scholars admit that China should bear international responsibilities,
but they argue that China itself should set the standards of “power adequacy” in the fulfillment of international responsibility (Li 2008; Pan and Zheng 2007). For example, some scholars assert that a country should bear its responsibility in accordance with its position within the international power structure (Liu 2007b; Ren 2007).

Third, these scholars set up an alternative “defensive” principle in fulfilling international responsibility, that is, China’s most important international responsibility or its largest international contribution is to solve its domestic problems. In 2007, then Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing claimed that the foremost of China’s responsibilities is its responsibility for the Chinese people. In addition, the People’s Daily declares the starting point of China’s active participation in international affairs is being “responsible for the people of our country” (Wang 2007; Zhong 2012). This orientation is followed in the academic discussions on international responsibility. For example, many scholars insist that China’s internal affairs are included as the first priority of its great power responsibilities (Wu 2011); according to Ren Xiao (2007), taking responsibility for domestic citizens and prioritizing China’s own problems are two principles by which China fulfills its international responsibility.

Fourth, regarding international responsibility, this group adopts a narrower approach in operationalizing the concept and defining the issue scope. Chinese scholars have deliberated on the conceptual operationalization of international responsibility and have categorized it according to various dimensions that clarify the relationship between international responsibility and other variables. For example, Li Dongyan (2011) disagrees with the use of the term “international responsibility” and prefers the concept of “international contribution”, thus identifying different sources of international responsibility and breaking down the relations between power and international responsibility. Others have probed diverse aspects of international responsibility, concentrating on its moral essence and noting that there are no “recognized and operationalized” standards in fulfilling international responsibility (Li 2011; Zhou 2011). Despite some scholars’ application of the concept to diverse issues like human rights, climate change, energy and humanitarian actions (Cai 2010; Wu 2010; Yu and Tang 2009), most researchers maintain a defensive stance on identifying international responsibility. For instance, Liu Ming (2008) proposes a concept of “limited responsibility” concerning “international obligations”, one that goes beyond narrower domestic interests and strategic targets.

**The Advocating Camp: It’s a Tool!**

The advocating camp takes a more proactive viewpoint in fulfilling international responsibility, while keeping a more open opinion in exerting China’s nationalism. These scholars further emphasize the significance of fulfilling international responsibilities across
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diverse issues within the context of China’s rise and China’s new position in the last decade. They mostly regard it as an opportunity for China’s further development on the international stage, although China may suffer some costs and risks. For them, fulfilling international responsibilities should be an active performance for a specific country based on its own situation rather than purely conforming to a trend.

Here Chinese scholars reaffirm the connections between China’s capacity and international responsibility, underlining China’s ambition as a great power rather than over-emphasizing China’s status as a developing country, thereby promoting its role in providing public goods in global governance. As Yan Xuetong (2011) points out, “if China wants to regain its historical status as a great world power, it must act like a great world power”. In general, what these scholars try to advocate includes the strategic value of assuming international responsibilities, the necessity of participating in the global community, and China’s updated views on sovereignty-related notions.

First, most scholars consider international responsibility as a strategic issue for China’s global performance. For example, Wang Yizhou (2011) proposes a concept of “creative involvement”, in which fulfilling international responsibility can take a significant part. Meanwhile, Shi Yinhong (2008, 2011) emphasizes China’s changed role in the world, thus the need to change its strategy to take up its share of international responsibility. Yan Xuetong (2013: 183–190) calls for the transformation of China’s foreign principles from economic concerns to political orientation based on its role as a responsible great power.

Second, advocating scholars not only consider fulfilling international responsibilities as a necessary step for participating in international society, but they also regard it as a problem-solving approach, for example, “China’s Plan” in global governance. Pang Zhongying (2006, 2011) differentiates between China’s international involvement and its greater roles in international system, arguing that its involvement dimension prevails while its “role” consciousness has been relatively insufficient, which is actually a “responsibility” issue; thus, he calls for China to take on responsibilities for global governance through its problem-solving approaches. Qin Yaqing (2014) argues that China should contribute “China’s Plan” for the transformation of the international order. Additionally, advocating scholars have started to focus on international leadership. For example, Liu Hongsong (2004) examines China’s international leadership responsibility and calls for China to actively provide public goods and build international institutions. Yan Xuetong (2013: 183–190) proposes international leadership responsibility within China’s foreign policies as a responsible great power, whereby China should learn to lead.

In addition, many scholars in this camp have taken a reflective viewpoint on China’s traditional principles (like non-interference) in the new era and have propose a series of related notions about international responsibility with more open minds (Chen 2016). For
example, Yan Xuetong (2015: 3, 236) proposes a theory of “moral realism”, which regards fulfilling international responsibilities as the core of the *wangdao* strategy in order to maintain the stability of the international order. Meanwhile, some specific topics within the broad concept of international responsibility such as R2P and “Sovereignty as Responsibility” are discussed via theoretical and policy perspectives, reflecting Chinese academic attempts to abandon dogmatic principles like sovereignty in order to follow international trends (Liu and Zhang 2014; Mao and Bu 2015; Ruan 2012).

However, the advocating group’s support for China’s increasing international responsibilities is not without any conditions: according to Shi Yinhong (2011: 95), China’s fulfillment of international responsibility holds only when it “(1) will not violate its vital interests and surpass its capability; (2) results from equal consultation between China and the external world, rather than from any ‘dictation’ or coercion by the latter; and (3) largely matches China’s reasonable international rights and privileges”.

Towards Divergent Convergence in Debating International Responsibility

It is important to note that the typology of these three camps on international responsibility is based on ideal rather than actual types, however a scholar might cross two camps depending on issues and during different time periods. What the typology seeks to clarify is the intellectual roadmap rather than labelling individual scholars. Furthermore, “international responsibility” is embedded in an existing structure of many key indicators including security, sovereignty, realpolitik, international image, China’s identities and so forth; as Alastair Iain Johnston (2008: 146) indicates, the Chinese have to make multiple trade-offs amongst different political dimensions. In this vein, no Chinese IR scholar totally refutes or absolutely accepts the notion of international responsibility. Conditions matter. They actuate trade-offs according to objective evaluations and academic orientation amongst different sets of tensions. Most importantly, China possesses conflictual identities (Shambaugh 2013: 35–36), which further diversify the viewpoints of Chinese scholars on international responsibility.

As a result, Chinese debates regarding international responsibility show a seemingly contradictory characteristic: “divergent convergence”. First, the referred terms of international responsibility in Chinese debate are still diverse, but internally it presents an increasingly positive meaning. Chinese scholars have finally accepted the term “China’s responsibility” which was a negative expression before 2008, admitting that China should actively take on relevant international responsibilities. While the averting scholars are adjusting their viewpoints towards a positive position, the advocating scholars are also adjusting their outlook to avoid excessive responsibility activities.
Second, China’s preference in international responsibility is becoming positive, but different terms imply a variety of inferences of Chinese scholars in connection with China’s multiple identities. China’s evolving notions could reflect an evolution from “responsible state”, to “responsible power”, to “responsible stakeholder”, and to general international responsibility. For example, the use of “responsible state” takes on a neutral logic of China being a developing country in the world; when using “responsible power”, scholars are actually highlighting China’s relatively higher status and potential prestige with a latently nationalist position; while the reference to “responsible stakeholder” shows Chinese support of the state as a community member with a significant internationalist identity.

Third, “divergent convergence” also indicates that China’s comprehensive perceptions of international responsibility would take more and more complicated issues into account. When diverse issues are included into the rhetoric of international responsibilities in a convergent manner, a problem emerges: fulfilling international responsibility of different issues may bring incoherent policy consequences. For example, is it possible to fulfill international responsibility for North Korea and balance the targets between insisting upon nuclear non-proliferation and providing foreign aid?

Finally, new disputes come up from the general convergence of Chinese viewpoints in international responsibility including: Whether or not to assume international leadership responsibility in the face of the United States’ possible retreat under the new administration? To what extent should China fulfill its international responsibilities and which area is the priority? And how to effectively assume international responsibilities in a systematic manner? In particular, most of China’s recent attention is on the debate over the extent to which China should shoulder international responsibilities in the new strategic situation. Some scholars argue that China should be more prudent in assuming international responsibility given the huge investments and possible risks of China’s regional projects. Meanwhile, both Chinese academia and policy researchers take note of the possible risks of the “Kindleberger Trap” within a Sino-US power transition (Li 2017; Nye 2017; Xinhua 2017a).

From Preventing to Projecting

China’s studies on international responsibility can also be discussed in a time dimension, that is, from preventing the burden of international responsibility to projecting the fulfillment of international responsibility in order to gain a global presence. For example, some scholars and policy advisors in the averting camp have changed their previous opinions on China’s international responsibility. Even the scholars in the advocating group demonstrate changing perceptions on international responsibilities. For example, Yan Xuetong (2001: 37) advocates that China should fulfill its international responsibilities but caution the potential risks embedded in the discourses of international responsibility articulated by
Western countries (Shambaugh 2013: 33). Ma Zhengang (2015) demonstrated a positive attitude towards China’s responsibility on the resolution of international heated disputes.

Before 2005, there were few disputes on the issue of responsibility in spite of some pioneering insights among China’s IR studies. Chinese scholars had framed the issue as an indispensable element of China’s foreign strategies agenda such as regional strategy. However, Zoellick’s argument of “responsible stakeholder” provoked China’s academic discussions, by challenging the prevailing intellectual positions and triggering a series of debates. Scholars’ viewpoints diverged because of differing opinions on relevant variables such as Sino-US competitive relations, ideological struggles, and the structural tensions of international competition.

Later, Chinese scholars combined “responsible great power” with “responsible stakeholder”, calming down some Chinese anxious attitudes. They found international responsibility could benefit China in spite of the possible costs. Moreover, as further involvement into international society is a key task of Chinese foreign policy, this proposal actually provides some opportunities for China. Consequently, scholars no longer debate whether international responsibility should be fulfilled, discussing instead possible approaches and the extent to which international responsibility should be practiced (Zhu 2010: 41). Some scholars even propose building a system of international responsibilities in the transitional period (Gao 2013).

With the rise of China on the global stage, Chinese scholars found that actively promoting the level of international responsibility may bring comprehensive benefits for China as a great power. At present, the concept of “international responsibility” covers a diverse range...
of issues, over China’s historical mission of national rejuvenation, global issues and challenges, international development and global common security. According to State Councilor Yang Jiechi (2015), “as a responsible great power, China should introduce China’s Initiative, exert China’s roles, and provide China’s contribution”, which aims to project international responsibility and construct “a community of common destiny”.

In summary, China’s attention to international responsibility is not simply linear in nature. Figure 4 indicates that China adopted a less isolated nationalism and preferred to undertake international responsibility within the socialist bloc before the split between China and the Soviet Union in the mid 1960s. After 1978, China gradually accepted the notion of international responsibility, and focused on this issue from an academic perspective. From “responsible great power” after 1997 to “regional responsibility” in early 2000s and to “responsible stakeholder” in 2005, Chinese scholars’ research on international responsibility continues to evolve. Based on a ten-year study of Chinese scholarly works from 2006 to 2015, three camps with different viewpoints have emerged, varying in accordance to configurations composed of various academic orientations about the nationalism-internationalism spectrum and different degrees of international responsibility fulfillment.

However, since 2015 there have been some signs of a new phase in China’s reflections about its fulfillment of international responsibilities. For example, with the emergence of large-scale academic studies and political discourses along with China’s assertive behaviors under initiatives like One Belt One Road (OBOR), many scholars who were previously optimistic have turned towards a more cautious view, implying a newly emerging convergence in the idea of avoiding “overheated” activities of fulfilling responsibilities. They worry that China’s over-commitment may interrupt national rejuvenation and lead to the failure of China’s rise. For example, Shi Yinhong (2015a, 2015b), who once advocated responsibility as a key word in China’s strategy, points out the risk of “strategic overstretch” in China’s international expansion and emphasizes the importance of “prudence” in OBOR. Meanwhile, Yan Xuetong (2016: 9–19) finds China actually over-burdens its international responsibility in terms of foreign aid and criticizes that quixotic and extreme leftist foreign view that excessive national capacity is indeed “Grandiose” (haoda xigong) rather than “Striving for Achievements” (fenfa youwei). This path of “grandiosity” may disrupt China’s successful rise. Coincidentally, some American experts notice that China is moving into the role of “post-responsible power” with increasing “revisionist” hints (Deng 2015: 117–118).

In addition, Donald Trump’s election as US president and his declarations on climate change and international stability provide a different perspective to Chinese viewpoints on international responsibility. Yan Xuetong notices the contradiction between the United States’ shifting responsibility while enjoying privileges, arguing this brings big uncertainties...
to the world while it cannot “stop the US economy from a relative decline” (Yamada 2016). In this case, the US withdrawal actually pushes China forward to assume more responsibilities. Similarly, Li Wei confirms that China could play a greater role and bear more responsibility in specific areas when the US denies its leadership responsibility, such as free trade, infrastructure, clean energy and so forth, wherein China holds some comparative advantages (Zhang, Xue and Li 2017:19–20)

Why Diverge and Why Converge?

There are at least five dynamics that can explain the divergence in views of China’s attention in international responsibility. This set of variables can explain why some realists tend to advocate that China fulfill international responsibility more than some liberalist and constructivist scholars. First, the ideological differences between nationalism and internationalism may determine the orientation of Chinese scholars, affecting the divergent viewpoints on international responsibilities among different groups. In fact, China has a long internationalist tradition, but nationalistic forces have also played a great role in impacting its policies on international responsibilities (Wu 2015; Xing and Zhan 2008: 91–92). When some given scholars prefer an open nationalist or internationalist position, they will likely support China’s active role in fulfilling international responsibility. Shambaugh (2013: 34–35) echoes this argument, indicating that globalists prefer to bear greater responsibilities than other schools.

Next, the complex concept of international responsibility is too multi-dimensional and internally conflictual. It covers issues across economic, political, security, and environmental sectors and involves different aspects concerning legality, justice, morality, conflicts and change, which may lead to conflictual situations or a lack of recognized operational standard (Li 2011). Therefore, Chinese scholars have been debating concepts such as international responsibility, China’s responsibility, responsible power, and bottom-line responsibility (Zhu 2010: 40–44).

Third, the gap between theory and policy is an important variable in explaining theoretical divergence. There have been some inconsistencies between academia and policy makers in China’s foreign policies (Xu 2016: 460). Policy advisors usually take a more conservative attitude toward fulfilling international responsibility compared with academics in universities. This is especially the case when the notion is proposed by the US, and hostile relations between China and Western countries often put pressure on policy advisors to take a more cautious stance. Additionally, China’s foreign policy officials typically absorb academic findings into national policy, narrowing the theory-policy gap and decreasing the divergence in debating international responsibility. For instance, Yang Jiechi (2015) argues that three factors determine simultaneously China’s endeavors in assuming international responsibility and obligation, as proposed by the
academia: the inherent meaning of China’s typical great power diplomacy, the expectation of international society and the influence of China’s diplomatic traditions.

Fourth, different theoretical IR branches play a role in affecting Chinese scholars’ choices of whether to support or reject international responsibility. In particular, the concept of interest is a key variable in deciding a given scholar’s preference for international responsibility. According to liberalists, if there exist common interests, China should prefer to fulfill international responsibility; the realists are more cautious with relative gains and potential struggles among great powers. Moreover, the constructivists deliberate on China’s identity, whether it is a responsible great power or not; if they recognize the identity, they will actively advocate to fulfill international responsibilities. However, when different identities of China emerge, the conflicts of fulfilling responsibility will come to light.

Last, the potential risks of power transition and China’s own unbalanced development can trigger different interpretations among Chinese scholars. Different camps have their own focus and therefore different evaluations of China’s own advantages and disadvantages in fulfilling its international responsibility. David Scott (2010) hereby notes that ambiguities and tensions exist in the process of China accepting responsibilities given the current international system; international responsibility as one kind of “power rise language” implies varied debates among scholars and policy advisors.

On the other hand, China’s perceptions of international responsibility are changing from controversy to convergence with generally more proactive approaches. The convergence of Chinese IR scholars is out of three reasons: China’s grand strategy, Chinese world viewpoints, and China’s international practice. First, China’s policy direction gives impetus to the basic convergence of China’s viewpoints regarding whether to bear international responsibility or not. Chinese scholars examplified typical connections between policy guidance and theoretical justifications. After 2005, some ideas were proposed by Chinese leaders, including “harmonious world” and “community of destiny”. This Chinese proactive stance caused conservative scholars to question their former beliefs. For example, some scholars in the averting camp finally changed their viewpoints, such as advocating China’s international undertaking guided by its new proposal of “human community of destiny” (Lin 2017).

Second, convergence is the result of the evolution of China’s worldview during its involvement into international society. Over the decades, China has changed from a stubborn opponent to limited involvement and to comprehensive integration. It was also a process through which China was transformed from being “a victim of the strong” to a “responsible power” (Deng 2015:120). The learning and socialization process has provided China with opportunities to participate in international institutions and accept prevailing international norms, such as being a “responsible stakeholder” (Zhu and Zhao 2008).
Besides the ideational factors, China’s rising power status provides both larger capacity and heightened willingness as China chooses to fulfill its international responsibility. For years, China’s responsibility activities in handling financial crises and building new international institutions have not only brought real benefits but also led to a greater global presence with increasing international reputation. Furthermore, China’s recent practice (e.g. OBOR) exposes a series of latent dangers when carrying out assertive strategies, urging China’s academia to take a more prudent posture when foeging China’s responsibilities in a convergent manner.

**Concluding Remarks and Policy Implications**

The rise of “international responsibility” has been a noticeable phenomenon in Chinese IR studies since 2005, when Robert Zoellick catalyzed the debate on this topic. Most importantly, we can discern at least three groups of scholars who have different viewpoints on international responsibility from the negative to positive dimensions and on ideological orientations from isolation to openness in the nationalism-internationalism spectrum—namely averting, accommodating, and advocating. This paper argues that the overall trend of international responsibility studies in China can be described as “divergent convergence”, showing that the debate on China fulfilling international responsibility is still ongoing rather than stopped.

Based on the above review, two policy implications can be derived for China’s rise and global presence. On the one hand, fulfilling international responsibility is a crucial step rather than a trap. China should continue to fulfill its responsibility and use it as a policy instrument. The current question is how to further bear more responsibilities and how to improve effectiveness across different issues. China’s responsibility and its problem-solving plans are essential for its status in the current international landscape.

On the other hand, China may enhance the significance of international responsibility in its foreign assertiveness, i.e. “responsible assertiveness”. Can responsibility be an effective response to the fear of a global leadership struggle? Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi declared that “[R]ather than talking about leadership, we should really be talking about responsibility” (cited in Xinhua 2017b). Deng Yong (2015: 163) indicates that “responsible China” would be a good weapon to fight the fear of its possible revisionism. According to Shaun Breslin (2010: 52, 2013: 616), the “credentials” with which a responsible power can act is a useful means to ensure China’s national needs on the global stage while China may seek “responsible change”. As a result, projecting more responsibilities and gaining more support can decrease the clamor from other powers and neighboring worries, promote China’s international performance, and provide new alternatives for China’s global presence.
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