THE GRIFFITH-TSINGHUA ‘HOW CHINA SEES THE WORLD’


Chinese Debate International Status

By PU Xiaoyu
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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)
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Abstract

How a rising power adapts to its new status is an important challenge in international relations. Since the global financial crisis, Chinese scholars have been heatedly debating China’s international positioning. The ongoing debate reveals a high level of uncertainty over China’s position in the world. While the notion of the “revival of the Chinese nation” indicates a clear goal of “making China great again”, China’s ultimate place on the global stage is unclear. Many Chinese scholars might want China to become richer and stronger, but they disagree on whether China should eventually seek superpower status. Regarding strategies, Chinese scholars also debate whether China should maintain a low profile or strive for greater achievements in global affairs. This paper takes a “status signaling” approach to explain why Chinese scholars take various positions in this debate. Status signaling aims to change or maintain a special type of “status belief” among relevant political actors. China must manage its conflicting roles in ways that advance its interests, while not engendering dangerous misperceptions. In particular, China must balance competing incentives between resolve and reassurance, status and responsibilities, domestic audience and international audience. These competing incentives have shaped Chinese debate on international positioning.

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Introduction

Shortly after Xi Jinping took his position as the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), he made a speech about his new slogan of the “Chinese Dream”, which means “the great renewal of the Chinese nation” (Xinhua 2012). Xi also laid out the “two centenary goals”, which are to complete the building of a moderately prosperous society by 2020 and to realize the great renewal of the Chinese nation by the middle of the century (Tiezzi 2015). The idea of “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” has been a major theme promoted by several generations of Chinese leaders. Any political leader aiming to maintain legitimacy in modern China must readdress the problem of the “century of humiliation” and restore China’s rightful place as a powerful nation in the world (Wang 2014). Thus, the “Chinese Dream” slogan has the important political function of mobilizing domestic support. However, the international implication of the slogan is subject to different interpretations. Does the “revival of the Chinese nation” mean that China should become a hegemonic power in Asia as well as in the world? For some, the “Chinese Dream” seems to send a clear message. According to Yan Xuetong (2014), the national rejuvenation of China means that China should restore its historical international status, achieved during the Tang dynasty, as the most advanced state in the world. Thus, China must catch up with the United States in terms of comprehensive national power. According to Liu Mingfu (2010), China and the United States will pursue an Olympic-style competition for global leadership. Michael Pillsbury, a former Pentagon official, claims that China has a “secret strategy” to replace the United States as the leading world power (Pillsbury 2015). According to these interpretations, China surely wants to become another superpower or even the most powerful nation in the world.

Or does it? There are several reasons why the answer is not that clear. First of all, Chinese officials have a long tradition of opposing superpower status. In his first speech at the United Nations in 1974, Deng Xiaoping said, “China is not a superpower, nor will it ever seek to be one. If one day China should change its color and turn into a superpower ... the people of the world should expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it” (Deng 1974). Deng’s speech was made in the 1970s, when China was
ideologically radical, economically weak, and diplomatically isolated. In the current “opening and reform” era, China has become the world’s second-largest economy, with an expanding global presence. However, Chinese officials still avoid describing China as a potential superpower. Chinese officials associate superpower status with hegemony, which has a negative connotation in the Chinese context. Second, while the international audience increasingly views China as an emerging superpower that should take a leadership role, many Chinese elites and public still emphasize that China is a developing country and that it should not be eager to take a leadership role in global affairs (Stone Fish 2017). Third, Chinese intellectuals and policy makers are not well prepared for China’s sudden high profile in global affairs, and some of them continue to downplay China’s high profile. For instance, according to Chinese senior diplomat Cui Tiankai, “We have been elevated [in the eyes of others] against our will. We have no intention to compete for global leadership” (cited in Shambaugh 2013: 307). While scholars such as Yan Xuetong (2014) think China should replace the US as the number 1 nation in the world, other scholars such as Wang Jisi (2011a: 28–31) and Zhang Ruizhuang (2013: 20–22) suggest that even number 2 status might be too high for China.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, Chinese scholars and policy makers have been heatedly debating China’s status and role in the world (Christensen 2015: 3–8). The ongoing scholarly and policy debate reveals a high level of uncertainty over China’s position on the global stage. As Henry Kissinger points out, a fundamental question about China concerns “the nature of its place in the world” (Goldberg 2016). While the notion of the “revival of the Chinese nation” indicates a clear goal of “making China great again”, China’s ultimate place on the global stage is unclear. Will a rising China seek to challenge or even to replace the United States as the new superpower? Is China a challenger or a supporter for the existing global order? Should China primarily position itself as an emerging superpower or as a developing country?

It is critical to investigate how and why the Chinese are debating China’s international positioning on the world stage. First of all, the question of China’s international positioning is related to the fundamental relationship between China and the existing international order. The nature and content of the international system in coming decades will partially depend on what roles the emerging powers, especially China, decide to play (Schweller and Pu 2011). Second, the debate shapes how China deals with a variety of international issues. For instance, should China primarily position itself as a developing country or a responsible great power in the climate change negotiations? China’s complex roles in the international arena led to some inconsistencies that plagued its position during the Copenhagen climate negotiations (Conrad 2012). Finally, China’s international positioning also shapes how the established powers might respond to the rise of China. For instance, if China were seeking
to grow within the existing liberal order, the Sino-American relationship might not be a zero-sum game and the United States would largely be willing to accommodate China’s rise (Ikenberry 2008). However, if China were seeking to replace the United States as a new superpower, the Sino-American conflict might be inevitable (Mearsheimer 2010a). In recent years, China’s more assertive posturing has partially contributed to the rethinking of US strategy towards China (Chen, Pu and Johnston 2013; Harding 2015).

This paper will proceed as follows. The first section will discuss the conceptualization of international positioning. The second section will explain the origin and context of the debate. In particular, it will analyze why international positioning has become an increasingly important topic for Chinese foreign policy. The third section will identify both consensus and differences among Chinese scholars, while the fourth section will provide a theoretical model to explain the differences among the Chinese scholars. The conclusion will summarize the findings and implications.

**China’s International Positioning: Definition**

What does international positioning mean? Originally a business management concept, “positioning” (dingwei) refers to the efforts of building a new image for a company or product (Muzellec and Lambkin 2008). Like a rapidly growing company trying to redefine its position and brand, China aims to project a new image and establish a new position in the international order. In business, positioning or branding is the creation of a name or symbol, or a combination of the two, for an established brand with the intention of developing a differentiated position (Muzellec and Lambkin 2008). The concept of branding or positioning can be applied in politics and international relations (Scammell 2007; Ham 2001). Some Chinese scholars conceptualize China’s positioning or dingwei as an issue of “diplomatic transformation” (waijiaozhuanxing) (Wang Yizhou 2011).

According to Chinese scholars Wang Jisi (2011a) and Cai Tuo (2010), the heated debate of China’s dingwei within China’s foreign policy community is unique, as there are no systemic studies of dingwei in the broader literature of international relations. While Wang and Cai’s assessment of the Chinese scholarly literature might be accurate, I argue that the topic of China’s international positioning can be analyzed from a more theoretical perspective. Viewed in a broader context, “the logic of positionality” is an increasingly important topic in the international relations (IR) literature (Mattern and Zarakol 2016). The logic of positionality proposes that hierarchies in world politics can constitute or make salient actors’ position-contingent roles. This implies that “the content of what actors want and what is important to them depends in part on where they are positioned in a hierarchical
order” (Mattern and Zarakol 2016). The challenge of how a great power adapts to its new status is not a unique Chinese problem. Rising and declining powers often face obstacles to objectively evaluating their shifting power and how to adjust their policy accordingly. Not only will the inherent uncertainty and complexity in the international system constrain the objective assessment of power and status at a national level, domestic politics could also complicate the process of strategic adjustments, leading to various pathologies such as under-expansion, over-expansion, or under-balance (Zakaria 1998; Snyder 1993; Schweller 2008). In the late nineteenth century, domestic political fragmentation inhibited the ability of the declining Britain to assess its relative power position accurately (Friedberg 1988). Under what conditions will a rising power pursue an over-expansionist policy? When and why will a rising power pursue a shirking policy (Trubowitz 2011; Stein 1993; Schweller and Pu 2011)?

International positioning has subjective, objective, and inter-subjective dimensions. The subjective dimension refers to the self-narrative of identity and status. In social interactions, the self-narrative of identities is the foundation of positioning or image projection. As individuals can have multiple selves, a nation can have different narratives of national identities (Markus and Paula 1986). The objective dimension refers to the material capabilities a country might have. Economic and military capabilities constitute the material foundation of a country’s position in the international pecking order. The inter-subjective dimension refers to the recognition of a country’s position by an international audience. By analyzing the domestic debate of China’s international positioning, this paper will focus on the subjective dimension of international positioning. The objective dimension of China’s positioning is still important, but the objective indicators of China’s international positioning are straightforward. For instance, no reasonable scholar would deny that China became the second-largest economy in 2010. The inter-subjective dimension of international positioning is also relevant, but it is not the focus of this article. That being said, subjective and inter-subjective dimensions of international positioning can be linked logically and theoretically. As Robert Jervis (1989: xiii) points out, signaling and perceptions are two sides of the same coin in international relations. Based on Jervis’s argument, when a state tries to project a particular image, it will estimate how these signals might be perceived and recognized by other countries.

It should be noted that in the Chinese context, the issue of international positioning overlaps with other concepts such as status, role, and identity, but these concepts are not necessarily the same (Hu 2010; He and Walker 2015). The common ground of these concepts is that they could help us conceptualize the position of a state in the international society. The key difference is that positioning seems to be more comprehensive and dynamic than other concepts such as status and identity. This article will focus on
international positioning while occasionally touching upon concepts such as status and identity. In particular, this article will examine three core questions related to China’s international positioning: first, what is China’s status and identity in the international system? Second, what is China’s long-term goal? Third, what should be China’s strategy to fulfill its goal? These questions can be simplified in the following way: “Who are we? Where are we going? What are we going to do?” Among the three questions, the most crucial is “where are we going?” As Henry Kissinger notices, the Chinese strategic tradition emphasizes long-term trends (Goldberg 2016). The question of “where are we going” might reflect a long-term perspective of China’s strategic orientation in international relations.

Debating China’s International Positioning: Origin and Context

Why has international positioning become an increasingly hot topic in China’s foreign policy community? Why have Chinese scholars been debating such a topic in recent years? This section will analyze the origin and context of this debate.

In 2009, Cai Tuo, director of the Global Studies Institute at China University of Political Science and Law, hosted a major conference on China’s international positioning. Participants included scholars from key universities in China, as well as policy makers from the Chinese Foreign Ministry (Wu 2009: 63–64). It was a very comprehensive conference in China that focused solely on the topic of international positioning. According to Cai (2010), there are four reasons international positioning has become an increasingly important topic: first, the rapid transformation of the international system; second, China is facing increasing structural pressure; third, China is confused about its identity and role; finally, the international community has increasing expectations and is more suspicious of China’s role. According to this perspective, both international and domestic factors compel China to clarify its position in the international system.

Borrowing the framework of “the level of analysis” in international relations (Waltz 1959; Singer 1961), we can identify the origin and context of the debate at three levels.

At the international level, China’s international positioning has changed dramatically in recent years, and two events were especially salient in shaping the debate: the first was the global financial crisis in 2008, which drove China onto the center stage in global economic governance. The second was China’s surpassing of Japan as the world’s second-largest economy in 2010. To some extent, China’s economic status has outgrown the expectations of China’s political and intellectual elites. In a 2005 Foreign Affairs article, Zheng Bijian, a political advisor to the Chinese leadership, emphasized, “China’s economy is one-seventh the size of the United States’ and one-third the size of Japan’s” (Zheng 2005: 18). It is likely
the Chinese elites did not expect China’s economy would surpass Japan’s only five years later. While China currently holds a higher international status, some Chinese elites are ill prepared for the country’s sudden high profile in the global community.

At the domestic level, China’s foreign policy making process has become increasingly complicated and fragmented, and different institutions and government agencies sometimes advocate different priorities and interests in foreign policy (Zhang 2016). Chinese scholars have had increasingly more chances to participate in policy deliberation processes hosted by various government institutions. The increasingly complex decision-making process has created space for diverse voices to emerge.

At the individual level, the theoretical preferences of scholars also shape the debate. As observations are often theory-laden, Chinese scholars conceptualize the key problems of international positioning differently, largely shaped by their own theoretical perspectives. There is a tendency among scholars with an international liberal orientation to often emphasize the “soft” dimensions of China’s international positioning, such as soft power, international institutions, and global public goods provision. Meanwhile, scholars with a nationalistic or realist orientation emphasize the material power and critical perspective of China in the West-dominated international society. For instance, Chen Yugang suggests that China’s international positioning should be viewed from the perspective of “global relations” rather than “international relations”. According to Chen, “global relations” has transnational dimensions, and China should clarify its goal and strategy with a global vision (Chen cited in Wu 2009). Cai Tuo identifies China’s value system and China’s soft power as some of the key issues related to China’s international positioning (Cai cited in Wu 2009). Pang Zhongying suggests that the most important thing for China is to resolve the identity question “who am I” so it can clarify its foreign policy (Pang cited in Wu 2009). In contrast to these perspectives on soft power and identities, Tang Yongsheng emphasizes the evaluations of China’s comprehensive power (including territory, population, economy, technology, and military) as the foundation of China’s international positioning (Tang cited in Wu 2009). Wang Xianghui emphasizes that China should not forget its “critical perspective” while integrating into international society (Wang cited in Wu 2009).

There are also some scholars who take a middle-ground approach. Emphasizing the importance of evaluating China’s capabilities and power, Wang Jisi (2011a) suggests that the key is to clarify the meaning of a Taoguangyanghui strategy (maintaining a low-profile approach). Men Honghua (2013) suggests that it is crucial to clarify China’s various national attributes: institutionally positioning itself as a socialist country; socio-economically, as a large developing country; culturally, as a cultural power with a traditional source; politically, as a responsible great power; and strategically, as a great power in the Asia-Pacific region.
Debating China’s International Positioning: Consensus and Differences

As Chinese scholars debate China’s international positioning, both consensus and differences emerge. Most Chinese scholars agree that China has multiple identities, but they seem to disagree over which identity should be more salient than others. Also, while Chinese scholars want China to become richer and stronger in the future, they disagree on the ultimate destination of China’s rise on the global stage. In particular, they debate whether China should become a new superpower and replace the United States as the new global leader. Regarding strategies, Chinese scholars are actively debating if China should maintain a low profile or strive for achievement in a new era.

Regarding the question of China’s identity and status, most Chinese scholars agree that China does not have a fixed identity; rather, China is a state with a political discourse grounded in several competing ideologies and narratives (Shambaugh 2011). As China sits in multiple positions in world politics, it has to manage its conflicted identities and roles. For instance, China has interests of both a developing country and a developed one and is both a weak country and a strong one. With multiple identities, China is finding it increasingly difficult to define its interests in a coherent way (Li 2012).

There are at least five narratives of China’s identities widely recognized in Chinese discourses of international relations. First, China is a socialist country with Chinese characteristics. The key feature of the Chinese system is that the CCP is the ruling party. As Yuan Peng said, “Westerners sometimes exaggerate China’s socialist characteristics and revert to the label ‘communist’, while at other times ignoring China’s socialist nature and dealing with it as if it were purely capitalist. Neither caricature adequately captures the complex nature of the Chinese economy, development model or social policies” (Yuan cited in Hachigian and Peng 2010). According to Wang Jisi (2011b), Chinese leaders are especially sensitive to “domestic disorder caused by foreign threats”. Second, China is a developing country. While China’s economy is already the second-largest in the world, many indicators of China still reflect a lower developmental level. Third, China is an “emerging great power” (xinxing daguo) or “rising power” (jueqi guo). As an emerging power, China shares a status with the other BRICS countries (Brazil, India, Russia, and South Africa). Originally coined as a purely economic term by the investment bank Goldman Sachs, BRICS has emerged as a group of influential great powers in the twenty-first century. “Emerging power” has become a buzzword in Chinese discourse on international relations.

Although Chinese academic discussions of China as a “rising power” emerged earlier (Yan 1998), the Chinese government started to acknowledge China’s “rising power” status more explicitly in the years of 2013 and 2014. By highlighting the Thucydides Trap as an analogy...
of Sino-American challenge, Chinese leader Xi Jinping proposes to build a “New Type of Great Power Relations” with the US. From this perspective, managing tensions with the No.1 power has become an increasingly urgent challenge for China (Qi 2015). This perspective seems to position China as the No.2 power in the international pecking order. Fourth, China is an established great power. While international observers often view China as an emerging power, they sometimes ignore the fact that China is already one of the established great powers. Deng Xiaoping (1993a: 353) once said, “In the so-called multi-polar world, China too will be a pole. We should not belittle our own importance: one way or another, China will be counted as a pole”.

Finally, China is a regional power in East Asia. China has been a predominant power in East Asia for thousands of years, which has foreign policy implications in contemporary era (Kang 2008). Some Chinese regard China’s leading status in the region as being natural instead of challenging the status quo (Yan 2001). Considering the trade-offs of China’s different identities, Chinese scholars tend to emphasize different aspects of China’s identities and status. For instance, Cai Tuo argues that China should embrace the identity of an emerging great power, while Hu Jian emphasizes the importance of China’s identity as a developing country (Cai 2010; Hu 2010).

Regarding the question of China’s long-term goals, Chinese elites have a clear sense of general direction but an unclear sense of ultimate destination. Modern Chinese leaders always strive to build China into a “rich nation with strong army” (Fuguo qiangbin) (Schell and Delury 2013). President Xi Jinping’s slogan of the Chinese Dream seems to reflect a continuity of modern Chinese political tradition rather than a creation of something entirely new. However, Chinese scholars have different beliefs regarding long-term goals. In particular, they ask, should China eventually become a superpower and play a leadership role on the global stage? As mentioned before, Chinese scholars such as Yan Xuetong and Liu Mingfu suggest China’s ultimate goal is to replace the United States as a new global leader. From these perspectives, a status competition between China and the United States will be inevitable. While China has the potential capabilities to be a superpower, the idea of superpower status is politically controversial in China. For one thing, the “superpower” status has a negative connotation in China’s diplomatic discourse, as it is often associated with “imperialism” or “hegemony”. While some scholars support the idea of China as an emerging superpower, Chinese officials and other scholars typically do not embrace this notion. According to Wang Jisi (2011a), even though China possesses the second-largest economy, it is still far behind America, Japan, and Europe in terms of innovation, quality of life, and soft power influence.

Finally, regarding the question of China’s strategy, should China play a more active role on
the world stage? Scholars in China’s foreign policy circle actively debate the opportunities and responsibilities of being a great power. Two decades ago, Deng Xiaoping set a guiding principle for China’s diplomacy, emphasizing that China should “hide its capabilities and bide its time”. This low-profile approach is widely known as the Tao Guang Yang Hui (TGYH) strategy in China (Chen and Wang 2011). In recent years, the Chinese foreign policy community has been debating what China should signal to both domestic and international audiences. Many Chinese scholars, such as Wang Jisi (2011a) and Qin Yaqing (2014), argue that China should continue maintaining a low profile. Yet, according to Yan Xuetong (2014), “the strive for achievement” strategy has served China well by defending China’s national interests while maintaining relatively good relations with many countries. To overcome the political and ideational obstacles for China to play a larger role, Wang Yizhou (2011) suggests using “creative involvement” to conceptualize China’s more active approach in global affairs.

Regarding the strategy of China, there is also a debate regarding how to conceptualize Xi Jinping’s assertive diplomacy (Yan 2014; Qin 2014). While China still has several incentives to keep a low profile, Xi Jinping has started to modify China’s low-profile approach by pursuing a more proactive diplomacy. From October 24 to October 25, 2013, Beijing held a major conference on China’s regional diplomacy in Asia. The meeting laid out some long-term goals of China’s regional diplomacy (Xinhua 2013). Besides holding the regional diplomacy conference, Xi has initiated a variety of activities in regional diplomacy. Xi spoke for the first time of China’s grand strategy needing to embrace “a new great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics” (you zhongguo tese de xinxing daguo waijiao), in order to craft a “new type of great power relations” (xinxing daguo guanxi) with the United States (Xinhua 2014). Facing the change in Xi Jinping’s foreign policy, some scholars such as Yan Xuetong argue that China has already abandoned the low-profile approach, and China’s top leadership has embraced the “strive for achievement” strategy. While acknowledging the rapid change of Xi’s foreign policy, Qin Yaqing sees both continuity and change in Chinese foreign policy. As Qin points out, “a strident turn from one strategy to the other is inadvisable, and indeed continuity through change is a realistic description of China’s present international strategy” (Qin 2014).

**Interpretation of the Debate: A Status Signaling Model**

Why do Chinese scholars take different positions on China’s international positioning? To conceptualize the relationship between scholars and the foreign policy making process in China, Huiyun Feng and Kai He (2016) propose four models: the epistemic community model, free market model, signaling model, and mirroring policy model. These different models highlight different relationships between scholarly debates and foreign policy.
making in China. It should be noted that these four models are hubristic frameworks that might help us understand the relationship between the academic world and the policy process in China. They do not mean to be exclusive to each other. While acknowledging that all four models have validity, I choose to use the signaling model to interpret the Chinese debate because it might be most relevant to the core question of the debate, namely China’s positioning in the international society. The core issue of positioning is the building and projection of various images, and image management can be analyzed from a signaling perspective (Jervis 1989). According to Feng and He (2016), the signaling model refers to situations where Chinese scholars help the government to test social and international responses to some new ideas for policies or policy changes. In other words, some scholars who have a close relationship with the government can facilitate policy makers in signaling some controversial ideas to the outside world. I modify the signaling model in two respects. First, I focus on “status signaling” instead of conventional signaling. Status signaling refers to the mechanism of information transmission that aims to change or maintain a special type of “status belief” among relevant political actors (Pu and Schweller 2014; Pu 2017). Second, I highlight the significance of both domestic and international audiences instead of just the “outside world”. As status signaling is a multilevel game, with the state’s leadership pivoting between domestic and international audiences, Chinese leaders face competing pressure from these audiences to project different images.

As I am using a signaling model to explain Chinese scholarly debate, there is a question: to what extent do Chinese scholars serve the purpose of the state signaling in international relations? Here are some caveats. First, China has a vibrant community of international relations scholars, and there are genuine academic debates on a variety of issues. In this sense, I am not claiming that all scholars simply serve the propaganda purpose of the Chinese government. Second, even though some scholars might intentionally serve the Chinese government’s purpose, they cannot serve as credible massagers in diplomatic crisis. Signaling intentions through scholars might be too noisy in a context of international crisis. That being said, the scholarly debate can serve a signaling function in several respects. First, as Feng and He describe, the scholarly debate could help the Chinese government to test waters. When the government is implementing new policy, it might make sense to collect reactions from domestic and international audiences, and scholarly debate can facilitate this process (Feng and He 2016). Second, as some scholars participate in policy deliberation, their diverse opinions could help outsiders understand the range of China’s policy choices. Finally, the hawkish and dovish voices in China’s international relations community sometimes represent the two sides of the same coin, as China tries to project its preferred image. As Robert Jervis (1989: xiv) emphasizes, states sometimes might want to be feared or to be seen as irrational to achieve strategic advantages. Some hawkish voices appearing openly in the Chinese media might have

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confused international observers, but those hawkish voices could be more appropriately viewed as part of government efforts to shape the perception of domestic and international audiences (Chubb 2013).

To conceptualize the fundamental question of China’s rise, some scholars have identified the security dilemma as a core challenge: as China is upgrading its military capabilities, it will lead to an arms race and generate backlash regionally (Liffland and Ikenberry 2014). Sun Xuefeng (2011) conceptualizes China’s major challenge as that of a “rising dilemma”: how can a rising power transform its material power into systematic influence while reducing the security challenges posed by the international system? While these studies have shed new light on China’s challenges, their focus on security is too narrow. I suggest that we could conceptualize China’s rise and its implications more broadly. A rising China faces a variety of challenges, some of which are not necessarily related to traditional security.

Why does China increasingly acknowledge its “rising power” status while still emphasizing its developing country status? Here I am using a theory of status signaling to explain China’s behaviors. The purpose of status signaling is to demonstrate a state’s preferred ranking in the international society. To indicate Great Power status, a rising power could build aircraft carriers, join major international organizations, and host the Olympic Games. However, a rising power could also use “strategic spinning” to demonstrate its preferred status through statements and speeches (Greenberg 2015; Mearsheimer 2010b). At the individual level, a person “spins” by telling a story to emphasize certain facts and link them together in ways that play to his advantage, while at the same time downplaying inconvenient facts. As a communicative act, political leaders often use spin to persuade their targeted audiences to accept one particular interpretation of social reality. A rising power might have different “possible selves”.

In psychology, “possible selves” represent “individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, thus providing a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (Markus and Nurius 1986). China might have various “possible selves”: the collectively shared ideas of what China might become, what China would like to become, and what China is afraid of becoming. A rising power might have different attributes regarding status and capabilities, and the multiple attributes of a rising power provide conditions for its government to highlight some dimensions rather than others. When a rising power aims to enhance its status to gain more privileges, it will highlight its strength. When a rising power tries to shirk from taking greater responsibilities, it will downplay its strength. When a rising power aims to consolidate political support from the developing countries, it will highlight its status as a developing country for solidarity purpose. In other words, China sometimes sticks to its original developing country status and other times emphasizes its newly acquired rising
power status. By emphasizing different aspects of China’s identities, China is motivated largely by instrumental reasons rather than symbolic reasons. However, China’s power and capabilities have increased rapidly, and its international environment has changed dramatically. The rapid change has created an increasing inconsistency between China’s traditional diplomatic narrative and China’s newly acquired international status (Xu and Du 2015). Such an inconsistency or ambiguity provides a space for scholars to debate the meanings and implications of China’s international positioning. China’s challenge moving forward will be to manage its conflicting roles in ways that advance its national interests, while not engendering dangerous misperceptions and expectations among multiple audiences. A rising China is facing competing incentives to project its image and status on the global stage. In particular, China must balance competing incentives between resolve and reassurance, status and responsibilities, the Global North (West) and the Global South, and domestic audiences and international audiences. I argue that these competing incentives have shaped Chinese debates on international positioning. Most Chinese scholars agree that China has multiple identities, and their differences seem to focus on which aspect China should emphasize.

First of all, the debate among Chinese scholars reflects a rising China’s uneasy balance between signaling resolve and signaling reassurance as China is rising in the international system. China’s reassurance is related to its policy of attempting to divert fears among other countries about its growing power. China has repeatedly reassured the established powers and the regional neighbors that its future posture will be peaceful and non-threatening (Goldstein 2001). Chinese elites are so eager to reassure the world about China’s non-threatening intentions that they even changed the slogan of “peaceful rise” (heping jueqi) to “peaceful development” (heping fazhan) (Glaser and Medeiros 2007). While the fundamental message of the two concepts is essentially the same, “peaceful rise” has a more competitive tone because the notion of “rise” indicates an enhancement of China’s status and may imply a “decline” in other countries’ status. Thus, Chinese leaders preferred to use the term “peaceful development” instead of “peaceful rise” (Glaser and Medeiros 2007). However, as China is rising, it must also defend its claims by signaling resolve. Thus, the balance of signaling resolve or signaling reassurance has shaped how Chinese scholars emphasize different aspects of Chinese foreign policy. The most interesting case is the argument of Zhang Ruizhuang. Zhang strongly opposed China’s low-profile approach (TGYH) in early years because he thought that China should signal its resolve in defending its claims when it was much weaker. However, in recent years, Zhang has become a champion of the low-profile approach. He suggests that China’s rise has generated strategic uncertainty and anxiety in the West (especially in the US) (Zhang 2013: 20–22). At this moment, China should be extremely cautious and prudent. Signaling reassurance to the international community becomes more crucial as China becomes a much stronger power in a new era.
Second, the Chinese debate reflects the competing incentives between seeking great power status and shirking from unwanted responsibilities. China surely has many reasons to signal its great power status. In the scholarly literature, China is often viewed as a “prestige maximizer” with a strong sense of status insecurity or status anxiety (Johnston 1999; Deng 2008). There are psychological and political motivations to close the gap between a rising power’s desired status and its actual status. For instance, based on social identity theory, any country, but especially great powers, should have a natural tendency to project a positive and distinctive image and status on the world stage (Larson and Shevchenko 2010). In recent years, China has carefully crafted its image as a strong nation through various high-profile projects such as the Beijing Olympic Games and the Shanghai Expo. However, China also has a strong incentive to signal a lower status to avoid taking on unwanted responsibilities. Chinese political elites argue that since China remains a developing country, keeping a low profile in the coming decades will allow it to concentrate on domestic priorities. The Chinese government wants to emphasize that China is still essentially a poor country with many domestic problems to resolve.

Having achieved such a high global profile, China has already generated high expectations to provide global public goods. The high profile with high expectations is not what the Chinese leaders are prepared to handle at this stage of China’s rise. The Copenhagen Climate Summit became a forum where different understandings of global responsibility clashed. The Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao’s speech at the summit made China’s position as a developing country exceptionally clear. Premier Wen emphasized the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities” on environmental issues. Given the speed and size of its economic miracle, China can be expected to experience growing pains as it transforms from a regional to a global player. China may be reluctant to take on major international responsibilities with respect to the global economy, climate change, and security crises. Instead, it may choose to focus inward, negotiating favorable international deals, while shouldering fewer global burdens than other major powers will want it to bear. Some Chinese scholars such as Hu Jian emphasize that dealing with China’s domestic challenges is an important part of China’s international responsibilities (Hu 2010: 144–145). China’s domestic development is beneficial for the rest of the world because Chinese consumption could boost the growth of the world economy in the long term. However, some other scholars suggest that China should not shirk from taking greater responsibilities. By taking greater responsibilities, China could contribute to global governance or build its moral leadership on the global stage (Cai 2010).

Third, the Chinese debate reflects China’s unique position as a large developing country. While striving for great power status, China wants to maintain developing country solidarity.
for political purposes. A rising power such as China can consolidate its political influence by emphasizing its identity as a “developing country”. South-South unity and cooperation has long constituted a core component of Chinese foreign policy (Yu 2010: 129). China has always declared that it stands with the developing world. China’s South-South policy has been influenced by diverse factors and largely shaped by China’s domestic priority. Since the global financial crisis, although China’s international status has been enhanced, China has still emphasized its belonging to the South or the developing world. The identity of developing country has always been an important theme in China’s diplomacy (Dittmer 2010a: 1–11). The PRC achieved its seat at the United Nations over Taiwan largely because it received support from the developing world. During the Cold War, China competed vigorously with the Soviet Union to woo the support from developing and Communist countries (Christensen 2011: Chapter 5). In the late 1970s, Beijing started its economic reforms, and China gradually abandoned its image as a radical revolutionary power.

China’s identity as a developing nation has intensified since the end of the Cold War. China attempted to break through the initial isolation after Tiananmen and also looked for alternative sources of support after the collapse of the communist bloc (Ness 1993). Furthermore, as China’s economic growth continues, economic interest and natural resources have been a major driving force behind China’s engagement with the developing world (Brautigam 2009). The economic relations have helped China strengthen its political influence in the developing world as well. By emphasizing China’s identity as a developing country, China is trying to strengthen its representation and voice in the global governance structure. China has been asserting its discontent with the current global order, and it has called for a greater say for developing countries, ultimately leading towards parity with the developed world (Chin and Thakur 2010).

China might not want to be viewed as a leader of the developing world; as Deng Xiaoping famously emphasized, China “should never seek a leadership position” (juebu dangtou) within the developing world (Deng 1993b). This approach is increasingly in conflict with the reality of China’s foreign policy practice: through active participation in the South-South cooperation, China has held the default status as a leader of the developing world, and there are also increasing international expectations that China should play a more active role in the developing world. Further, in recent years China has strengthened its efforts to build multilateral forums and institutions within the developing world (Sohn 2012). Wang Jisi (2015) and Men Honghua (2013) emphasize that China is not a typical developing country anymore, and they suggest that China could identify itself primarily as a country that could bridge the developed world (Global North) with the developing world (Global South).

Finally, the Chinese debate reflects an uneasy balance between domestic and international incentives. China has the second-largest economy, strong military power, and privileged status. China’s strategy has been to balance its international aspirations with its commitment to being a “responsible” global citizen. The identity of China as a developing country is a key aspect of this strategy, as it allows China to seek legitimacy as a leader in the international community while also maintaining its alignment with the interests of the developing world.
membership in major international organizations. A systematic study of great power status puts China as a “status over-achiever” in the international system (Volgy et al. 2011). Why should China still struggle for more status? I argue that China’s continuous struggle for international status is increasingly driven by domestic political calculations. The global financial crisis has turned China from a peripheral member into a key player in global governance, and it has also boosted China’s ideational confidence about its political economic model. As Lieberthal and Wang note, “It is a popular notion among Chinese political elites, including some national leaders, that China’s development model provides an alternative to Western democracy and experiences for other developing countries to learn from, while many developing countries that have introduced Western values and political systems are experiencing disorder and chaos” (Lieberthal and Wang 2012: 10). While China’s domestic politics have driven China to take a more “assertive turn” in diplomacy, some Chinese scholars have begun to worry about international backlash. In this sense, multiple audiences and complicated incentives have shaped how Chinese scholars are debating China’s international positioning.

Conclusion

As China’s development has entered into a new stage, there is increasing uncertainty over China’s identity and roles, as China expert Lowell Dittmer emphasizes: “The truth may be that China, like a young adult, is now more confused about its national identity than it was when it was more radical and less developed. To some extent this confusion has affected images of China among other countries as well” (Dittmer 2010b: 226).

Like a rapidly growing company trying to redefine its goal and brand, a rising China is trying to establish a new position in the international system. China’s rapid rise generates new uncertainty and confusion about its status and role on the world stage. Chinese scholars are actively debating about China’s international positioning. While China should clarify its position in the international pecking order, Chinese scholars have incentives to emphasize different aspects of China’s status and identities. While some Chinese scholars see international positioning as a unique Chinese problem, the topic could be examined in a broader theoretical perspective. The challenge of how a rising power adapts to its new status is not a unique Chinese problem. Rising powers often face obstacles to objectively evaluating their shifting power and adjusting to the new reality accordingly.

As Chinese scholars debate China’s positioning, they have both consensus and differences. Most scholars agree that China has multiple identities, including that of socialist country, developing country, rising power, great power, and East Asian regional power. Chinese scholars seem to disagree with each other regarding which identity should be more salient.
than the others. Chinese scholars seem to have a clear sense of China’s direction; namely, they want to make China great again. However, they seem to disagree with the ultimate destination of China’s rise on the global stage. In particular, they disagree on whether China should seek to become a new superpower. In addition, Chinese scholars are actively debating whether China should continue maintaining a low profile or actively strive for achievement in a new era.

To explain various positions on China’s international positioning, this article took a “status signaling” approach to interpret this Chinese debate. As a mechanism of information transmission, status signaling aims to change or maintain a special type of “status belief” among relevant political actors. China’s status signaling is a multilevel game, with the state’s leadership pivoting between domestic and international audiences. As Chinese leaders face competing pressure from domestic and international audiences, a rising China faces a variety of challenges. China’s crucial challenge will be to manage its conflicting roles in ways that advance its national interests, while not engendering dangerous misperceptions and expectations among various audiences. In particular, a rising China must balance competing incentives between resolve and reassurance, status and responsibilities, and a domestic audience and international audience. These competing incentives have shaped Chinese debate on international positioning.

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