

## Great Power Management and China's Responsibility in International Climate Politics

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**Abstract:** By exploring international practice of great power management, this paper examines how the U.S. (an established power) and China (an emerging power) discursively frame great power responsibility in the context of international negotiations on climate politics. Firstly, this paper will argue that the American discourse on “responsible great powerhood” attempts to redirect and constrain China’s position in global politics. Secondly, this paper claims that China defends its interests and responds to Western demands by advancing two, partly conflicting, climate discourses simultaneously. On the one hand, despite its growing international status, China emphasizes its status as a poor developing country. On the other, the rhetoric of being a “responsible major power” is used to assure other nations of China’s credibility and benevolence; China is neither a threat to other countries nor to the environment.

**Key words:** China, climate change, great power, practice, responsibility

### Introduction

China’s “rise” has heated theoretical and political debates about its implications for the global economy and world politics. Due to vague definitions of great powerhood, however, there is no consensus whether or not China has achieved a great power status. If defined as a “power (of some sort) that people at the time thought was great, that is, thought needed to be taken into account seriously in policy-making” (Black, 2008:1), it would be foolish not to call China a great power. At the same time, China’s great power status is questionable in ideational terms; it has not (yet) enough soft power to spread collective ideas and change international practices. That is why David Shambaugh (2013) calls China a “partial power” that is not really influencing world politics. As for international climate politics, China plays a crucial role. First, it is the biggest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter in the world, and has an important role in setting the tone for other emerging powers, namely BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) countries, and more broadly, for all developing countries. Second, China has emerged as the major candidate for challenging the superpower status of the U.S., and the contemporary practice of great power management is chiefly articulated in interactions between China and

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the U.S. Third, climate change is the biggest threat of our times. Given that great powers have the special collective responsibility to “ensure that the conditions of international peace and security are upheld” (Jackson, 2000: 203), great powers have a special responsibility to respond to climate change.

This paper examines global responsibility as an emerging rule of the international practice of great power management from the theoretical perspectives offered by the English School (ES) of international relations (IR). Methodologically, it joins “in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation occur within and are aspects or components of the *field of practices*” (Schatzki, 2001: 2, emphasis original). I argue that great power responsibility is chiefly an international discourse, and I do not provide any kind of list of actions that would demonstrate whether or not China is a responsible actor in international climate politics. Like all discourses, international discourse of (great power) responsibility is created in through social practices. It is produced, reproduced, and transformed through UN conferences and other official meetings, academic conferences, political statements, and so forth. In other words, responsibilities are *constructed* in social interaction; they are not given or static but they evolve in social context when actors talk over their definitions of reality and their justifications for practices. Through language, parties attempt to create a common understanding of responsibility. From this perspective, state representatives’ pronouncements such as speeches and white papers are important political actions, which create and allocate responsibilities. Without language, practitioners could not express meanings, intentions, reasons, and beliefs that are important factors of social construction of responsibility, weaving together the discursive and material world (Adler & Pouliot, 2011: 6-8).

The empirical part of the paper focuses on China’s responsibility in international climate politics: it analyzes Western and Chinese media reports, official strategies, and political statements, and examines how the U.S. and China discursively frame great power responsibility in the context of international negotiations on climate. First, I argue that the American discourse on “responsible great power” attempts to redirect and constrain China’s position in global politics including international negotiations on climate. Second, I investigate how both Chinese political leadership and media have welcomed the American discourse and how they have responded to it. Finally, I claim that China defends its interests

and responds to American demands by advancing two, partly conflicting, climate discourses simultaneously. On the one hand, despite its growing international status, China emphasizes its status as a poor developing country. On the other hand, the rhetoric of being a “responsible major power” is used to assure other nations of China’s credibility and benevolence; China is neither a threat to other countries nor to the environment.

### **International Practice of Great Power Management**

For the purposes of this paper, I define international practices as shared goal-oriented temporal learning processes which develop meanings, negotiate rules, and organize the social world. We can identify at least the following characteristics of international practices: First, practices exist only in and through social participation. They create new relations and connections with and in the world. Second, practices are temporal and situational. They are not intentionally designed nor do they appear from scratch. They are historical, ongoing, patterned processes which both generate new circumstances and are affected by changing circumstances. Practices have a life cycle - they emerge, diffuse, institutionalize, and fade away (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). The lifecycle is not necessarily linear and stable but may involve discontinuity; some practices do not comprise all the stages, and some practices change substantially during their lifecycle as participants are replaced, new ideas emerge, unexpected events happen, and so on and so forth. Third, practices are both material and discursive, and there is no need to distinguish between doing and saying. Practices are thus performances and enactment of discourses. They define issues by constructing meanings and relationships, legitimate knowledge, and outline appropriate choices of actions (see Dryzek, 2005). Sometimes they materialize in artifacts such as laws or other procedures, sometimes not. They are also learning processes. Knowledge does not only give impetus to the emergence and change of practices but learning is also “enclosed” in the “very execution” of the practice (Adler & Pouliot, 2011: 15). Finally, practices are goal oriented and they are based on and bound up with power. They negotiate meanings, define rules, and produce relations of accountability. Collectively created and negotiated rules of the practice form a moral basis to which participants’ moral agency is to be evaluated by themselves, other participants of the practice, and/or any interpreter of the practice. For example, “medical ethics”, “business ethics”, “family ethics” and “international ethics” are subject to a very different kind of standard of conduct, and make the participants look at the world in certain ways. Participation in these practices involves ethical evaluation about possible and morally

acceptable choices of action. If participants fail to follow these rules, they are accountable to, but not necessarily sanctioned by, at least the other participants of the practice.

Although ES theorists have only recently started to consider practices directly (see Navari, 2010; Little, 2011), they have always considered institutional practices as fundamental to the constitution of international society. Almost all ES scholars have formulated their own lists of institutions that can be seen as patterned sets of shared practices, which organize and sustain international society. As the ES concept of practice is a “purposive goal-orientated conception” (Navari, 2010: 3), Schatzki’s (1999) conception of integrative practice seems to capture best the ES notion of practice. Integrative practices are “complex practices found in and constitutive of particular domains of social life” (Schatzki, 1996: 98). In addition to social understanding related to the specific practice, they include “explicit rules, principles, precepts, and instructions”, and “teleoaffective structures comprising hierarchies of ends, tasks, projects, beliefs, emotions, moods, and the like” (Ibid.: 99). The ES conception of great power management conforms to all the requirements of Schatzki’s integrative practice. First, there is, at least to some extent, a shared understanding of how to identify the members of the “great power club”. Second, it has its rules of membership albeit they are not expressed in legal terms (other than procedures of the UN Security Council). Finally, it is teleoaffective; the goal of the practice is to maintain international peace and security. In contrast to Schatzki, from the ES perspective, the rules of practice do not necessarily have to be explicit.

There have always been great powers, but in the ES terms of primary institution, great powers have formed an international club of “legalized hegemony” only since the early nineteenth century (Reus-Smit, 1999: 109; Simpson, 2004: 73). In its contemporary form, it started to evolve after the Second World War, when the great power club was institutionalized with the establishment of the UN Security Council. It gradually changed with the ending of the Cold War and the beginning of China’s reform era. At the moment, the practice is again in flux as China is in the process of joining the community of practice. As a newcomer, China does not enjoy the status of full member of the great power club. Its competence is not clear yet - does it engage in peaceful interaction and is it going to follow the rules of the practice? Classic realists think that great powers tend to behave in a similar manner and hence the rise of China inevitably leads to hegemonic war. From the ES perspective, the “China threat” view is too simplified because both circumstances and ideas influence how great powers behave. First,

historical practices set up the scene in which great powers can operate. A rising China is faced with a very different international society from previous rising powers. Second, national identity, norms, and values shape how great powers see the world and how they behave. Therefore, the world is not “condemned to perpetual great-power competition” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 2) but China’s rise can be peaceful.

“When we speak of great powers”, Bull (1977: 194) writes, “we imply...the existence of a club with a rule of membership.” These rules are not given or static, but are produced and transformed in social interaction. Even if a state reaches a certain level of material capacity, it does not automatically become a great power, but has to be accepted to the great power club by other members of international society. From the ES perspective, the most important rule of great power management is that great powers are “recognised by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties” (Bull, 1977: 196). However, these rights and responsibilities cannot be formalized and made fully explicit (i.e. by writing hegemonial rights of great powers) because international society is anarchical and, hence, rejects the idea of a hierarchical ordering of states. To become an accepted member of the great power club, at least two conditions have to be met. Firstly, club members must enjoy substantial institutional privileges in international decision making, as China undoubtedly already does (Suzuki, 2014: 637). Secondly, members of the club must “be treated as a *social* equal” with other members of the club, which is the “primary reason” for questioning China’s membership in the great power club (Ibid.). If others do not recognize China’s competence as a great power, it cannot be accepted into the club. That is why the next section looks at how the U.S. (an established power) defines the rules of membership which China (an emerging power) must follow in order to be, and be seen as, a great power.

### **Expectations to China’s Global Responsibility**

At the beginning of China’s reform era, the U.S. was optimistic about China’s reforms and believed that “China would learn to be more like us” but the Tiananmen incident in 1989 changed the U.S.’s China policy dramatically (Zheng, 1999: 126). The “containment policy” was, however, replaced with the “engagement policy” in 1993. After the Taiwan Strait Crisis (1995-1996), the Clinton administration announced that its long-term goal was to integrate China into international society “with all the privileges and responsibilities of a major power” (Ibid.: 128). In practice, that meant that the U.S. “would make efforts to bring China into the

world power club, but China has the obligation to honor the existing international rules in its own behaviour” (Ibid.: 128-129). Despite skepticism over U.S. motivations, China welcomed the U.S. policy as a way to become a real great power (Ibid.).

Debate over China’s global responsibility became heated when Robert B. Zoellick, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State during the George W. Bush administration, introduced the concept of responsible stakeholder to international politics in 2005:

All nations conduct diplomacy to promote their national interests. Responsible stakeholders go further: They recognize that the international system sustains their peaceful prosperity, so they work to sustain that system (Zoellick, 2005).

The concept was primarily an attempt to describe China’s international responsibilities and to urge China to carry them out. Zoellick warned that China should neither attempt to challenge the existing international system nor to promote competing norms and world order. Zoellick (2005) also noted that: “China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success”. Although there is no clear understanding of what China will do or what it will stand for when it finally achieves great power status, Zoellick was optimistic about China’s potential to become a responsible stakeholder. He called the U.S. to help foster China’s reforms:

We now need to encourage China to become a responsible stakeholder in the international system. As a responsible stakeholder, China would be more than just a member – it would work with us to sustain the international system that has enabled its success (Zoellick, 2005).

In the following year, the concept of responsible stakeholder was incorporated into the U.S. National Security Strategy of 2006 that gave an order:

As China becomes a global player, it must act as a responsible stakeholder that fulfills its obligations and works with the United States and others to advance the international system that has enabled its success (White House, 2006).

The U.S. has not offered a unanimous definition of what it means to be a responsible power but it seems that the meaning and purpose of the concept of responsible stakeholder is to evaluate China’s policies in the context of the U.S. interests and expectations (Gill, 2007).

The first Obama administration followed with similar ideas and James Steinberg, Zoellick's successor as a U.S. Deputy Secretary of State, introduced his own China paradigm, "strategic reassurance" in 2009. Steinberg (2009) defined the principle as the following:

Just as we and our allies must make clear that we are prepared to welcome China's "arrival", as you all have so nicely put it, as a prosperous and successful power, China must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of security and well-being of others (Steinberg. 2009).

On the one hand, Steinberg affirmed that the U.S. is "ready to accept a growing role for China on the international stage"; On the other hand, he reminded that "we will also be looking for signs and signals of reassurance from China. If China is going to take its rightful place, it must make those signals clear" (Ibid.). In contrast to Zoellick, who did not mention climate change or environmental issues at all, Steinberg acknowledged the importance of effective U.S.-China cooperation on climate change mitigation, "driven by the knowledge that the United States and China are the two biggest emitters of greenhouse gases" (Ibid.).

The second Obama administration defines the building up of a "productive and constructive relationship" with China as one of its strategic aims. A week after President Obama's re-election in November 2012, U.S. National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon encouraged "Beijing to define its national interest more in terms of common global concerns and to take responsibility for helping the international community address global problems" (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2012). He continued by urging China to become a responsible international citizen:

Now, we've been clear that as China takes a seat at a growing number of international tables, it needs to assume responsibilities commensurate with its growing global economic impact and its national capabilities (Ibid.).

Donilon (2013) reaffirmed this statement in March 2013 and called for U.S.-China cooperation "to build a new model of relations between an existing power and an emerging one". He pointed out that there is not a natural law according to which "rising power and an established power are somehow destined for conflict" (Ibid.).

After China became the world's biggest CO<sub>2</sub> emitter in 2006, Western leaders have started to urge China to shoulder more responsibility in climate change mitigation as well. Notably, after the UN Copenhagen Conference in 2009, China was the main target of harsh international criticism. For example, both the British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and the British Climate Change Secretary Ed Miliband clearly blamed China for being irresponsible and for "blocking progress" at the UN Climate Conference in December 2009 (see Lynas, 2009; Porter 2009; Vidal, 2009). In September 2014, president Obama linked climate responsibility and great power status together by addressing the fact that the U.S. and China "have a special responsibility to lead" the global efforts to tackle climate change because that is "what big nations have to do" (Obama, 2014). As the U.S. has not really demonstrated this leadership by action, the issue of climate change could provide China with an opportunity to prove to the world its emerging global leadership.

### **Chinese Notions of Responsibility**

External expectations of China's international behavior cannot alone help us to understand China's evolving notions of climate responsibility. In order to understand what kind of responsibility China has and why China is willing to shoulder it in the context of international climate politics, we have to explore the state's identity. Identity is a subjective and objective discourse of the self; it is how both one and another perceive oneself to chiefly establish what she or he is. It is both material and ideational; it is based on a material site of a human body (or the territory of a state) but what makes it so special are ideas - values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, memories, and so on and so forth. Because identity is a "lived experience of participation in specific communities" (Wenger, 1998: 151), it is shaped by the practices one takes part in. Identity determines what kind of choices of action one perceives as appropriate. The balance of power itself does not dictate how great powers use their power in relation to each other and to minor states but their socially constructed identities shape their policies and actions. Thus, the practices, including great power management, shape and transform participants' identity, notions of morality, and sense of appropriate choices of actions. Furthermore, "interests presuppose identities", Wendt (1999: 231) notes, "because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is".

Along with reforms and open-door policies, China's national identity changed gradually during the 1980s and 1990s. Although the identity transformation was chiefly pushed by

economic interests, it completely changed China's membership in international society (Qin, 2004). As China began to see international institutions as beneficial to its development, it did not want to be seen as a threat and started to cultivate an image of a responsible major power globally (Deng, 2008; Gries, 2004; Johnston, 1998). The identity change also led to debate over the state's international responsibilities in China in the 1990s (Xia, 2001). For the time being, Chinese academics and the political elite have not agreed on the scope of China's global responsibility. The main reason for this is that both Chinese political leaders and the general public believe that "China is a nation with a dual-identity"; it is both a developing country and a major power (Wu, 2001: 293). The Chinese argumentation in international climate politics reflects this dichotomy by building up a very dualist image for the state. On the one hand, the Chinese government responds to Western expectations by emphasizing the state's active and cooperative image as a "responsible stakeholder". On the other hand, the government highlights China's image as a "developing country".

### **Major Country Responsibility**

In the early 1990s, China's international status started to increase rapidly in both material and ideational terms. First, China's economic wealth began to rise rapidly because of economic reforms. Second, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, international society started to regard China as a new potential great power and wanted to integrate China into international practices. Hence, both internal and external developments put in motion a learning process that led to China's accession to the great power club. At the moment, China is in the process of learning new ideas and ways of being in the world in accordance with this new identity. At some point, this learning process will lead to China, a "relative newcomer", becoming a "relative old-timer" in the great power club. This promotion is usually unmarked and implicit; suddenly you realize that you are in a position to teach new newcomers and, at the same time, other participants start to expect you to know and do "more than you are sure you do" (Wenger, 1998: 90). It is hence usually others who give a new status and newcomers cannot themselves decide when they are ready to become old-timers and bear more responsibilities within the practice. This is exactly what is happening with China as the West expects it to shoulder heavier global responsibilities while China still regards itself as a developing country unable to respond to these demands.

In world politics, China is now increasingly identifying itself as a great power and the government has started to signal that it is willing to shoulder more global responsibilities in the future. In general, both the Chinese government and Chinese scholars have generally reacted positively to Zoellick's conception (Jin, 2006). As an evidence of this, the State Council Information Office released a white paper entitled "China's Peaceful Development Road" to elaborate on the country's peaceful development philosophy shortly after Zoellick's speech. The white paper highlighted China's development needs and declared that "China's development will never pose a threat to anyone" because "peaceful development is the inevitable way for China's modernization". The paper recognized that, "Active in the settlement of serious international and regional problems, China shoulders broad international obligations, and plays a responsible and constructive role". However, it targeted the main responsibilities to developed countries. It stated:

The developed countries should shoulder greater responsibility for a universal, coordinated and balanced development of the world, while the developing countries should make full use of their own advantages to achieve development (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2005).

In 2007, Zhao Qizheng, a former Minister of the State Council Information Office of China, defined China's responsibilities as follows: Due to China's developing country status, the state's "first and foremost responsibility is to develop its economy to give the Chinese people a better life" (Zhao, 2012: 197). The 2011 White Paper on China's peaceful development echoed: "For China, the most populous developing country, to run itself well is the most important fulfillment of its international responsibility" (Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2011). The paper continued to underline China's developing country status and suggested that China should not be expected to shoulder broader global responsibilities before it has met domestic challenges and achieved a higher level of development. The statement illustrates the Chinese position that global responsibility depends on a state's development stage rather than its global impacts. However, the white paper did not indicate when China would achieve such a high development stage that it would assume more global responsibility.

In June 2013, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the World Peace Forum pledged that China's fifth generation of leadership is going to take a more proactive approach to

diplomacy. According to Wang (2013), China is “ready to respond to this expectation of the international community” “to undertake its due responsibilities and make greater contribution to world peace and common development”. Wang also recognized that China’s permanent seat in the UN Security Council brings it special responsibilities that it cannot escape.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China is always conscious of its international responsibilities and obligations and stands ready to offer more public goods and play its unique and positive role in addressing various issues and challenges in the world (Wang, 2013).

In line with China’s rising international status, the Chinese government has started to formulate new concepts and ideas, such as “harmonious world”, “the China dream”, “the Asia-Pacific dream”, and “the new type of major country relationship” to organize international society. In addition, China has suggested alternative sources of global governance by proposing new foreign policy initiatives, such as One Belt, One Road, or New Silk roads, and by establishing new multilateral financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the BRICS New Development Bank. Time will tell if these new concepts and institutions manage to reorganize international practices so that they will become “less Westernized” and accommodate the Chinese values and interests better. From this paper’s point of view, the concept of the “new type of great power relationship” is of interest. It was first expressed by then China Vice President Xi Jinping in February 2012. He claimed:

We should work hard to implement the agreement between the two presidents, expand our shared interests and mutually beneficial cooperation, strive for new progress in building our cooperative partnership and make it a new type of relationship between major countries in the 21st century (Xi, 2012).

Xi Jinping highlighted four areas in which both countries should make greater joint efforts to build such new type of relationship: First, increasing “mutual understanding and strategic trust”; second, respecting “each side’s core interests and major concerns”; third, deepening “mutually beneficial cooperation”; fourth, enhancing “cooperation and coordination in international affairs and on global issues” including climate change (Ibid.). Right after his nomination to China’s Premier, Li Keqiang reaffirmed that the 5<sup>th</sup> generation of Chinese leadership would “work with the Obama administration to work together to build a new type of relationship between great countries” (Reuters, 2013). The conception of the new type of

great power relationship, however, does not provide anything new. It focuses on “core interests”, not common interests that could be translated into new responsibilities for the both sides. Implicitly, it is about hard power and an attempt to persuade the U.S. to respect China’s sphere of interests in East Asia.

In international climate negotiations, the Chinese government has become “more proactive, more engaged, and more flexible” since the Bali Conference in 2008 (Liang, 2010: 68). Since 2008, China has launched annual white papers on climate change which all emphasize that as the “largest developing country”, China has played a responsible and constructive role in international negotiations on climate. Only recently, China has started to refer to itself as a major power in international negotiations on climate change, although it continues to emphasize the development first principle. In September 2014, at the U.N. Climate Summit, Special Envoy Zhang Gaoli declared: “responding to climate change is what China needs to do to achieve sustainable development at home as well as to fulfil its due international obligation as a responsible major country” (Zhang, 2014). Moreover, as China has published its major climate commitments in joint statements with the U.S, it seems that it has made them in a reference to its great power status (see White House, 2014; White House, 2015). On the one hand, the National Climate Change Plan (2014-2020) confirmed China’s great power responsibility in climate change mitigation; on the other hand, it defended the state’s “legitimate development rights and interests” (National Development and Reform Commission, 2014: 4-5). At Paris Conference in 2015, China’s Head of the State (instead of the Premier) took part in the negotiations for the first time and represented China as a responsible stakeholder and a determinate facilitator of international climate agreement. Notably, Xi Jinping (2015) called for all states to “assume more shared responsibilities for win-win outcomes”, which indicates that China no longer focuses only on historic responsibility of developed countries but is willing to shoulder more responsibility in international climate negotiations.

The pursuit of a favorable international image is clearly an important factor in China’s climate discourse (Kopra, 2012). To assess responsibility, however, we cannot just focus on words but real responsibility has to be demonstrated by actions. Due to the space constrains, however, I am able to describe China’s actions to tackle climate change only in outline. Since the late 2000s, the Chinese government has taken important steps towards moderating the

future growth of the country's greenhouse gas emissions. It has encouraged central and local governments, businesses, and individuals to practice a "low-carbon lifestyle" living by issuing a wide variety of policies and action plans. In June 2007, the government published its first comprehensive climate policy document entitled the National Climate Change Programme. In August 2009, the top legislative body, National People's Congress of China Standing Committee, adopted the first climate change resolution which underlined the principle of scientific development and vowed to strengthen China's legal framework addressing climate change. In November 2009, China announced a "voluntary" but "nationally binding" target to reduce carbon emission intensity per unit of GDP in 2020 by 40-45% from that in 2005. It was estimated that there would not be a reduction in China's overall emissions as China's GDP (and emissions as well) was expected to double by 2020, but the target would prevent greenhouse gas emissions to double by that time (Xinhua, 2009). In March 2011, the target was incorporated into the 12th Five-Year Program (2011-2015), which decided to cut energy consumption per unit of GDP by 16% by 2015, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 17%, respectively. In addition, the proportion of non-fossil fuels in the overall primary energy consumption was raised to 11.4% (compared to 8.3% in 2010). In 2012, China issued preliminary carbon emission trading system regulations and launched pilot programs for carbon emissions trading in five major cities (Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Chongqing and Shenzhen) and two provinces (Guangdong and Hubei). The carbon trading system is planned to be expanded nationwide in 2017 (White House, 2015).

In 2014, the Energy Development Strategy Action Plan (2014-2020) included, for the first time, a cap coal on national coal consumption by 2020, and pledged to raise the share of non-fossil fuels in the total primary energy mix to 15% by 2020 from 9.8% in 2013 (Xinhua, 2014). In November 2014, China and the U.S. made a historic agreement in which China announced that it will halt the growth of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions around 2030 (White House, 2014). It means that China no longer focuses on reducing relative "carbon intensity" but it has instead pledged to make a reduction in its absolute emissions. Last, but definitely not least, in June 2015, China published its intended nationally determined contribution (INDC) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in which it pledged to peak CO<sub>2</sub> emissions around 2030 and to reduce its carbon intensity, the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> per unit of GDP, by 60% to 65% from the 2005 level by 2030. In addition, the government committed to increasing the share of non-fossil fuels in primary energy consumption to around 20%, and

increasing the forest stock volume by around 4.5 billion cubic meters on the 2005 level (National Development and Reform Commission, 2015: 5). Notably, in September 2015, China also announced that it will “make available ¥20 billion [about 3 billion USD] for setting up the China South-South Climate Cooperation Fund to support other developing countries to combat climate change, including to enhance their capacity to access GCF funds” (White House, 2015).

This brief outline demonstrates that China takes climate change seriously. In order to understand the Chinese position on international negotiations on climate change, however, we must look at China’s developing country identity.

### **Development First**

For China, climate change is an “issue involving both environment and development, but it is ultimately an issue of development” (National Development and Reform Commission, 2007). According to my interpretation, this definition has two aspects. First, climate change is caused by the historic development of developed countries, and second, climate change poses a severe obstacle to the development of developing countries. Therefore, the Chinese government argues that the “ultimate solution to climate change can only be achieved through common sustainable development of all countries” (Xie, 2010). This has two implications: First, developed countries have to change their consumption path to be more sustainable and implement serious emissions reductions. Second, developing countries have to adapt themselves, with the help of developed countries, to climate change in order to achieve better levels of development despite the severe effects of climate change. The idea follows the Kuznets curve - the higher the development stage a state achieves, the more capability to mitigate and adapt to climate change they have due to greater resources and better access to technologies to cope with climate change. Recently, the Chinese government has also started to recognize the security impacts of climate change. However, China opposes securitization and formal discussions on climate change at the U.N. Security Council because it does not operate under the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) and its decision-making is not based on universal participation. For China, it is important that the voices of all developing countries are heard (Wang, 2011).

In international negotiations on climate change, the Chinese government assures that it is a “responsible developing country” that takes climate change very seriously, yet has neither a historical responsibility nor the financial resources to mitigate climate change, and that it is in need of financial and technological support (Kopra, 2012). It underlines the CBDR principle and opposes binding emission reductions for developing countries. For years, China refused to commit to any kind of emissions reduction and demanded that developed countries shoulder all responsibility for climate change mitigation for historical reasons. China compromised its position in the 2007 UN Bali Conference, where it and other developing countries committed themselves to implement nationally appropriated mitigation actions in the context of sustainable development that are supported and enabled by measurable, reportable, and verifiable technology. Since adaptation is “an essential component in the framework of sustainable development to address climate change”, China demands that developed countries provide developing countries with technological and financial support to develop their adaptation capacity (National Development and Reform Commission, 2008).

Despite its increasing wealth, China continues to represent itself as a developing country by aligning its climate politics with all the developing countries’ (the G77) interests in international climate negotiations. The Chinese government emphasizes that it has a moral responsibility to maximize economic growth. To some extent, China’s climate discourse is affected by the burden of “the Century of Shame”. The government indicates that China is not a capable actor but a powerless, poor country unable to tackle the “unprecedented” difficulties caused by climate change. As an innocent “victim”, China “faces” both the severe consequences of climate change and unfair policies of developed countries, whereas developed countries are dominant actors who should take action. As China’s then Premier Wen Jiabao put it in 2008:

If we look at the world history of development, we will see that developed countries encountered their resource and environmental challenges in phases in the course of 200 years of industrialization. But we are confronted with the challenges all at the same time. In addition, we have to address in a much shorter timeframe the issue of energy conservation and pollution control which has taken developed countries decades to tackle after their economies became highly developed. The difficulties we face are therefore unprecedented (Wen, 2008).

Undoubtedly, China is not a very typical member of developing countries due to its rapid economic growth and increased global status. However, the Chinese government continues to use rhetoric intended to entwine developing countries' interests with its own. It stresses its friendship with developing countries and argues that "China has never separated itself from other developing countries and will never do so" (Wang, 2013). Yet, China's participation in the G77 is becoming more and more questionable. Naturally, the Chinese government wants to ensure that it will not be left alone in international negotiations. Both BASIC group (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) and Like-Minded Developing Countries on Climate Change (including Argentina, Bolivia, China, Cuba, El Salvador, Ecuador, Iran, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Malaysia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and India) provide important support for China, which does not want to have legally binding emission reductions nor abdicate its financial and technological benefits. In particular, both groups see no sub-categories between developed and developing countries. Sub-categories would obviously weaken their position in international climate negotiations.

Chinese media has taken a more straightforward position and argued that global expectations of China's responsibility should be closely linked to the state's development stage. As a People's Daily Online columnist Li Hongmei (2009) puts it, "China is still a developing country feeding a large population and has to be responsible for the well being [sic] of its own people before benefitting others." That is why China Daily argues that:

[N]ational strength and international status should determine the international responsibilities China should accept. Given China's developing country reality and the current West-dominated world order, it is far-fetched, if not ill-timed, to demand that the country undertake [sic] duties that are beyond its prowess (China Daily, 2010a).

Some Chinese journalists have warned that Western countries' calls for China's greater responsibility aim to hinder China's economic development, to advance their own national interests, and to pass on their own responsibilities to China:

[T]he concept of 'great powers' responsibility' is defined by the Western world completely on the conditions of satisfying its own needs and interests. Simply put, whether to be responsible for the world, from the Western perspectives, is literally evaluated by how much responsibility you have assumed for the West (Li, 2009).

The strategic point of the “China economic responsibility” theory lies in some Western countries’ attempt to distract world attention from facts and burden Beijing with more responsibilities that it should not and could not shoulder. In other words, some Western countries are too eager to shirk their responsibilities and pass on their burden to China (China Daily, 2010b).

Some western countries have been throwing out various “China responsibility” theories after the global financial crisis. These responsibilities form a system that seem [sic] to grant China a responsibility to save the world.... Some western countries are also exaggerating China’s position as the world’s largest greenhouse gas producer and are asking it to shoulder obligatory requirements of emission cuts; at the same time these countries don’t want China to enjoy preferential treatments available to developing countries. They believe that China’s demand for “common but differentiated responsibilities” is an attempt to shed responsibility (Xinhua, 2010).

For China, as these examples illustrate, the most important factor in international climate politics is its developing country status, not its major power identity. As Xie Zhenhua, China’s chief negotiator to the UN climate change talks, puts it, it would be “unfair and unreasonable to hold China to absolute cuts in emissions at the present stage, when its per capita GDP stands at just 5,000 U.S. dollars” (Xinhua, 2012). In June 2015, China’s INDC also described China as a developing country and made no reference to great power responsibility. Although China represented itself as a developing country at the Paris Conference in 2015, it made substantial compromises that enabled states to adopt a new, international climate change agreement. Indeed, it seems that China is now increasingly identifying itself as a great power also in international climate negotiations.

## **Conclusion**

During the last decade, there have been a lot of speculations about whether the rise of China will represent a threat or opportunity for the world. Since Zoellick’s speech in 2005, Western countries have urged China to become a “responsible stakeholder” and shoulder more global responsibilities, including climate change. Although the conception of “great power responsibility” is undoubtedly a Western discourse, it is not insignificant for China. It constrains China’s policies since the Chinese government does not want to be perceived as a threat but wishes to be seen as a “responsible major power” instead. Because coping with environmental degradation is one of the biggest challenges contemporary China faces today, the Chinese government has no choice but to take climate change seriously. As China’s national identity is in flux, it has been domestically very difficult to agree on the scope of

China's global responsibility. However, the Paris Conference indicated that China is now increasingly living up to its emerging great power identity. China portrays an image of a "responsible stakeholder" assuring the world that it takes climate change seriously and that it is a credible and benevolent member of international society. The discourse aims to persuade others that China is a trustworthy partner both in business and politics. The motive of the discourse is clear - if others do not regard China as a responsible and credible stakeholder, they are probably not willing to deepen economic cooperation or accept China as a major player in global political decision-making.

At the same time, China argues that international expectations of its global responsibility should be closely linked to its development stage. According to China's "development first" principle, developing countries do not have an obligation to control emissions before they achieve a certain level of development. As the government wants to avoid any legally binding requirements in international climate politics, it aligns its interests in conjunction with other developing countries. The "development first" principle claim is naturally justified from the least developed countries' point of view, but one can wonder if China is a typical representative of developing countries. At its current level of development, China's wealth and capability to take ambitious climate actions will continue to increase and makes it more and more difficult for the Chinese government to assure the world that it is a developing country. Again, a significant proportion of Chinese emissions are "offshore emissions" and thus Western consumers are partly responsible for increasing GHG emissions in China.

Because practices anchor identities "in each other and what we do together", it is not easy for China to transform identity without the support of the other participants of the practice (Wenger, 1998: 89). "We need *recognition* for the persons we take ourselves to be, and only *as recognised* can we conclusively come to establish an identity", Ringmar (1996: 13, emphasis original) explains. Therefore, the U.S. should recognize China's membership in the great power club by allowing China to play a more important role in international politics. It would encourage the Chinese government to shoulder more responsibility on contemporary global issues. In contrast to realists, who often emphasize the role of causality in international relations, I do not believe that norms inevitably cause certain behavior. Even if states achieved some kind of common understanding of what kind of (climate) responsibilities great powers and emerging powers ought to shoulder, it would not inevitably mean that states

would demonstrate their responsibilities by action. Although states do not always act responsibly, the “responsibility” means that they are always answerable for their policies and actions, and, at minimum, they are accountable to their citizens and international society (Jackson, 1995: 137). Therefore, China has to take global expectations and needs into consideration if it wants to be seen as a cooperative and responsible member of international society. In order to halt the rise of global CO<sub>2</sub> stock, all major countries including China, are required to take serious actions as soon as possible. Developed countries’ ambitious greenhouse gas reduction commitments would encourage China to shoulder more responsibility as well. In the end, in addition to the U.S., China is the only country of which a national policy can make a global difference.

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