THE GRIFFITH-TSINGHUA ‘HOW CHINA SEES THE WORLD’

Why Chinese IR Scholars Matter
By Huiyun Feng and Kai He
Why Chinese IR Scholars Matter

Huiyun Feng and Kai He
Griffith Asia Institute, Griffith University

Griffith was the first University in Australia to offer Asian Studies to undergraduate students and remains a pioneer in this field. This strong history means that today the Griffith Asia Institute can draw on the expertise of some 50 Asia-Pacific-focused academics from many disciplines across the university. Our Strategic Vision is to promote greater interest in and awareness of Australia’s changing region and its importance to Australia among the public, universities, policy makers and the media. The Griffith Asia Institute produces innovative, interdisciplinary research on key developments in the politics, economics, societies, and cultures of Asia and the South Pacific. By promoting knowledge of Australia’s changing region and its importance to our future, the Griffith Asia Institute seeks to inform and foster academic scholarship, public awareness, and responsive policy making. The Institute’s work builds on over 40 years of Griffith University tradition of providing cutting-edge research on issues of contemporary significance in the region.

Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University

Tsinghua University’s Institute of International Relations (TUIIR) is a university-level academic institution with a strategic goal of becoming a leading international research think-tank in China. TUIIR concentrates on both research and instruction. Currently, there are seven research centers, three research programs, and two editorial departments. The faculty of the institution acts as both instructors and researchers. The TUIIR organizes a variety of academic activities every year, such as forums, seminars and lectures. We have held the Community Conference of Political Science and International Relations eight times, in which more than 700 scholars participated each year. Also, TUIIR has held the Tsinghua International Security Forum 15 times, the Theory Seminar Youth International Relations Scholars four times, and the Summer School of the International Relations Research Methods and Arms Control Seminar nine times. In 2012, TUIIR successfully organized the first World Peace Forum, which made a major impact globally.

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)
Why Chinese IR Scholars Matter

Abstract
This paper addresses three questions: (1) why do we study Chinese IR scholars’ views and perceptions?; (2) what are the possible relationships between Chinese IR scholars and the policy making community?; (3) how will we study Chinese IR scholars? We suggest that Chinese IR scholars can serve as a “proxy measure” to gauge Chinese leaders’ perceptions, because scholars are the mediators between Chinese leaders and the general public in society. We do not intend to simply draw a causal and linear line between Chinese IR scholars and policy makers. Instead, we suggest four models of the relationship between Chinese IR scholars and China’s policy makers, namely, the “epistemic community model,” the “free market model,” the “policy signalling model,” and the “mirroring policy model.” In addition, we argue that exploring the internal debates among Chinese scholars is a unique approach to understanding what Chinese scholars think as well as inferring what Chinese leaders might want.
About the Authors:

Huiyun Feng is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Government and International Relations at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She is a former Jennings Randolph Peace Scholar at the United States Institute of Peace. Her publications have appeared in the European Journal of International Relations, Security Studies, The Pacific Review, International Politics, Chinese Journal of International Politics, and Asian Perspective. She is the author of Chinese Strategic Culture and Foreign Policy Decision Making: Confucianism, Leadership and War (Routledge, 2007) and the co-author of Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in the Asia Pacific: Rational Leaders and Risky Behavior (Routledge, 2013).

Kai He is an Associate Professor of International Relations in the Griffith Asia Institute and Centre for Governance and Public Policy at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. He was a postdoctoral fellow in the Princeton-Harvard China and the World Program (2009—2010). He is the author of Institutional Balancing in the Asia Pacific: Economic Interdependence and China’s Rise (Routledge, 2009), the co-author of Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in the Asia Pacific: Rational Leaders and Risky Behavior (Routledge, 2013), and the author of China’s Crisis Behavior: Political Survival and Foreign Policy (Cambridge, 2016).

This Working Paper Series presents papers in a preliminary form and serves to stimulate debates and discussions among scholars and policy analysts. The views expressed are entirely the authors’ own.
Why Chinese IR Scholars Matter

Huiyun Feng and Kai He

Introduction
Since 2010, China has become the second largest economy after the United States in the world. China’s military spending is also the second largest, just behind that of the United States in recent years. In 2016, China announced a further increase in its military budget by 7%~8%. Although the power gap between China and the United States is still significant, “the rise of China is the big story of our era” (Shambaugh 2013, the emphasis is original). China’s “assertive diplomacy” has also drawn deep suspicions from the rest of the world since the global financial crisis in 2008 (e.g., Swaine 2010, 2011; Swaine and Fravel 2011). The 2012 Scarborough Shoal crisis with the Philippines, the still ongoing flare-ups with Japan on the Senkaku/Diaoyu disputes, as well as the maritime competition or even rivalry between China and the United States in the South China Sea have further intensified the strategic concerns over China’s rise. How to understand China’s rise and its implications for Asian security is an imperative challenge for policy makers in today’s world and in the foreseeable future.

In order to better manage the rise of China, the United States and other nations need to know what Chinese leaders think and perceive as well as predict how they will behave with their increasing economic and military capabilities in international affairs. Understanding the Chinese perspective is the first step in making effective policy on China. As Henry Kissinger (2011: vxi) advises, we “do not always agree with the Chinese perspective… But it is necessary to understand it, since China will play such a big role in the world that is emerging in the twenty-first century.” If “strategic distrust” is a major obstacle in the bilateral relations between the two nations as Kenneth Lieberthal and Jisi Wang (2012) suggest, 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 United States and China.

China experienced its once-a-decade leadership transition in 2012, and China’s new President Xi Jinping is expected to remain in power for the next ten years. Chinese foreign policy is moving in a new direction under Xi’s leadership, as reflected in China’s policy preference of “striving for achievement” (有所作为 you suo zuo wei) in recent years (Yan 2014). How will Chinese leaders perceive China’s power versus
the United States in the next ten years? How do the Chinese view the US “rebalancing” strategy in Asia? What are Chinese leaders’ visions for bilateral relations with Japan and other neighbors? Will China abandon its “peaceful rise” policy? These are some questions of vital importance to policy makers in the Asia Pacific in making a sensible China policy and forging a mutually beneficial relationship with China. Now it is time to investigate the new Chinese leadership’s perceptions on Asian security and international relations so that the outside world can better prepare for both opportunities and challenges brought about by China’s rise.

However, one obstacle in making China policy is that there is no direct way to gauge Chinese leaders’ perceptions and opinions due to their different cultural backgrounds and political and social systems. In this project funded by the MacArthur Foundation (2016—2018), we intend to explore and understand Chinese leaders’ perceptions and attitudes regarding Asian security through the eyes of China’s International Relations (IR) scholars. This project uses Chinese IR scholars as a “proxy measure” to make sense of Chinese leaders’ perceptions on Asian security, because there is no other reliable method to directly measure Chinese leaders’ perceptions in detail. Chinese IR scholars serve as the mediators between Chinese leaders and the general public in society.

We do not intend to simply draw a causal and linear line between Chinese IR scholars and policy makers. Instead, we suggest that there are at least four types of relations between Chinese IR scholars and China’s policy makers. Some Chinese IR scholars may play an active role in influencing China’s foreign policy as part of an epistemic community. Some may provide intellectual products in a free market of ideas for policy makers to consume when making decisions. Chinese IR scholars may also play a policy signalling role in facilitating the government’s test of some controversial ideas before new policies or policy changes are formalized. Moreover, the rise and fall of Chinese IR scholars’ ideas and debates can serve as a mirror to reflect the underlying transformations of Chinese foreign policies and domestic politics. Through exploring Chinese IR scholars’ views and debates, therefore, we can better gauge how Chinese policy makers may think, behave, and react on major issues in international relations.

In this paper, we first address the question of why we study Chinese IR scholars. We review the state of the art of the studies of Chinese IR scholars and argue that these scholars as a subject of research have a unique value in understanding Chinese foreign policy. Surveying the existing research, we detect two areas of concern: first is the limited attention to diverse views and internal debates among Chinese IR scholars; and second is the lack of theorization on the role of IR scholars in foreign policy. Therefore, we discuss next how we study Chinese IR scholars’ views and
perceptions by investigating internal debates among Chinese IR scholars. We argue that the internal debates among Chinese IR scholars are more dynamic than widely perceived in the Western world. More importantly, the unique feature of our project is to let Chinese IR scholars tell their own stories.

Third, we propose four possible models as a starting point for later researchers to investigate the role of Chinese IR scholars in policy making in China’s political system; i.e. the “epistemic community model,” the “free market model,” the “policy signalling model,” and the “mirroring policy model.” We conclude that through examining Chinese IR scholars’ debates as well as theorizing their diverse roles in foreign policy, we can obtain a more systemic and dynamic picture of Chinese scholars’ perceptions. This will facilitate deeper understanding of Chinese foreign policy as well as better assessment of its possible orientations in the future.

The State of the Art in the Study of Chinese IR Scholars

The significance of studying Chinese IR scholars did not appear until after the Cold War. In Beautiful Imperialist (1991) David Shambaugh examines how America Watchers, i.e., China’s IR scholars who work on US-China relations, perceived the United States between 1972 and 1990. It is path-breaking in that it highlights the important role of Chinese IR scholars as mediators in connecting Chinese society and the previous generation of Chinese policy makers. Shambaugh concluded in the book that China’s distorted and biased perceptions of the United States contributed to the fluctuations in U.S.-China relations during the Cold War.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, other scholars followed Shambaugh’s example to explore China’s changing perceptions of the United States through the eyes of the America Watchers (e.g., Wang 2000; Chen 2003; Zhang 2005). For example, Bonnie Glaser and Phillip Saunders (2002) examine the evolving roles and increasing influence of Chinese research institutions in China’s foreign policy decision-making process. Similarly, Glaser and Evan Medeiros (2007) explore how Chinese think-tank analysts and university-based scholars have influenced a change in China’s foreign policy discourse from “peaceful rise” to “peaceful development” in the 2000s. In 2012, Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell (2012) published “How China Sees America” in Foreign Affairs, based on their extensive interviews and fieldwork in Beijing, in which they analyze “the sum of Beijing’s fears” toward the United States. In a most recent study, Daniel Lynch

---

1 This section is based on our previous publications: Feng and He (2015) and Feng and He (2016).
Why Chinese IR Scholars Matter

(2015) investigates how Chinese academic elites debate China’s economics, politics, and foreign policy through intensive content analyses of Chinese publications and elite interviews.

There are two methodological reasons to treat Chinese IR scholars as a new focal point in the study of China’s foreign policy. First, unlike the general public, the views of IR scholars or experts can be more valuable in examining China’s foreign policy and international relations. There is an increasing research trend for the use of elite views to make sense of international relations. For example, in 2012, the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project launched a “US-China Security Perceptions Project” with the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the China Strategic Culture Promotion Association, and the Research Center for Contemporary China at Peking University. The “U.S.-China Security Perceptions Project” aims to evaluate different views between the general public and experts in both the United States and China regarding US-China security issues. The final report was released in December 2013 and suggested that the US public and experts had different perceptions regarding US-China policies (Swaine et al. 2013).

Second, the changing decision-making structure in China offers a unique social role to Chinese IR scholars. With widespread use of the Internet and social media, the foreign policy decision-making process in China is no longer “one man’s rule” (Ning 1997; Nathan and Scobell 2012). Although it would be an exaggeration to say that the public has a direct impact on Chinese foreign policy, China’s policy makers face increasing pressure from society in the process of making foreign policy decisions. By measuring how Chinese IR scholars look at Chinese power, US policies, and Chinese foreign policy, we can be more confident in inferring how China’s policy makers might think and perceive of international relations when facing constraints from society.

Shambaugh’s and other scholars’ efforts to examine the perceptions of Chinese IR scholars have formed the foundations of our project. However, there are two methodological and theoretical limitations in the existing research. First, there is no systemic study on the internal debates of Chinese IR scholars. Most research focuses on Chinese IR scholars’ views of the United States, not Asian security issues and

---

2 Following a similar methodology, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) also conducted an opinion survey on “strategic elites” in 11 Asia Pacific economies in early 2014, which aimed to explore regional perceptual trend lines on power and order in Asia.
international relations in general. With a limited quantity of published academic works, there is a significant research gap in the study of China’s IR scholars’ perceptions after 2000. Moreover, most research highlights the dominant views of Chinese IR scholars and uses the “winning” voice to simply infer what Chinese leaders and policy makers might think in foreign policy. However, Chinese IR scholars’ perceptions are in fact much more diverse than widely perceived. Without systemically examining the different views among IR scholars, the origins of their debates, as well as the processes of their debates, we can not fully understand and grasp the rise and the fall of major ideas in the Chinese IR community as well as the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy.

Second, there is a lack of theorization on the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy. Most research simply draws a linkage among Chinese IR scholars’ perceptions and China’s foreign policy without exploring internal mechanisms and dynamics between the two. Consequently, this lack of theorization phenomenon drives some scholars to question whether in China the so-called public opinion, including IR scholars’ views, is actually a result rather than a source of governmental policy (Sun 2011; Jakobson and Knox 2010). Other scholars suggest that Chinese foreign policy decision making is widely seen as the elite’s business, while the public stays far away from the decision-making process (Fewsmith and Rosen 2001; Wang and Shirk 2004). Some critics even sharply argue that advising Chinese leaders is a “futile effort” because most recommendations and reports written by scholars and analysts are filtered out by numerous bureaucracies before reaching policy makers at the top (Lu 2012).

As existing research suggests, Chinese IR scholars and the public in general might not affect Chinese foreign policy directly; however, their influence cannot be ignored because of the pluralist trend in the Chinese decision-making process observed by many China scholars (e.g. Lampton 2014; Swaine and Zhang 2006). Our project is built on this analytical premise. We argue that we need to further theorize the relationship between Chinese IR scholars and policy makers in order to better understand the dynamic role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy.

Therefore, our project is designed to address the above two analytical deficiencies in the study of Chinese IR scholars. On the one hand, we focus on Chinese IR scholars’ internal debates and let Chinese IR scholars tell their own stories to the outside world. On the other hand, we propose four analytical models to further theorize the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy. It is not our intention to formalize the...
relationship between Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy. Instead, we keep this question open for scholars to discuss and investigate. In other words, we only suggest at this point that Chinese IR scholars matter in foreign policy, but how they matter is subject to debate. It will be a major methodological task in this project for our contributors to investigate how Chinese IR scholars matter in their own research.

**Why Internal Debates among China’s IR Scholars Matter**

There are three reasons for focusing on Chinese IR scholars’ debates. First, the Chinese debates will provide a new perspective on the study of Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy. As mentioned before, there is no systematic research on the internal debates among Chinese IR scholars, especially into the 2000s. Given the fact that both Chinese politics and society are moving in a pluralist direction, Chinese leaders can no longer remain immune from societal influences, e.g., from IR scholars. IR scholars are also not easily manipulated or influenced by the government. China’s foreign policy decision-making process has become institutionalized, in that Chinese IR scholars and policy analysts play an important consultative role in advising policy makers through various channels.

Therefore, Chinese IR scholars’ perceptions can provide a “parameter” or “domain” of Chinese leaders’ opinions and thoughts. This perceptual parameter can not only help outsiders understand the domain of actions or the constraints Chinese leaders may face when making decisions, but also make sense of how Chinese leaders may behave in the future and thereby provide some predictive value. As Daniel Lynch (2015: x) points out, “studying these (Chinese scholars’) images can be useful in trying to assess what trajectory is likely to emerge, precisely because the elites are operating inside parameters imposed by the (still) awesomely powerful Party-state.” Through in-depth discussions on the various debates among Chinese IR scholars, this project will present an updated and a more nuanced, comprehensive picture of different schools of thought in the Chinese IR community.

Second, this project intends to bridge the perception gap between the Chinese IR

---

3 Besides focusing on the IR debates, we employ another method to examine Chinese IR scholars’ perceptions, which is to conduct a series of anonymous opinion surveys among Chinese IR scholars. Through a large-N study and statistical analysis, we can explore how Chinese IR scholars view the world, especially on some key issues in international relations in the Asia Pacific. We will publish separate papers and survey reports to explain our research design and methodology for the opinion survey part of our project. For preliminary results of the scholar surveys, see Feng and He (2015) and Feng and He (2016).
community and the outside world. Due to the language barrier and different publication requirements, Chinese IR scholars are not very active in the English-based publishing world although this situation is gradually changing. In public, especially in the English-based media, Chinese scholars seem to uphold the party line when they are interviewed or reported. Consequently, it is a stereotype image of an “empty mirror,” in that Chinese scholars only explain, elaborate, and defend Chinese foreign policies and positions in international relations without contributing their independent thoughts and ideas. We have to admit that, in fact, many scholarly works in China fall into this category for two reasons. First, it is safe to follow the party line in the one-party political system in China. Second, it is easy to obtain funding and get published if scholars conduct research on “hot” topics guided by the government. While we are fully aware of this phenomenon, we suggest that Chinese IR scholars play more diverse and important roles in foreign policy than the “empty mirror” argument has suggested.

By focusing on Chinese IR scholars’ internal debates, we can explicitly address this “empty mirror” problem, because it is impossible for both sides in a debate to support the government’s policy. In other words, the method of exploring Chinese IR scholars’ debates undermines the argument that the views of China’s IR scholars are simply an “empty mirror” of Beijing’s party line and do not contribute to the perceptions and thinking of Chinese leaders. We contend that understanding why some scholars hold different views from the government is the first step in grasping the potential directions and the boundaries of Chinese foreign policy in the future.

It is worth noting that Chinese IR scholars have debated and are debating publicly over many issues in Chinese sources. Some foreign scholars have started to investigate the intense debates among Chinese IR scholars. For example, Mingjiang Li (2008) investigates Chinese IR scholars’ debate on soft power. Shaun Breslin (2015) discusses the evolution of China’s perceptions of human security by delving into scholarly works and publications. Zeng and his colleagues (Zeng et al. 2015) focus on Chinese IR scholars’ debate over a new concept of “core interests” in Chinese foreign policy.

This project will extend this intellectual effort to systematically examine Chinese IR scholars’ debates over foreign policy. One unique feature of this project is that most of our contributors in the project are based in China, teaching and conducting research in Chinese universities and research institutions. All of them are experts in their respective fields. Some of them have even actively participated in the internal
debates with other scholars in China. Therefore, our contributing scholars can better grasp some nuanced differences in the debates than outside observers. In other words, letting Chinese IR scholars tell their own stories about the debate is the distinctive feature of this project. These debates will not only enrich our understanding of the evolution of Chinese foreign policy, but also make sense of the possible directions of China’s rise in the future.

Third, this project has strong policy relevance for both China and the outside world. For Chinese policy makers the results of this project will be interesting and useful. Since the Chinese government is also sensitive to society in making foreign policy, given the increasing influence of globalization and information technology, it has established a “public opinion office” [舆情办公室 Yuqing Bangongshi] in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to better understand societal attitudes and opinions on international affairs. This project will provide unique information for the Chinese government to grasp the prevailing views, concerns, and perceptions in the Chinese IR scholar community regarding international affairs so that Chinese foreign policy can be transparent and accountable to both domestic and international audiences.

For the outside world, especially the United States, knowing what Chinese leaders might think and figuring out how and why China may behave will deepen their understanding of China’s rise. As mentioned before, enhancing mutual understanding is the first step towards building mutual “strategic trust” between China and the outside world, especially with the United States, in the 21st century. This project will help reduce misunderstanding, alleviate the security dilemmas and other miscalculations, and contribute to Asian security and world peace.

**Four Models of Chinese IR Scholars’ Role in Foreign Policy**

For analytical purposes, we propose four models to theorize the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy. These four models are by no means exhaustive or mutually exclusive. They can be seen as preliminary probes that are intended to stimulate more in-depth research on the study of Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy by the contributors to this project.

*Epistemic Community Model*

The first model is the “epistemic community” model. As Peter Haas (1992) defines it, “an epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise
and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area.” The causal logic between an epistemic community and policy making is rooted in the uncertainties and complexities of international affairs. A mature epistemic community can provide the information that policy makers need in order to address complexities and reduce uncertainties in making decisions. Therefore, an epistemic community will be able to directly influence the policy-making process and even coordinate international cooperation (Haas 1992; Adler and Haas 1992).

In the China case, this “epistemic community” model suggests that some Chinese IR scholars form various epistemic communities with shared beliefs and policy orientations in international relations. Through their expertise, reputation, and status in society, they can provide insightful information to policy makers in a way that directly influences China’s foreign policy. Apparently, there is more than one epistemic community among Chinese IR scholars because of their diverse theoretical beliefs and theories in international relations. David Shambaugh (2011) specifies seven schools of thought among Chinese IR scholars, such as nativism, realism, “major power,” “Asia first,” “global south,” “selective multilateralism,” and “globalism.” According to the epistemic community model, those Chinese IR scholars who share similar worldviews and beliefs can exert different degrees of influence in Chinese foreign policy. According to Shambaugh’s analysis (2011), after the 2008 global financial crisis, scholars in the “globalism” camp have gradually lost their voice in the Chinese discourse while realists and nativists—the left and conservative groups—have started to gain more influence in Chinese bureaucracies. Consequently, we see that Chinese foreign policy has turned in an assertive direction since 2008.

In a similar vein, Alastair Johnston, in his Social States (2014), suggests that the major reason for Chinese government to embrace multilateralism in the 1990s was rooted in the socialization process in which Chinese officials and policy elites were socialized by the rules and norms of multilateralism through their participation in multilateral institutions. Although Johnston did not explicitly discuss the role of Chinese IR scholars in influencing China’s multilateral diplomacy, some top IR scholars, such as Yan Xuetong from Tsinghua University, Wang Jisi from Beijing University, and Zhang Yunling from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, have regularly joined in the track-two diplomacy between China and the outside world since the 1990s. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that some top IR scholars have become agents of socialization, in Johnston’s terms, who played a stimulating role in
encouraging the Chinese government to embrace multilateralism in the 1990s.

It is worth noting that one problem of this “epistemic community” model lies in the problematic causal linkage between Chinese IR scholars and policy makers. Due to the hierarchical nature of the decision-making system in China, how Chinese IR scholars can influence decision making is still questionable. Even though we can identify a coherent epistemic community inside the Chinese IR community, such as the globalism group, it is still not clear whether and how they can directly impact the top decision makers in the domain of foreign policy. Empirically, it is also difficult to test this epistemic community’s argument because of the lack of evidence in substantiating the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy.

“Free Market” Model
The second type of relationship between the Chinese IR community and policy makers is called the “free market” model, in which Chinese IR scholars are like the producers of knowledge and the government is the consumer. In this free marketplace of ideas, Chinese IR scholars produce new arguments and theories as well as policy recommendations, while government policy makers choose the ones that fit their interests and agendas. Here, the IR community plays a similar role as think-tanks in the Western world, which mainly serve to provide new ideas and advice to the government (George 1993). The difference between IR scholars and policy analysts in think-tanks lies in the nature of the “market.” While IR scholars develop their ideas in a “free market” environment, think-tank analysts work in a “planned economy” in which they are more likely to produce what the government orders through commissioned reports.

In China, the distinction between academic scholars and policy analysts in think-tanks is somewhat more ambiguous than in the West, because Chinese academic scholars are more likely to conduct policy-oriented research instead of pure academic or theory-driven works. In other words, Chinese academic IR scholars actually compete with think-tank analysts in a much bigger marketplace of ideas in the domain of foreign policy. One example of this “free market” model in China is the rise of Yan’s Xuetong “moral realism” theory and China’s foreign policy transformation from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievement.” Yan and his colleagues (2011) have conducted research on China’s ancient philosophy and its implications for foreign policy since the early 2000s.

Yan suggests that a country with superior morality, i.e., humane authority (Wang Dao), is more likely to lead successfully in the international system than a country
solely relying on military means (*Ba Dao*). Therefore, he argues that China should employ “moral realism” to compete with the United States for future leadership in the international system. After Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, we see a clear foreign policy change, in which China starts to emphasize the importance of “striking a balance between upholding justice and seeking interests” (*Yi Li Guan*) in international relations. Although the Chinese government does not directly recognize that they adopt some elements of “moral realism” in making foreign policy decisions, the clear similarity between the two reveals that Yan’s ideas were purchased in the “free market.”

The major difference between this “free market” model and the previous “epistemic community” model lies in the activism of IR scholars toward the policy community. While IR scholars are more active in the “epistemic community model,” they play a relatively passive role in the “free market” model because policy makers are the ones who purchase “ideas” in the marketplace. Some scholars vividly create an analogy that Chinese IR scholars are similar to supermarket owners, who provide various ideas as products to the government. However, the supermarket cannot determine which product or idea will be picked or chosen by the government. Therefore, what the IR scholars can do is to offer as many ideas and policy advice as possible so that the government can always find what they want.

This “free market” model is actually not unique to China. Some Western scholars also question the genuine value of IR scholars in the policy-making process. Lorenzo Zambernardi (2016) argues “politics is too important to be left to political scientists.” IR scholars should not be expected to have a direct influence on policy practices. Instead, scholars need to focus on developing different theories and ideas that can serve as foundations for the intellectual development of policy makers. More importantly, keeping pluralism in the IR community can “prevent foreign policy being formulated in the absence of rival theoretical conclusions” (Zambernardi 2016: 3).

In an interview, Yan clearly denied that he has tried to influence China’s foreign policy. He implied that he (as well as other Chinese IR scholars) might not have the necessary channels to reach the top policy makers. However, it is difficult to tell from this “free market” model why the Chinese government adopts some ideas, such as Yan’s moral realism, but not others in the marketplace of ideas. Moreover, many top IR scholars are also serving as policy advisors to the Chinese government. For

---

4 Xu Jin presented this analogy at the first working conference of this project held in Beijing in December, 2014. Yan Xuetong also discussed this analogy in the second working meeting of this project in Beijing in July, 2015.
example, Professor Shi Yinghong from Renmin University is a consultant for the State Council. Professor Qin Yaqing from the Chinese Foreign Affairs University has given lectures on global governance to the Politburo members. Therefore, the linkage between Chinese IR scholars and policy makers will not be a one-way street. In other words, the “epistemic community” and the “free-market” models may not be mutually exclusive because Chinese IR scholars can both influence and be influenced by the government at the same time.

**Signalling Policy Model**

The third model is called a “signalling policy” model, in which Chinese IR scholars play a signalling role for the government to test societal and international responses to some new ideas for policies or policy changes. This model suggests that some IR scholars who have a close relationship with the government can facilitate policy makers in signalling some controversial ideas to the outside world. The reactions to these scholars’ ideas will further guide policy makers in making a decision about whether they can go ahead to implement the planned policies or not. For example, due to China’s defensive military doctrine and ideological constraints, building military bases beyond its borders is always a policy taboo or a controversial issue in its foreign policy. It is reported by *The Financial Times* that Dingli Shen, a well-known IR scholar at Fudan University, published an article in July 2010 entitled, “Don’t Shun the Idea of Setting Up Overseas Military Bases” on [www.China.org](http://www.China.org), an official online news media outlet run by the Chinese government. Five years after Shen’s article, China opened its first military base in Djibouti in 2015. According to the report, Shen believed that “the lack of international reaction to his article, which was published in English, might have been a factor in the Chinese decision to go ahead with a foreign base” (Clover and Lin 2016).

It is rational for the Chinese government to test for societal and international reactions to some potentially controversial ideas, such as the establishment of overseas military bases, before implementing these policies or policy changes. Chinese IR scholars, therefore, become a logical agent to carry out this signalling task for the government. One analytical difficulty in distinguishing between this “signalling” model and the “free market” model is the nature of the discreet relationship between scholars and the government in the two models. On the one hand, scholars can voluntarily serve as the signalling agent without a request from the government. This is similar to the “free market” model in which scholars offer bold and new policy recommendations without the government’s request. On the
other hand, scholars may be advised to propose certain ideas for the purpose of signalling and testing for the government. Because of the highly opaque process of policy making, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish which type of “signalling” role Chinese IR scholars serve in the foreign policy process. Regarding Shen’s example discussed above, it is not clear whether Shen served as a signalling agent for some bureaucracies or he was just an idea producer in a free marketplace of ideas.

Besides the establishment of overseas military bases, there are other highly debated policy topics in China. For example, whether China should change its bilateralism-based policy in the South China Sea disputes is a vigorously debated topic among Chinese IR scholars. Should China change its foreign policy toward North Korea? Will China need to change its non-alignment policy to consider forming alliances with other countries? Should China reconsider its non-intervention policy in international affairs? These are only a few examples of ongoing debates among Chinese IR scholars. Considering the “policy signalling” model, we need to investigate whether these debates function as “policy signalling” for the government or as a scholarly competition of ideas among scholars.

Mirroring Policy Model

Last, but not least, there is a “mirroring policy” model in the study of Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy. In this model, Chinese IR scholars can serve as a “mirror” to reflect Chinese foreign policy orientations and even domestic politics’ directions. Like scholars in other countries, Chinese IR scholars disagree with one another on many issues. For example, in the early 2000s Chinese IR scholars heatedly debated a “new thinking” of Sino-Japanese relations (Gries 2005). In this debate, some scholars advocated a new foreign policy toward Japan through delinking the history issue, whilst others argued that recognizing history is the basis for a good relationship between the two nations. This debate triggered an intellectual storm within both the IR community and society in the 2000s. The debate ended with a gradual defeat of the “new thinking” school in the Chinese IR community. This outcome is not surprising given the strong policy reactions of the Chinese government toward Japan on the history issues in the 2000s. It is not clear whether the government intervened in the “new thinking” debate over Sino-Japanese relations. However, the result of the debate, i.e., the demise of the new thinking school in both academic writings and the public media, reflects or mirrors the policy orientation of China toward Japan in the 2000s.

Another example is the “peace and development” debate among Chinese IR scholars in the early 1980s. In 1979, after the Cultural Revolution, China commenced...
its economic opening-up and reform. China’s foreign policy also experienced dramatic transformation. Chinese IR scholars debated over whether China should abandon its class struggle-based revolutionary goal in foreign policy. In particular, scholars disagreed on whether China needed to prepare for wars and conflicts with the West, or focus on economic development. This debate ended with a clear victory of the “peace and development” school.

From government statements to scholarly publications, we can see that the “peace and development” school prevailed in Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s. This result indicated that the reformist faction won out in the power struggle vis-à-vis the conservative faction within the CCP. Thereby, China has adopted a development-based foreign policy toward the outside world in its reform era since the 1990s.

One analytical difficulty in applying this “mirroring policy” model is the unclear role of the Chinese government in scholarly debates. While both the “policy signalling” model and the “mirroring policy” model assume that the Chinese government will be involved in the debates, the nature of the involvement is different. The government plays an initiator role to test controversial policies through IR scholars in the former, but it can serve as an initiator, a judge, or just a receiver of scholarly debates in the latter. In other words, in the “mirroring policy” model we need to examine how and why the government gets involved in the scholarly debates, why it supports some ideas but not others, as well as whether its endorsement is the major reason for some ideas to win out in the debates. To make things even more complicated, answering these questions is not an end of our investigation, but rather a beginning of our inquiry because we need to use the above information to further reflect on and understand future orientations of Chinese foreign policy and even domestic politics.

As mentioned previously, there is no clear-cut winner among these four models regarding the relationship between Chinese IR scholars and policy making. The “epistemic community” model draws a strong causal linkage from Chinese IR scholars to the policy community, while the “free market” model reverses the causal arrow from the policy community to the IR scholars. The “policy signalling” and the “mirroring policy” models entail a strong assumption regarding the government’s involvement in scholarly debates, although Chinese policy makers are more active in the former than in the latter. In this project, it is not our intention to test which model is better than others in the study of the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy. Instead, we keep our conclusions open at this point and encourage all of the contributing scholars in this project to discuss their own understandings of the relationship between Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy.

Chinese IR scholars can serve as a “mirror” to reflect Chinese foreign policy orientations and even domestic politics’ directions.
Conclusion

The rise of China is one of the defining political events in the 21st century. How Chinese leaders think, perceive, and behave will shape peace and prosperity in the Asia Pacific. However, it is difficult to accurately measure Chinese leaders’ perceptions due to China’s opaque decision-making process. Therefore, we have proposed to examine Chinese IR scholars’ views and perceptions on international relations. Chinese IR scholars can serve as a “proxy measure” for the views of the Chinese policy community and government. The relationship between IR scholars and Chinese leaders/policy makers is complicated and “mutually constitutive” in essence. On the one hand, IR scholars can influence leaders’ views on international politics. On the other hand, leaders’ policy choices also construct a boundary for Chinese IR scholars as to what to think and write.

In this project, we further theorize the role of Chinese IR scholars in foreign policy with four models: the “epistemic community,” the “free market,” the “policy signalling,” and the “mirroring policy” models. These four analytical models are illustrative and inspiring in nature. We encourage the contributing scholars in this project to investigate the complicated relationship between Chinese IR scholars and foreign policy by using these four models as their starting point, and if possible, consider how to move beyond these four models. Chinese IR scholars have heatedly debated China’s international relations, such as China’s national interests, the structure of the international system, positioning China’s status in the system, as well as China’s non-alignment policy.

However, these debates have not been systematically introduced to Western scholars. This project attempts to bridge this knowledge gap between Chinese IR scholars and the outside world. Most contributors to this project are China-based academics. They can offer their insights based on their unique understanding and even personal experience during the debates. Although Chinese IR scholars may not be directly involved in the policy-making process, their views can reflect and even influence what Chinese leaders think. This project, therefore, offers a new prism for the outside world to understand Chinese foreign policy behavior and even predict what China might do in the future through the contested eyes of Chinese IR scholars—a distinctive group of insiders in Chinese society.

References

Adler, Emanuel and Peter M. Haas. 1992. Conclusion: Epistemic Communities, World Order, and the Creation of a Reflective Research Program. *International Organization*, winter,


