The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2025, **18(3)**, 313–342
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf008
Article

The Prestige-Seeking Logic in China's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Prestige is a critical yet underexplored dimension of power politics in international relations. Despite its significance, its conceptual foundations and foreign policy implications have gone largely unexamined and remain insufficiently clear. Traditionally, prestige has been dismissed as an irrational pursuit or a catalyst for unnecessary conflict. However, this reductive perspective overlooks states' varying motivations across diverse political contexts and the sophisticated means by which states seek and leverage prestige. In response to the fundamental question of why and how great powers perceive prestige, this article offers an analytical framework based on subjective and intersubjective dimensions to reconceptualise prestige and explore its impact on Chinese foreign policy. More specifically, the article identifies four distinct scenarios pertaining to perceptions of prestige based on the state's and other actors' evaluations of prestige dynamics, these perceptions being straightforwardly categorised as overrated, self-overrated, underrated, and self-underrated. Furthermore, it explores four primary approaches to understanding China's evolving conceptions and pursuits of international prestige: learning, adaptation, creativity, and competition. This article aims to advance the conceptual understanding of prestige and provide a range of analytical tools for examining and evaluating the fundamental drivers of Chinese foreign policy in the current era of uncertainty.

Introduction

Prestige, as opposed to power, may be regarded as the "everyday currency" of international relations (IR). Once recognised, prestige can enable the achievement of policy objectives without even necessitating its use.[1] However, this concept has historically received sporadic academic attention. The terminological confusion surrounding it and the lack of a set of systematic analytical tools have hampered a comprehensive understanding of the role that prestige plays in global politics. In an era marked by uncertainty and escalating great power rivalry, the ways in which states evaluate their prestige and the impacts of these varying perceptions on decision-making have become critical issues in the realm of IR. However,

[1] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 31.

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whether the struggle for prestige is based on rational calculations or emotional impulses remains a matter of debate. Some scholars consider prestige to be subordinate to countries' material and strategic goals,[2] contending that "only foolhardy egocentrics are inclined to pursue a policy of prestige."[3] This overly simplistic argument is unconvincing. Why do leaders of great powers sometimes intensify their pursuit of prestige and at other times adopt a more pragmatic approach?

Prestige serves as a major driver behind Chinese foreign policy. Mao Zedong classified China's national interests into three categories: survival, prosperity, and prestige.[4] As a power with an illustrious past that now faces mounting external pressures, China is seemingly sensitive to these evaluative terms related to others' perceptions, including prestige, status, and international image.[5] As China ascends to great power status, its imperative to attain prestige is becoming increasingly pronounced.[6] Chinese President Xi Jinping, evoking the nation's historical glory, asserts that "national rejuvenation has been the greatest dream of the Chinese people and the Chinese nation."[7] A recent presentation underscored the notion of "a new model of major power relations" employed in dialogue with the USA, which calls for the USA to recognise China as a great power with a unique status.[8] Nonetheless, China's ascent and its "pursuit of accomplishment" may be perceived as a contest over prestige hierarchy, wherein China endeavours to secure greater prestige and a distinctive position in the international arena.[9]

Amid these contemporary changes, questions are naturally arising regarding the definition of prestige and its impact on foreign policy. Both classic and modern works place greater emphasis on how considerations of prestige lead to seemingly irrational and radical policies, but these works ignore the conceptual features of prestige and its varied effects from different perspectives.[10] These features have become particularly complex in China. For instance, in the 1950s and 1960s, China's pursuit of prestige manifested as an aspiration for global revolution and ideological crusade. However, in the 1980s and beyond, Beijing's pursuit of prestige shifted towards a more moderate yet varied approach, presenting a more nuanced landscape of policymaking considerations.

Therefore, this study analyses impulsive reactions and explores various policy outcomes and preferences driven by the pursuit of prestige in China. To differentiate prestige from similar concepts and precisely explain its function in the decision-making process, this paper devises a framework based on the "balance of prestige," offering variations of this concept

[2] Steve Wood, "Prestige in World Politics: History, Theory, Expression," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2013), pp. 387–411.

[3] Jonathan Mercer, "The Illusion of International Prestige," *International Security*, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2017), p. 133; Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), p. 75.

[4] Niu Jun, *Lengzhan yu Zhongguo Waijiao Juece* (*The Cold War and Chinese Foreign Policy Decision-Making*) (Beijing: Jiuzhou Chubanshe, 2013), p. 122.

[5] Deng Yong, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8.

[6] Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–84.

[7] "Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China," *Xinhua Net*, 1 July 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm.

[8] Dai Bingguo, "Cujin Zhong Mei zai Yatai diqu liangxing hudong" ("To Promote China-US Good Interaction in Asia-Pacific"), *Xinhua Net*, 3 March 2012, https://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2012-05/03/c_123074577.htm.

[9] Wood, "Prestige in World Politics," p. 403; Fitzgerald John, "China and the Quest for National Dignity," *The National Interest*, No. 55 (1999), pp. 47–59; Sun Lung-Kee, *The Chinese National Character: From Nationhood to Individuality* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Yuen Foong Khong, "Power as Prestige in World Politics," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (2019), pp. 119–42; Joseph M. Parent and Paul K. MacDonald, "In Search of Status: China and the USA in United Nations Speeches, 1970–2020," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 1–27; Stephanie Christine Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US–China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 333–56.

[10] Daniel Seth Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War: Returning to Realism's Roots," *Security Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (1999), p. 157; Mercer, "The Illusion of International Prestige," p. 166.

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based on two dimensions. The first dimension is the subjective level, where prestige pertains to the actor's internal assessment relative to the objective circumstances. The second dimension is the intersubjective level, where prestige constitutes a second-order belief concerning the actor's perceived standing relative to that of other actors. These two dimensions give way to four scenarios in which perceptions of prestige may influence the decision-making process and reveal mechanisms behind political preferences. The study contends that while prestige-seeking remains an enduring source of stimulus in China's foreign policy, approaches to achieving prestige vary depending on how it is perceived. Consequently, this research identifies four behavioural patterns—learning, adaptation, competition, and creativity—that demonstrate general policy outcomes under different circumstances.

In doing so, it contributes to a precise conceptual development of prestige, clarifying its core concepts and features. Theoretically speaking, failing to recognise the complexity of prestige-related variations not only leads to conceptual confusion but also impedes explorations of policy motivations. Therefore, this article provides a coherent basis for future academic discussion. Empirically, it traces the nuanced approaches employed by the Chinese government to understand why and how China is incorporating prestige into its foreign policy agenda. By advancing the discussion on how prestige plays out in specific political scenarios, this article identifies and addresses gaps in the literature. Moreover, it enables a better understanding of the underlying motivations and policies driving China's prestige-seeking behaviours, thereby shedding light on the rationale behind China's foreign policymaking.

The article is structured into four sections. First, it introduces the conceptual basis of prestige and the corresponding levels of analysis with a particular focus on the conceptual family of similar terms and the hierarchy of beliefs. The second section develops a new framework that categorises various perceptions of prestige into four types of "imbalances." It further identifies four behavioural patterns for empirical analysis alongside hypotheses and methodological notes. The third section delves into the empirical results, with four typical prestige scenarios spanning from the late 1980s to 2020 selected to explore the logic and approaches behind China's prestige-seeking policy. These cases confirm the hypotheses and explain how China perceives prestige from both internal and external perspectives and the ways in which its perception influences its implementation of policies. Lastly, the final section offers some concluding thoughts, discussing how prestige should be understood in a changing geopolitical landscape brought about by Trump's second term.

Prestige and Levels of Analysis

This section discusses the concept of prestige with a focus on the dimension of collective belief, identifying its diverse characteristics from a comparative perspective and providing a distinct analytical framework based on prestige in the hierarchy of beliefs.

Prestige in a Hierarchy of Beliefs

Prestige, defined as others' collective belief in one's superior traits, is a recurring element in the history of human societies. Interpretations of prestige have evolved throughout history from a symbolic asset to a strategic tool of statecraft. Since the ancient world, it has been intertwined with internal legitimacy and external diplomacy through notions of battlefield valour, honour, and symbolic power, influencing social and political structures.[11] In the modern era, prestige has become closely linked to military and economic strength, as

[11] Kevin Wamsley, Robert Barney, and Scott Martyn, eds., *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies: Sixth International Symposium for Olympic Research* (London, Ontario: International Centre for Olympic Studies, University of Western Ontario, 2022), pp. 29–40.

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demonstrated by British imperial dominance and the great power struggle during the Cold War.[12]

Conceptually, prestige can manifest directly, incidentally, or implicitly in the fields of social and natural sciences.[13] Hence, we can define prestige in minimalist terms as a recognition of importance.[14] Given its inherently competitive and hierarchical nature, the hierarchy of prestige reflects the dynamics of great power politics and relative power distribution.[15] However, despite being the subject of numerous studies in recent decades, insufficient attention has been paid to the typological clarification of conceptual variations of prestige and the diverse ways in which it can impact the decision-making process.[16]

To explain the significance of prestige in Chinese foreign policy across various scenarios, this article introduces an approach based on a hierarchy of beliefs. This approach outlines various levels of perception, facilitating a distinction between similar—sometimes interchangeably employed—cognitive concepts (e.g., status, reputation, honour) while clarifying their distinctive functions.[17]

The hierarchy of beliefs posits that there are three levels of beliefs on which individuals rely to understand the world. The 0th level of belief pertains to an empirically observable objective situation, such as the number of nuclear weapons possessed by a country. The first level, which encompasses first-order beliefs, comprises an actor's beliefs about an objective situation, such as Beijing's perception of whether its nuclear capacity is sufficient to deter threats or China's evaluation of US military capacity. Second-order beliefs emerge as the result of multiple iterations of first-order beliefs. They encompass an actor's beliefs regarding the beliefs of another actor or group of actors, such as Beijing's perception of how Washington assesses China's status in the world or of how Western countries perceive the Sino-Russian alignment. Unlike first-order beliefs, which involve an actor's self-perception, second-order beliefs stem from interactions among multiple actors.[18] In essence, first-order beliefs reflect a single actor's individual perspective, which may not be known to others.[19] In contrast, second-order beliefs entail the consensus or outcomes that emerge from multiple rounds of interactions among a group of actors.

Numerous scholars consider prestige to be a second-order belief due to its role in explaining power dynamics.[20] First, the hierarchical nature of prestige suggests that it arises from a collective societal consensus rather than an individual perspective. In other words, it emerges from an interactive societal network that includes both self-perception and the perception of others. This also suggests that the esteemed values of prestige evolve alongside shifts in societal norms over time. Second, the perception of prestige is depicted as both subjective and dependent on objective realities. On the one hand, it relies on the tangible existence

[12] Jesse Dillon Savage, "The Stability and Breakdown of Empire: European Informal Empire in China, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2010), pp. 161–85.

[13] Wood, "Prestige in World Politics," p. 387.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Gilpin, *War and Changes in World Politics*, p. 14.

[16] In their recent work, Jonathan Renshon and Richard Salmons point out the contradictory assertions of past prestige and status studies on causal mechanisms in different situations and explain the qualities and roles of similar concepts. However, their works are seemingly weak in explaining different stresses and differences in decision makers' perceptions caused by crises. Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Richard Salmons, *The Role of Status in Asia-Pacific International Relations*, Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 2018.

[17] Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll, "Consensus and the Creation of Status Beliefs," *Social Forces*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (2006), pp. 431–53; Allan Dafoe and Devin Caughey, "Honor and War: Southern US Presidents and the Effects of Concern for Reputation," *World Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2016), pp. 341–81; Allan Dafoe, Jonathan Renshon, and Paul Huth, "Reputation and Status as Motives for War," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17 (2014), pp. 371–93. Barry O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 193; Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, p. 39.

[18] Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, p. 36.

[19] Ridgeway and Correll, "Consensus and the Creation of Status Beliefs," p. 433.

[20] O'Neill, *Honor, Symbols, and War*, p. 193.

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of material phenomena and objective sources. On the other hand, it is influenced by shifts in social value systems. These hierarchical and perceptual features of prestige demonstrate that it represents a state's self-assessment based on its position on the international stage, its perception of how others view it, and how it adjusts its self-assessment based on external perception factors.

Therefore, given the multiple dimensions of prestige, a scenario may be defined as either balanced or imbalanced depending on the extent to which a state's self-perception aligns with external perceptions. The perils of imbalanced prestige—characterised by discrepancies between self-perception and external perceptions—have been sporadically discussed in the literature. For instance, both Robert Gilpin and Ralph Hawtrey emphasise that states are less inclined to resort to the use of force when the hierarchy of prestige is clearly and mutually understood. Conversely, a weakened and more ambiguous prestige hierarchy serves as a precursor to conflict and struggle.[21] Similarly, Richard Ned Lebow illustrates the emergence of conflict and chaos when a state's perceived prestige and anticipated position diverge, leading it to perceive its prestige as not duly recognised.[22] Therefore, when a power's prestige diminishes, or the hierarchy of prestige is disputed amid escalating great power confrontations, a display of strength may become a viable option for powers that perceive a discrepancy between their actual capabilities and their position in the prestige hierarchy.

However, an imbalanced power relationship does not automatically trigger an immediate struggle for prestige. Changes in actual capacities and prestige do not always occur simultaneously; rather, they are contingent on acceptance of the status quo. As Schweller and Pu explain, dramatic power shifts also give rise to prestige competition. They note that "Prestige, however, tends to be sticky … The system evolves into disequilibrium only when a large enough disjuncture arises."[23] Hence, it is essential to understand not only the balance of power but also the motives behind and mechanisms of prestige-seeking in an imbalanced scenario. Such an understanding is crucial if we are to understand the behavioural patterns of great power politics.

Prestige and Conceptual Identification

While scholars have discussed potential conflicts arising from imbalances between perceived prestige and actual strength, two conceptual issues remain underexplored. First, most research disregards the difference between prestige and similar concepts, such as honour, status, image, and reputation,[24] often using them interchangeably.[25] This conceptual ambiguity inevitably hinders theoretical development and dialogue. For instance, in Tang's analysis of the cult of reputation, he fails to clearly distinguish reputation from similar terms, overlooking the distinction between the subjective and intersubjective levels.[26] Similarly, Hans Morgenthau and Robert Gilpin define prestige simply as the reputation for power, obscuring the second level of analysis: the intersubjectivity and interactions among multiple actors.

[21] Gilpin, *War and Changes in World Politics*, p. 31.

[22] Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 66.

[23] Randall L. Schweller and Xiaoyu Pu, "After Unipolarity: China's Vision of International Order in an Era of US Decline," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2011), p. 43.

[24] Tang Shiping, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2005), pp. 34–62.

[25] On many occasions, the term "international image" is used to convey a similar meaning. However, "image" is not considered a serious concept in this research, as it does not encompass the three core features listed in Table 1, nor does it offer a clear conceptual distinction from other terms.

[26] Sasikumar S. Sundaram, "The Practices of Evaluating Entitlements: Rethinking 'Reputation' in International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2020), p. 658; Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," pp. 34–62.

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Table 1. Conceptual Comparison

Concepts	Features		
	Levels of Analysis	**Hierarchy**	**Levels of Competitiveness**
Prestige	Second-order belief	Highly hierarchical	Competitive
Honour	Second-order belief	Less hierarchical	Less competitive
Status	Second-order belief	Highly hierarchical	Highly competitive
Reputation	First-order belief	Not hierarchical	Not competitive

Since intersubjective interactions are generally not carefully analysed in conceptual formations, prestige is conceptualised merely as a subjective byproduct of reputation in many works. This inevitably transforms it into an instrumental concept that distorts decision makers' perceptions.[27] Second, these analyses are often approached from a general perspective, wielding a strict focus on states' subjective perceptions and actual power without considering intersubjective interaction as a dynamic and relevant process.[28]

To address this conceptual ambiguity, this study proposes a redefinition of prestige and related terms within the framework of a hierarchy of beliefs. The conceptual foundations of prestige, outlined in Table 1, clarify the concept and differentiate it from related concepts, particularly reputation and honour.

Honour constitutes a belief regarding the virtue of another actor or behaviour, or their possession of positive attributes.[29] However, honour is distinct from prestige in terms of the levels of analysis and the resulting characteristics: Prestige is a positional concept imbued with competitiveness, while honour is not. Honour pertains to the virtue within a group that all members possess so long as they meet certain criteria. For example, in a society that values honesty, all members may be considered honourable if they exhibit honesty; one's honour does not detract from that of another. There is no ranking that determines the most honourable individual at the top of a hierarchy.

In many works, "status" and prestige are often used interchangeably.[30] While these two concepts do share some critical similarities, they differ in a critical sense. Status refers to a ranking on a hierarchy, but prestige is reflected in the public recognition of admired qualities. Thus, prestige entails zones of prestige that include multiple esteemed actors, while status is more specific, with a focus on one actor that typically sits in a formal position on an ordered list.[31] In practice, while a status marker can be a good tool for enabling quantitative measurement in certain organisations, prestige covers broader political phenomena for which the indicators are less clearly identifiable. Consequently, status is more of a formal position in a competitive hierarchy, such as those held by nuclear powers or permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. These formal representations explore the outcome of political dynamics but tend to omit the nuanced cognitive change underlying visible institutional hierarchy. Moreover, prestige involves broader realms that capture more signals beyond strict status markers.

The relationship between prestige and reputation is similar. Reputation refers to the assessment of an actor's past conduct (often used to predict future actions) and typically

[27] Markey, "Prestige and the Origins of War," p. 129.

[28] Dov Cohen, Richard E. Nisbett, Brian F. Bowdle, and Norbert Schwarz, "Insult, Aggression, and the Southern Culture of Honor: An 'Experimental Ethnography'," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 70, No. 5 (1999), p. 945.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Renshon, *Fighting for Status*, p. 35.

[31] T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson, and William C. Wohlforth, eds. *Status in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 16

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serves as shorthand for "a reputation for resolve."[32] The fundamental distinction between prestige and reputation lies in the fact that reputation may be shaped only through interactions involving two actors, giving it a subjective element. This implies that the formation of reputation neither necessitates a third party to establish consensus nor requires intersubjective interaction. This contrasts sharply with perceptions of prestige, which emerge among a group of actors.

Therefore, prestige fits better conceptually, as it demonstrates wider applicability in case studies pertaining to critical junctures in China's evolving perceptions, thereby capturing more implicit and informal signals. A lens of prestige, compared to hierarchy-focused status, presents a more dynamic and comprehensive explanation.

In failing to properly conceptualise prestige, these past studies offer limited insight into the motivations behind prestige-seeking behaviours. Additionally, the manner in which a state delineates the balance or imbalance of prestige and the way in which these perceptions influence policymaking have not been adequately explored. Therefore, compared to similar terms, "prestige" offers greater alignment with this study's conceptual scope. It encompasses a broader array of dynamic details within a less institutionalised realm amid the volatile landscape of international politics. Considering positionality and perception within the hierarchy of beliefs, this article proposes a framework through which to analyse the balance and imbalance of prestige, delineating various types of perceived prestige and their policy implications within a specific context. In the context of China, a prestige-oriented perspective offers a more nuanced depiction of the motivations behind Beijing's foreign policy changes as well as extensive implications that align with numerous scholarly investigations into the spiritual and conceptual foundations of China's global engagement.[33]

Balance and Imbalance of Prestige in IR

Based on the preceding conceptual discussion, this section develops a new typology to describe a given country's prestige-seeking behaviours along subjective and intersubjective dimensions. Moreover, it identifies relevant strategies for seeking prestige and designs a comparative case study while proposing some hypotheses.

A Typology of Prestige-Seeking Behaviours

The balance (or imbalance) of prestige emerges from a disparity between levels of achieved and ascribed prestige. More specifically, conflicts arise from differences between the level of prestige that a state believes it has attained or has come to deserve and the level of prestige recognised by other societal actors.

Individuals expect their cognitive frameworks to gravitate towards consistency or equilibrium, where subjective and intersubjective perceptions align. Typically, this quest for consistency is not a product of rational deliberation but an implicit and omnipresent guiding principle ingrained in human behaviour. The attainment of cognitive equilibrium gives way to a heightened sense of comfort among individuals, thereby influencing their interpretation of new information in a manner that reinforces this equilibrium. A balanced structure affords decision makers a cohesive *gestalt* in times of uncertainty, facilitating the simplification of complex problems amid a deluge of information.[34]

[32] Gregory D. Miller, "Hypotheses on Reputation: Alliance Choices and the Shadow of the Past," *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2003), pp. 40–78.

[33] Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*; Xue Ye, "China's Rise, Guanxi, and Primary Institutions," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2023), pp. 1–31; Yong Deng and Fei-Ling Wang, eds. *China Rising: Power and Motivation in Chinese Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Qin Yaqing, "Chinese Culture and Its Implications for Foreign Policy-Making," *China International Studies*, No. 5 (2011), p. 45.

[34] Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 117–8.

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Table 2. Empirical Cases of the Imbalance of Prestige

		Subjective	
		Positive	**Negative**
Intersubjective	Positive	Overrated prestige (P, P) (2008 to mid-2010s)	Self-underrated prestige (N, P) (the late 1990s to mid-2000s)
	Negative	Self-overrated prestige (P, N) (2012–2020)	Underrated prestige (N, N) (mid-1990s)

In contrast, imbalance stems from a cognitive discrepancy between the subjective and intersubjective levels, resulting in cognitive dissonance, meaning conflict between two cognitive elements. When faced with such situations, actors endeavour to justify their actions in order to resolve internal conflicts, attempting to convince themselves of the logical reasoning behind their decisions.[35] Due to individuals' innate inclination to uphold existing cognitions, they are motivated to realign these cognitions in situations characterised by imbalance and, in turn, achieve an ideal "balance of prestige." This equilibrium may be described as a state that perceives its prestige as aligning perfectly with others' assessments of its capacities. However, given the fluctuating nature of power dynamics, such a balanced perception of prestige is fleeting; as a result, imbalances are prevalent in global politics. Consequently, cognitive dissonance arising from prestige imbalance accentuates the significance of prestige, compelling states to view it as a paramount factor behind decision makers' preferences.

Given the diversity of possible responses to such imbalance, a framework capable of identifying a diverse array of scenarios is required. Thus, this study proposes an analytical framework aimed at exploring the impact of prestige across different hierarchical levels on states' behavioural tendencies within an anarchic system. This framework selects four distinct periods in China's diplomatic history, each corresponding to one of four perceptions of prestige and exemplifying the rationale behind China's evolving strategies to acquire prestige.

As depicted in Table 2, this framework demonstrates four scenarios of "the imbalance of prestige"—a typology of prestige comprising subjective prestige as the first-order belief and intersubjective prestige as the second-order belief. The objective situation, particularly the actual power wielded by the state, serves as the foundation upon which perception is constructed. In an ideal scenario, every actor would perceive prestige objectively with complete accuracy and impartiality, and the prestige hierarchy would precisely mirror the outcomes of material reality. This article refers to such a scenario as a "balance of prestige." For example, in a hypothetical world where the number of nuclear weapons possessed by a state is the sole criterion by which to assess prestige, the prestige hierarchy would correspond to the rankings of nuclear-armed countries, and the perceptions derived from these rankings would set the standard for subjective and intersubjective evaluations. However, perceptions typically deviate from such ideals, resulting in perceived realities that stray from such a balance. The resultant imbalance gives rise to four types of prestige cognitions that may be applied to four scenarios of post-Cold War Chinese prestige-seeking behaviour.

Subjective and intersubjective prestige each comprise both positive and negative aspects. In the case of subjective prestige, the positive aspect signifies that State A's perception of prestige surpasses its actual power, while the negative aspect signifies the opposite. Meanwhile, intersubjective prestige pertains to how State A evaluates external perceptions of its prestige. This evaluation is deemed positive if State A believes that other states' evaluations

[35] Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, p. 382.

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of its prestige exceed its own evaluation; otherwise, in the case of negative intersubjective prestige, State A perceives its prestige as undervalued in the international arena. Such disparities in prestige represent cognitive states wherein the two dimensions of prestige—self-perception and intersubjective perceptions—are misaligned. This discrepancy manifests in various ways and significantly influences state behaviour.

The summary presented in Table 2 outlines four combinations of perceptual outcomes across subjective and intersubjective dimensions: (P, P), (P, N), (N, P), and (N, N).

The first category (P, P) denotes a scenario wherein both State A's assessment of its prestige and its evaluation of external perceptions of its prestige exceed the ideal level of perception—objective reality and perception are perfectly aligned. For instance, the USA, in a unipolar context, exemplifies Type 1 prestige, as both Washington and the international community recognise the USA as the unchallenged superpower.[36] China's foreign policy from 2008 to the mid-2010s reflects this pattern of perception.

The second category (P, N) characterises a scenario in which State A perceives its prestige as higher than its actual power warrants and believes that other states are failing to recognise its true power or are undervaluing its prestige. A notable example of this scenario may be found in Lebow's argument regarding Germany in World War I. He emphasises that the gap between Germany's self-perceived prestige and external recognition constituted a powerful source of conflict.[37] In this article, the rising global ambition and intensifying great power competition after the early 2010s demonstrated China's self-overrated prestige-seeking policy.

The third category (N, P) contrasts with the second one, depicting a scenario in which State A feels that others perceive it as more prestigious than is warranted. An example of this may be seen in the Concert of Europe following the Congress of Vienna, where certain great powers were deemed overrated.[38] Austria and Prussia, despite generally being considered "great powers,"[39] were actually among the weakest states in the pentarchy, needing to rely on international coordination and intermediary states to uphold their security. The disparity between external assessment and self-evaluation may be detected in Beijing's efforts to improve its prestige from the 1990s onwards.

The last category (N, N) illustrates a relatively uncommon scenario in which both State A and other states harbour negative evaluations of its prestige. For example, in the late 19th century, the USA was widely regarded as a second-tier power despite its significant economic prowess.[40] Washington's willingness to exert its own influence was limited, and its status as a great power with substantial influence had yet to be recognised—even by itself. In the case of China, this underrated prestige was evident when China tried to re-engage with international society after 1989.

Identifying Prestige-Seeking Strategies: Learning, Adaptation, Competition, and Creativity

A state may pursue higher prestige through various means, as exemplified by China's diplomatic strategies, which generally encompass four approaches: learning, adaptation, competition, and creativity. While most states aim to maximise their prestige, the methods that they employ to achieve that aim may vary.

[36] Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 70, No. 1 (1990), p. 23.
[37] Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, pp. 340–2.
[38] Paul W. Schroeder, "Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?" *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3 (1992), p. 698.
[39] Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 527.
[40] Fareed Zakariya, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 46–8.

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The first two approaches, learning and adaptation, may be broadly categorised under the term "socialisation," which entails states' acceptance and internalisation of international norms as they integrate themselves into the global environment. Socialisation is essentially "the process directed towards a state's internalisation of the constituent beliefs and practices institutionalised in its international environment."[41]

First, adaptation (as a political mechanism) involves the adoption of new diplomatic behaviours aimed at fostering a conducive environment for domestic development. It is a rational tactic used to mitigate audience costs and maintain domestic stability without directly challenging the existing world order or provoking hostility from other major powers.

Second, learning is similar to adaptation in that it signifies a change in how states institutionalise their domestic and international expectations.[42] However, it is distinct in that it represents a process that is more fundamental than adaptation—one that isn't solely based on instrumental calculations.

The analytical distinction between adaptation and learning hinges on whether a state alters its policies based on instrumental motives or in response to external pressure. Therefore, learning presupposes that a policy change stems from a fundamental shift in the state's understanding of its role in a given situation. Conversely, an adaptation argument posits that such changes are predominantly tactical, arising from a reassessment of the most effective means by which to navigate potential dilemmas, often in response to structural pressure.[43]

Third, competition is inherent in states that perceive themselves as underrecognised and constrained in their opportunities for advancement. These states engage in competition to match or surpass the dominant power in their respective areas of superiority. Since prestige in IR typically stems from a combination of military power, economic power, and ideological hegemony, competition often manifests as geopolitical and ideological rivalry in the form of military conflicts, economic competition, or debates over orthodox ideals. Although competitive actions may appear to mimic those of the leading state, the aim of seeking such prestige markers is to supplant the dominant state in the hierarchy rather than to seek out acceptance within elite circles.[44] Hence, the prestige-seeker does not necessarily seek out the endorsement of the values and institutions upheld by states of a higher status. Instead, a competitive policy tends to foster a revisionist mindset aimed at challenging the prevailing status quo.

Fourth, when a prestige-seeker pursues pre-eminence in a domain distinct from that of the leading powers, social creativity (particularly through the creation of new concepts or criteria) becomes a valuable means of preserving and enhancing its prestige.[45] This approach requires the state to circumvent standards that could impede its objectives without directly challenging the established order due to (its awareness of) its limitations in doing so. Additionally, a prestige-seeker may recognise the legitimacy of the status quo. Historically, this strategy has been employed by countries that possess a degree of influence but lack absolute dominance in traditional spheres, such as military and economic power. In such cases, asserting one's prestige entailed resorting to non-traditional means, such as referring to moral values, conceptual innovations, or other initiatives. For example, both China and

[41] Frank Schimmelfennig, "International Socialization in the New Europe: Rational Action in an Institutional Environment," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2000), pp. 109–39.

[42] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Learning versus Adaptation: Explaining Change in Chinese Arms Control Policy in the 1980s and 1990s," *The China Journal*, Vol. 35 (1996), pp. 27–61.

[43] Ibid., p. 30.

[44] Deborah Welch Larson, "Will China Be a New Type of Great Power?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (2015), p. 328.

[45] Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 11–2.

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India have leveraged their roles as developing countries to advocate for reforms to the international economic system, aiming to unite and lead third-world countries while bolstering their own prestige.

Conceptually, these four mechanisms offer an ideal framework for researchers to identify and explain China's prestige-seeking policies. However, not all relevant policies and foreign behaviours align perfectly with these mechanisms, as Chinese foreign policy often involves a combination of varying approaches guided by an underlying strategic logic. The discussion of these four mechanisms does not provide exhaustive explanations from which readers can expect perfect correspondence between typologies and real-world occurrences. Instead, they represent valuable summaries that offer insights into the predominant prestige-seeking mechanisms adopted by China across various periods and situations. Notably, the evolution of these mechanisms was not instantaneous; rather, they were developed through lengthy and complex decision-making processes. Consequently, multiple mechanisms may have coexisted simultaneously.

Hypotheses and a Methodological Note

This study proposes four hypotheses corresponding to the four basic scenarios of prestige, elucidating how states are influenced by perceptions of prestige and which policies are beneficial in each scenario:

(1) *Type (P, P)*. In this type, where State A's subjective and intersubjective perceptions surpass the level that objective strength would suggest in an ideal situation, China tends to create acceptable norms and institutions to maximise its international prestige without antagonising others or undermining its image. This may be attributed to the state's realisation of its own capacity and perception of benign others who are likely to recognise its creations.

(2) *Type (P, N)*. In the second type, where State A's self-perception exceeds external perceptions, China may opt for a radical policy to pursue prestige and challenge the status quo through competition, driven by a revisionist desire to eliminate the prestige deficit by achieving a higher level of prestige. Having perceived a hostile atmosphere, the state tends to use competitive policies to achieve prestige rather than restraining itself to the confines of the existing framework.

(3) *Type (N, P)*. The behavioural pattern in this type differs from that in the others. China realises that its prestige and influence are more nominal than real, prompting the state to undertake learning policies from its Western peers. It insists on maintaining the projected image and status quo to preserve its established interests while transforming itself in a way that moves it towards its desired, more favourable role in the international arena.

(4) *Type (N, N)*. The last type envisions the state using the tactical approach of adaptation to alleviate external pressure and acquire greater recognition of its prestige, as it can neither pursue it based on its actual strength nor reshape the world order due to its limited influence. For China, adopting a low-profile stance and making tactical adjustments to accommodate the rules of the existing order constitute an appropriate way to enhance its prestige.

This study examines multiple cases to illustrate how perceptions of prestige have evolved since the 1990s across different scenarios. The first case focuses on China's integration into the international human rights regime as a prestige-restoring behaviour. This integration occurred when China's prestige-seeking policy responded to pressure by adopting an adaptation strategy in an unfavourable situation (N, N). The second case investigates the motivation and process behind China learning to be a "responsible power" in the 1990s and early 2000s. It emphasises China's efforts to solidify its prestige and embrace a learning attitude towards international norms (N, P). The third case, from 2008 to the mid-2010s, covers a more confident China proactively engaging in prestige-building through the creation of new discursive and normative assets aimed at maximising prestige without challenging the status quo (P, P). Lastly, the empirical section analyses China's increasingly assertive actions

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in pursuit of prestige based on contemporary studies on China's diplomacy. It demonstrates a competitive stance in geopolitical tensions (P, N) with a particular focus on tensions between internal and external assessments.

This article hypothesises that four prestige scenarios make up the basic types of Chinese prestige-seeking policy. While China has adopted mixed policies, each period exhibits a distinct dominant policy. By assessing whether the imbalance of prestige convincingly explains China's prestige-seeking behaviour, this study determines the extent to which China's prestige-seeking policies have been influenced by various types of perceived prestige. Furthermore, it assesses the logical coherence of these policies across varying scenarios.

This study's assessment of prestige is based on both material and perceptual evidence. Tangible indicators of prestige, such as economic growth, military power, cutting-edge technology, and influential political events, serve as measurable evidence that forms the basis for subjective and intersubjective perceptions of prestige.

Overall, the research adopts a "snapshot" approach to its methodology and hypothesis testing. This approach entails characterising key steps in the process and depicting a circumstance, situation or set of events to describe what has occurred.[46] It aims to capture the causal processes by which a specific variable has triggered a series of observable consequences. Therefore, it does not aim to examine the long-term evolution of China's prestige policy or make definitive claims regarding the nature of prestige in a metatheoretical sense. Rather, it focuses on cases aligned with different types of prestige, as outlined in the analytical framework. Through this approach and its focus on certain periods, this research is more sensitive to situational contexts and offers greater explanatory insight into prestige policy adjustments.

Prestige-Seeking in China's Post-Cold War Foreign Policy

This section provides four empirical cases of China's prestige-seeking behaviours from the 1990s to the 2010s, aiming to depict the underlying logic and explore China's approaches to perceiving its own prestige and adjusting relevant policies.

Reintegrating through Adaptation in the 1990s

This section examines China's re-engagement with the global human rights regime in the 1990s, bearing an underrated level of prestige. A significant transformation occurred in the country's diplomatic relations during the 1980s: It adopted prestige-seeking and acceptance of international norms as its primary diplomatic approaches. There were several reasons behind this transformation. First, China was continuing its ongoing process of de-ideologisation that began in the late 1970s. China was becoming more actively involved in international institutions and had begun adopting certain international norms as an alternative means of enhancing its prestige and international image.[47] Second, China found itself in an unfavourable position after 1989 due to internal and external upheavals, making it more sensitive to perceptions of its prestige.[48] Therefore, changes in the sources of its prestige and assessments of the political environment led to a fundamental shift in China's diplomatic behaviour. While maximising its relative economic and military power remained crucial for Chinese decision makers, it needed to find a way to relieve external pressure and identify a moderate strategy through which to enhance its prestige.[49]

[46] David E. McNabb, *Research Methods for Political Science* (New York: M. E. Sharp, 2010), p. 43.

[47] Yang Kuisong and Xia Yafeng, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969–1976," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2010), pp. 395–6.

[48] Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 97.

[49] Rosemary Foot, *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle over Human Rights in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 114–8.

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For these reasons, China in the 1990s may be categorised as having a prestige imbalance (i.e., a self-perceived lack of prestige due to declining relative power and a deteriorating international environment, which generated a prestige deficit in its interactions with others). Deng Xiaoping's focus on "keeping a low profile and waiting for the right moment" reflected policymakers' sobering assessment of China's strengths and weaknesses as well as their recognition of the significant disparity between China's tarnished prestige and the prestige of other major countries.[50] As Deng advised, to achieve a state of balanced prestige, it is necessary to "calmly observe and handle situations, maintain stability, and avoid taking the lead or speaking excessively," thereby pursuing a modest and pragmatic path of development. However, "making a difference" implies that one must actively engage in global affairs, prioritise cooperation over confrontation and pursue integration into the international community in order to establish a favourable environment in which to develop.[51] Hence, China's foreign strategy entailed maintaining a low international profile, avoiding conflict and reintegrating into the global community. As Deng stated after the incidents of 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Soviet bloc, in consideration of the turmoil that followed in socialist countries, China should remain moderate and calm and wait for changes in the international environment.[52] On the international stage, China continued to be viewed as an outcast, lacking full recognition from the international community. This resulted in limited participation in global institutions like the World Bank.[53] Furthermore, China became the target of neoliberal criticism due to its expansion efforts in the 1990s.[54]

Consequently, it became imperative for China to undergo a fundamental transformation in its foreign conduct in order to reconstruct its international image and re-establish engagement with international society.[55] It went on to adopt more moderate positions encompassing nearly all sensitive issues, ranging from human rights to security policy and geopolitical considerations.

China's integration into international human rights institutions demonstrates how China sought to restore its prestige through a defensive position, as human rights constituted the issue where Beijing was most harshly criticised by the international community. Therefore, China adopted a learning posture when it sought to rejoin the global community; it accepted internationally recognised norms and conventions even though they could have undermined the power position of the Communist Party.[56]

From 1989 onwards, China increasingly aligned itself with the international human rights regime, adopting a more nuanced approach and expanding its participation despite the risk that these changes would open a loophole for potential foreign interventions. For instance, the controversial "counter-revolutionary" crime was reinterpreted by the Supreme People's Court of China to reduce its controversiality following the Tiananmen incident. The Supreme Court justified this amendment as compatible with international practice and agreements that China had signed with foreign countries.[57] This is but one example of China's increasingly proactive engagement with United Nations (UN) human rights bodies

[50] Wang Jisi, "Zhongguo de guoji dingwei wenti yu 'Taoguang Yanghui, Yousuo Zuowei' de zhanlve sixiang" ("The International Positioning of China and the Strategic Principle of 'Keeping a Low Profile while Getting Something Accomplished'"), *Guoji wenti yanjiu* (*China International Studies*), No. 2 (2011), pp. 4–9.

[51] Ibid., pp. 6–9.

[52] Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan Vol. 3* (*Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping Vol. 3*) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), p. 320.

[53] James V. Feinerman, "Deteriorating Human Rights in China," *Current History*, Vol. 89, No. 548 (1990), p. 265.

[54] Zhang Yongjing and Barry Buzan, "China and the Global Reach of Human Rights," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 241 (2020), pp. 169–90; Sonya Sceats and Shaun Breslin, *China and the International Human Rights System* (London: Chatham House, 2012), No. 5, pp. 22–4.

[55] Johnston, *Social States*, p. 97.

[56] Zhong Wenhui, "China's Human Rights Development in the 1990s," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 8, No. 8 (1995), pp. 79–97.

[57] SCMP Reporter, "Change in Rules on State Security," *South China Morning Post*, 22 May 1993.

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in the post-Tiananmen era. In the 1990s, China ratified over 20 international human rights treaties in response to global pressure, notably including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).[58] Driven by the pursuit of prestige as a recognised, responsible great power, China's restoration of prestige and enhancement of its image became imperative steps.

All of these signs led to new and more positive interactions between Beijing and the international human rights regime, with the Chinese government's decision to engage in vigorous human rights diplomacy. More importantly, Chinese decisions were found to involve strong domestic support for human rights research, such as conferences, scholarly and official human rights publications, the hosting of visiting government delegations, and heightened activity in UN human rights forums.[59] This period echoed the call for the rule of law during the reform of the socialist market economy. Evidently, it had become fashionable to abide by international standards—which had formerly been rejected as dominated by Western values—to enhance China's role in the world.[60] A text analysis of *People's Daily* found that the yearly proportion of the topic in the human rights corpus rose consecutively and dramatically, from 13.3% in 1989 to 24.1% in 1993; it was increasingly being seen as indicative of the governing capacity of the Party, making it deserving of reception and acclamation.[61]

However, instead of unconditionally accepting all knowledge of human rights during this adaptation period, China tailored the regime by wielding its influence and reshaping its understanding of this issue. Those who were highly sceptical towards the West revived and implied a revisionist tendency in the international institutions. This tactical acceptance of human rights issues and compliance with international norms faded in 1993 once external pressure eased, and a more proactive and sovereignty-focused approach emerged in China's stance. Most evidently, China intended to reconceptualise the meaning of human rights to counter the influence of Western universalism. At the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, China adopted a mix of approaches, accepting some existing norms but reformulating priorities by privileging collective over individual rights and trying to negate existing norms or prevent the development of new ones. Chinese delegates unceasingly emphasised their distinct human rights priorities. It prioritised the right to subsistence and the principles of sovereignty and non-interference—that each state had the right to its own interpretation of human rights.[62] Consequently, China used each forum as a medium through which to influence the international human rights regime. Additionally, political transactions (e.g., China's billion-dollar contracts to reduce international pressure before the UN Human Rights Commission session) and postponement strategies (e.g., the unrectified ICCPR and rejection of the application of International Labor Organization standards to local contexts) may be found in China's reluctance to embrace Western standards.[63]

Years of acceptance and adaptation had given way to rewards. China's domestic behaviour altered its hitherto benign image in the eyes of foreign governments, particularly those of the West, as demonstrated by the gradual easing of sanctions.[64] Reciprocally, a more peaceful Chinese foreign policy emerged at the Fifteenth Party Congress in September 1997, signalling that China required the goodwill and support of the West. Furthermore, China not only adopted the rules and norms of the human rights regime but also adroitly

[58] Deng, *China's Struggle for Status*, p. 84; Aleš Karmazin, "Normative Overlaps between China and the Liberal International Society: China's Developmentalist Human Rights," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2013), pp. 406–30.

[59] Ann Kent, *China, the United Nations, and Human Rights: The Limits of Compliance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 234.

[60] Zhong, "China's Human Rights Development in the 1990s," p. 96.

[61] Titus C. Chen and Chia-hao Hsu, "Double-Speaking Human Rights: Analyzing Human Rights Conception in Chinese Politics (1989–2015)," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 112 (2018), pp. 534–53.

[62] Kent, *China, the United Nations, and Human Right*, pp. 237–8.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., p. 234.

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grafted the expression of human rights onto its unfinished mission of state-building, indoctrinating sustainable momentum to renew its understanding of human rights and shape the regime.[65] Overall, throughout the years that followed 1989, Beijing displayed a willingness to comply with and influence the content of the international human rights system.[66]

Apart from human rights, similar patterns of adaptation under pressure were evident in China's responses to arms control and principles of international interference, which have long been seen as sensitive issues where Beijing maintains conservative vigilance.

On the issue of nuclear arms control, by transitioning from staunchly advocating for nuclear autonomy to partially embracing norms regarding the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), China utilised its acceptance of international norms as a way to demonstrate its desire to reintegrate into the global community. On 9 March 1992, China finally acceded to the NPT. China's evolving stance on various arms control institutions, including the Landmines Protocol, Missile Technology Control Regime, Chemical Weapons Convention and Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty, exhibited a comparable line of reasoning. In these cases, the effects on perception outweighed the economic and limited military implications.[67] The primary factors considered across all these instances pertained to prestige and perception, as adopting more moderate stances helped China to mitigate external pressure.

More conspicuous evidence came from Beijing's concession regarding sovereignty-related issues made in exchange for a benign international image. After 1989, China engaged in 22 diplomatic discussions to address territorial disputes with neighbouring nations in an effort to rebuild its image as a peaceful power. This engagement resulted in nine successful resolutions during the 1990s. Certain outcomes did not align with China's consistent stance on territorial matters, and China made significant concessions in most of these settlements.[68] In early 1990, China voted in favour of UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 660, which condemned Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. China also acquiesced to UNSCR 687 against Iraq the following year. This marked a significant shift in China's stance toward the multilateral security apparatus, as it acquiesced to the intervention of military organisations under the authority of the UN. Beijing's acquiescence to international intervention was interpreted as a response to international pressure.[69] Despite its opposition to international interventions that could weaken its stance on the status of Taiwan, China's decisions in the Gulf crisis entailed the acceptance of unfavourable international norms in exchange for political benefits and an enhanced international image.[70]

As argued earlier, in the post-Tiananmen era, a dual approach in China's dealings with uncertainties may be summarised as follows: to emphasise its positive role in international society; and to offer regular and timely concessions to the West. What was the logic behind China's shifting attitude towards the highly sensitive human rights regime in the 1990s and Beijing's tactical compliance? The imbalanced perception of prestige and the desire to restore its international image under immediate pressure could explain this.[71] From the 1980s onwards, Chinese leaders increasingly realised that China's active engagement in international regimes was beneficial to the country's general image, which was more important than the economic and military costs associated with engagement. It stood out when

[65] Chen and Hsu, "Double-Speaking Human Rights," p. 540.
[66] Ibid., p. 534.
[67] Johnston, *Social States*, p. 132
[68] M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China's Compromises in Territorial Disputes," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2005), pp. 46–83.
[69] John Calabrese, "Peaceful or Dangerous Collaborators? China's Relations with the Gulf Countries," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (1992–1993), p. 479.
[70] Robert S. Ross, *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 222–3.
[71] Johnston, "Some Thought of China's Participation in International Institutions," pp. 8–9.

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China appeared isolated outside the "club," which caused an identity crisis among Chinese leaders as China's acceptable traits as a great power had been eroded. Therefore, the importance of prestige concerns was overestimated.[72] The need to enhance its own prestige in international institutions and the affirmation of its importance as a major power drove Beijing's diplomacy most of the time in the 1990s. Faced with a state of imbalance in which both internal and external perceptions of prestige were negative, China had to re-engage with the international community to regain its trust and appreciation. Jiang Zemin's 1991 interpretation encapsulates this approach, "We adopted a low-profile approach primarily due to the complex international situation."[73] This reflects that adaptation, as the primary strategy with which China pursued prestige during this period was both a tactical manoeuvre and an inevitable response to pressure.[74]

Overall, by adapting and internalising international norms and values, China joined most international institutions that regulate interstate behaviour.[75] Inside these institutions, it generally did not try to undermine their functioning or overall purpose. Increasingly, Chinese foreign policy accepted that, for the foreseeable future, it would need to accommodate US hegemony; when US hegemony needed to be challenged, China would do so mainly through international institutions. As a result, Beijing could neither fully embrace Western-led international norms for ideological reasons nor completely reject the USA for economic reasons.[76] Deng Xiaoping's post-Soviet collapse encapsulated this approach: "we should continue to observe, and cannot just say the current situation is too serious to acknowledge that we are in a disadvantageous position … the opportunity exists, the challenge lies in grasping it."[77] Chinese foreign policy thus acknowledged the need to accommodate US hegemony to foster a favourable international environment and re-engage with the global community.

Learning to Be a "Responsible Power" around 2000

This section investigates China's path towards being a responsible great power with self-underrated prestige. Compared to most periods in the 1990s, China began receiving more and more positive feedback from the international community as the 21st century approached following years of socialisation and self-restraint through the role of patient and aspirant learner.

In this regard, China's prestige-seeking policy confronted two seemingly contradictory scenarios. On the one hand, China viewed itself as a latecomer, a rising state, a developing country and a learner with limited international prestige and influence. In October 1997, Jiang met with the key staff of a US news agency in China prior to his national visit to the USA and said, in a discussion about value differences between China and the USA, "We are able to learn advanced science and technology and management experience from the US."[78] On the other hand, China was increasingly being seen as an influential actor, potential partner, and problem resolver in international forums. For instance, many political figures, including US President Clinton and former World Trade Organization

[72] Ross, *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, pp. 222–3.

[73] Jiang Zemin, *Jiang Zemin lun you zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi* (*Jiang Zemin on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2002), pp. 527–8.

[74] Zhu Weilie, "Guanyu 'taoguang yanghui, yousuo zuowei' waijiao fanglue de sikao" ("On China's Diplomatic Strategy of 'Keeping a Low Profile and Taking a Proactive Role When Feasible'"), *Guoji Zhanwang* (*Global Review*), No. 3 (2010), pp. 117–8.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Samuel S. Kim, "Chinese Foreign Policy after Tiananmen," *Current History*, Vol. 89, No. 548 (1990), p. 280.

[77] Deng, *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* Vol. 3, p. 254.

[78] "Jiang Zemin huijian Meiguo zhujing xinwen fuzeren huida tiwen" ("Jiang Zemin Met US News Agency in Beijing and Answered Questions"), *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), 26 October 1996, p. 1.

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(WTO) Secretary-General Supachai Panitchpakdi, praised China's responsible actions during the Asian financial crisis for both Asia and the world at large.[79] Beyond politicians, citizens across different countries were also exhibiting a more positive attitude towards China. In 2005, an influential BBC survey indicated that China was perceived positively by most countries with "a significantly more positive role in the world than either the US or Russia."[80]

As a result, when it comes to China's international prestige, the negative self-evaluation and positive external evaluation in the intersubjective sense collectively defined China as holding a "self-underrated" role in terms of prestige from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s.

On the one hand, China projected a relatively modest yet ambitious image as a learner during this period. Learning from developed countries and maintaining openness formed the basis of China's strategy in pursuit of deep integration into the international community at this time. "Learning" implied that China positioned itself as a latecomer in terms of its national power and influence relative to developed countries. Notably, this motivation was evident in official discourses. For example, Former State Councillor Dai Bingguo cautioned that China should maintain an objective and realistic perspective, emphasising that "we can't overestimate ourselves."[81] In 2010, when summarising China's foreign policy strategy in the 2000s, Dai again highlighted that China's "strategic intention" was "peaceful development," stressing that China "lacked the qualifications for pride and arrogance (*meiyou renhe jiaoao zida de benqian*)" and, thus, needed to "learn humbly from others (*xuxin xuexi bieren*)."[82]

On the other hand, years of low-profile engagement with the international community had garnered significant recognition from other powers and the international community. From the late 1990s onwards, China's external environment improved, with it gradually being regarded as playing an active and positive role in global affairs by most major powers and other international actors. In 2001, China successfully joined the WTO, marking a significant milestone in China's engagement with international society. In the years that followed, its persistence and patience would be rewarded, as its capacity for learning, cooperation, willingness to engage in realistic self-evaluation, and engagement with the international community improved. In particular, when Chinese leaders such as Jiang Zemin and Zhu Rongji claimed to follow international rules and made a series of promises regarding China's domestic reforms and opening up, Clinton regarded China's accession to the WTO as "the most significant opportunity that we have had to create positive change in China since the 1970s" and trusted that the WTO would "commit China to play by the rules of the international trading system."[83]

In this context, China genuinely felt the goodwill of its international peers and responded by earnestly engaging with the international community, embracing norms and assuming corresponding responsibilities.

China's ultimate acceptance of "international responsibility" illustrated how China sought to enhance its international prestige in a situation where it had previously underestimated itself. This pivotal case has been cited as evidence of the "positive reaction from the international community" to the affirmation of China's global identity.[84]

[79] Laurence J. Brahm, *Zhu Rongji Zhuan: Xiandai Zhongguo de Zhuanxin* (*Zhu Rongji and The Transformation of Modern China*), Ding Li trans. (Hong Kong: Open Page, 2022), pp. 29, 337.

[80] "22 Nation Poll Shows China Viewed Positively by Most Countries: China's Economic Growth Considered Positive but Not Its Increasing Military Power," Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), 5 March 2005.

[81] Dai Bingguo, *Zhanlve duihua: Dai Bingguo Huiyilu* (*Strategic Dialogue: Memoir of Dai Bingguo*) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2016), p. 61.

[82] Ibid., pp. 382–5.

[83] Tan Yeling, "How the WTO Changed China: The Mixed Legacy of Economic Engagement," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 100, No. 2 (2021), pp. 90–1.

[84] Hoo Tiang Boon, *China's Global Identity: Considering the Responsibilities of Great Power* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), p. 61.

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China proclaimed its aspiration to be that of a "responsible great power" in 1997 before later declaring its willingness to assume "regional responsibility" in the early 2000s.[85] According to some studies, Jiang highlighted the promotion of China's image as a "responsible major power" and regarded it as "one of the key themes of Chinese foreign policy."[86] Despite the debate surrounding the term "responsible stakeholder," proposed by Robert Zoellick in 2005, the discourse encouraged China's shouldering of international responsibilities across various issues and, in turn, improved the country's image. Importantly, China's pursuit of the responsibility discourse has largely been embraced by the international community, with some studies noting that China's practice and attitude in its assumption of international responsibilities have "begun to flourish."[87]

Accordingly, a noticeably positive interaction served as an expected foundation on which to shape China's international prestige policy. In July 2001, only three months after the Hainan Island incident on 1 April 2001, Colin Powell's visit to Beijing and his public declaration that Washington regarded China as "a friend" and desired a "friendly relationship"[88] provided China with additional political momentum to further improve its relationship with the USA. Subsequently, US representatives publicly commended China for its "constructive proposals and a moderate tone" alongside its efforts to "bridge the gap between developing and developed nations."[89] Encouraged by this improved international environment, China bolstered its internal drive to become a full member of the international community despite its modest evaluation of its own national capacity and shifted its preferences towards international cooperation rather than competition. Importantly, China expressed confidence in its current trajectory, emphasising the need for strategic patience and adhering to appropriate policies on reform, openness, and partnership.

Furthermore, China's self-restrained stance also played a significant role in its efforts to build international prestige. In this period, despite some Chinese viewing China as a "rising power" or "emerging great power," most Chinese people and Chinese government officials still insisted that China was a developing country.[90] Recognising its status as a developing country, China acknowledged the need for a prolonged period of catching up with its Western counterparts. Aspiring to become a strong and developed country, China understood the importance of learning from developed countries, sought to avoid unnecessary conflicts with the West and participated extensively in international society. Over the course of approximately two decades, China endeavoured to project an international image of peaceful ascent and development.[91] In November 2003, China proposed the concept of a "peaceful rise" to the world, sparking (sometimes contentious) debate over China's international development. Consequently, in an effort to dispel misunderstandings surrounding this pursuit of a "peaceful rise," China revised the term to "peaceful development" in official discourse in 2004.[92] In fact, until 2013–2014, the Chinese government had regarded China "more explicitly to acknowledge China's 'rising power' status."[93]

[85] Mao Weizhun, "Debating China's International Responsibility," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2017), pp. 173–210.

[86] Johnston, *Social States*, p. 98.

[87] Mao, "Debating China's International Responsibility," p. 203.

[88] Hoo, *China's Global Identityr*, p. 71

[89] Alan P. Larson, "China's Role in the World Economic System," Remarks to the Students and Faculty of the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), Beijing, China, 5 November 2003, https://2001-2009.state.gov/e/rm/2003/27026.htm.

[90] Pu Xiaoyu, "Controversial Identity of a Rising China," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2021), pp. 138–9.

[91] Barry Buzan, "The Logic and Contradictions of 'Peaceful Rise/Development' as China's Grand Strategy," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (2014), pp. 381–420.

[92] Zhao Jingfang, "Zhongguo heping jueqi bei wudu de yuanyin" ("Reasons of Misunderstanding China's Peaceful Rise"), *Xuexi Yuekan* (*Study Monthly*), Vol. 10 (2012), p. 39.

[93] Pu, "Controversial Identity of a Rising China," p. 139.

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When exploring the primary approaches and motivations behind China's integration into the global community as a responsible power and its willingness to assume more active roles in efforts to address international issues, learning from others emerges as its primary method. In contrast to China's response in the 1990s, Beijing received more goodwill and portrayed a more genuine image in its interactions with others. Throughout his administration, Hu Jintao reiterated that "China will assume more international responsibilities and actively participate in global affairs."[94] Beyond mere rhetoric, from the late 1990s onwards, China became increasingly involved in international organisations, well beyond what may have been expected given its level of development.[95] Additionally, China demonstrated significant compliance with international norms. Zhu Rongji emphasised that China would now follow international rules, insisting that this did not represent a compromise because following international rules is the duty of any responsible country.[96] In the 2000s, China became an active participant in WTO dispute resolutions, both as a complainant and as a respondent. During this period, China reached mutually agreed upon solutions in nine cases and fully complied with rulings in eight out of nine cases.[97] China's efforts to uphold the international order served to enhance its image and garner recognition. As Ann Kents argued, "China prefers to be seen as a part of the global consensus rather than a disruptor of hegemony."[98] Even some critical studies with political prejudice admitted that China "did fulfill the majority of the terms of its WTO accession within a few years" and found that roughly 70% of US firms surveyed in China felt that China's domestic business climate had improved "to a great extent" or "to a very great extent."[99] Through its discourse and deeds—in stark contrast to its reaction to external pressure in the 1990s—China demonstrated a genuine willingness to learn and integrate itself into international society. One study's findings show that, when using "responsible power" in official discourses, Chinese government officials mostly highlight China's "high status and potential prestige."[100]

Logically, China's compliance with international institutions may be argued to have resulted from a transformed perspective on the international order, the tangible benefits of globalisation and the intangible pursuit of international prestige. This "cognitive" shift was evident in Chinese expressions. In 2001, during a speech in France, Hu stated that developed countries were the primary beneficiaries of globalisation, while developing countries, including China, faced the risk of marginalisation.[101] However, a decade later, when discussing the role of a responsible power, China was portrayed as the greatest beneficiary of global integration from many perspectives.[102] Compared to the 1990s, the primary impetus of learning was a response not only to external pressures but also to internal aspirations and needs, including economic and even political aspirations. In this sense, adopting a learning-oriented approach to active engagement with the global community in pursuit of greater

[94] "Hu Jintao zai Zhongguo gongchandang di shiba ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao" ("Hu Jintao's Report on the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China"), *Xinhua Net*, 17 November 2012, http://www.xinhuanet.com//18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_113711665_12.htm.

[95] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2003), pp. 13–4.

[96] Brahm, *Zhu Rongji Zhuan*, p. 346.

[97] Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, "2015 Report to Congress on China's WTO Compliance," Washington, D.C., December 2015.

[98] Ann Kent, "China's International Socialization: The Role of International Organizations," *Global Governance*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2002), pp. 343–4, 349, 358.

[99] Tan, "How the WTO Changed China," p. 95.

[100] Mao, "Debating China's International Responsibility," p. 199.

[101] "Hu Jintao fuzhuxi zai Faguo guoji guanxi yanjiusuo fabiao yanjiang" ("Vice President Hu Jintao Gives Speech at French Institute of International Relations"), Foreign Ministry of People's Republic of China, 11 November 2001, http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/chn/zgyw/200111/t20011106_3281862.htm.

[102] Liao Lei and Xiong Zhengyan, "Liangda fenghui zhang xian Zhongguo liliang zaici zhanxian fuzeren da guo xingxiang" ("Two Summits Demonstrate China's Power, Showing the Image of 'Responsible Power'"), *Xinhua Net*, 16 April 2010, https://www.gov.cn/jrzg/2010-04/16/content_1584173.htm.

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prestige was not only rooted in China's national interests but also reflected in its evolving attitudes towards international institutions.

With good interaction filled with goodwill and self-restraint in maintaining the status quo between two major powers, the period from 2005 to 2012 is generally perceived to have witnessed "an unprecedented level of dialogue and policy engagement" between the USA and China.[103] It marked a new phase in China's peaceful development, wherein the self-positioning of its role as an international actor with increasing influence was elevated, and its position as a responsible major power was gradually recognised by other countries and the international community from a positive perspective. This trend seemingly set the stage for a markedly different period with regard to international prestige in the years following the mid-2000s.

The story of China's self-underrated prestige policy (N, P) has several implications for China's willingness to assume international responsibility, accede to the WTO and other international institutions and build a strong relationship between the two great powers, which finally improved China's international prestige—both from the perspective of China itself and from that of the international community. First, China's prestige policy in this period was constrained by path dependence in the preceding period and objective reality with regard to China's power, achievements and policies. A greater sense of prestige from its peers and the international community at large represented a better start in China's efforts to achieve strong relations and trigger positive motivations between powers. Second, China's self-underrated prestige policy required China to perceive itself in a pragmatic way. During this period, China still wanted to focus on its internal arena by solving domestic problems. For example, when negotiating WTO accession, Chinese leaders like Zhu Rongji emphasised "the domestic problems China confronted" rather than showcasing its achievements.[104] Third, this kind of prestige policy drew a boundary for China's assumption of international responsibility. Despite the international community evaluating China's international prestige more highly, China insisted that its responsibility should align with its power. China had been debating about "seeking great power status and shirking unwanted responsibilities," as Pu Xiaoyu pointed out that "China also has a strong incentive to signal a lower status to avoid taking on unwanted responsibilities."[105] Fourth, China's self-underrated prestige policy finally provided a positive motivation to resolve disputes over the most important targets in this period. For example, there had been disputes and conflicts over the construction of a good China–US relationship (e.g., the Belgrade Embassy Bombing incident, the Hainan Island incident in 2001, a series of counter-China activities by the Bush administration) and difficult accession to the WTO (e.g., the intentional manipulation of China's status by the USA).[106] Under these circumstances, Chinese leadership exhibited strong political willingness and strategic patience that extended beyond normal imagination to resolve disputes and achieve their aims. For instance, Jiang once had a public debate with Clinton over human rights, which was seen as "a sign of his strength, confidence, and international stature."[107]

Accumulating Prestige through Creativity in the Mid-2000s

The mid-2000s was host to an overrated level of prestige in China's promotion of its "peaceful rise" in the world. First, a series of significant political events, including China's successful hosting of the Olympic Games, increased level of participation in global affairs,

[103] Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p. 115.
[104] Brahm, *Zhu Rongji Zhuan*, p. 328.
[105] Pu, "Controversial Identity of a Rising China," p. 145.
[106] Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, pp. 62–3.
[107] Johnston, *Social States*, p. 97.

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and robust fiscal policies during the Financial Crisis made Beijing more attractive and indispensable in global politics.[108] Second, a positive image of China emerged from comparisons between China and the USA in global governance. Beijing was actively promoting international agreements on various issues (e.g., preventing weapons in outer space, cyberspace security, international peacekeeping, internet governance, South–South cooperation, climate change), whereas Washington had become more defensive on these fronts.[109] At the UN, China's voting patterns generally aligned with the majority, leaning towards maintenance of the status quo.[110] Additionally, China's influence and prestige were significantly enhanced by the generous foreign aid it provided during its transition into one of the world's most significant donors.[111] Consequently, China emerged as one of the most popular states in many polls, especially in Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia.

In fact, China was well-positioned to make significant strides in its political prestige after 2008. Many have argued that China gained significant international prestige and recognition in the first decade of the 21st century.[112] These developments led to a rapid rise in China's international prestige, reaching new highs and garnering years of significant media and academic attention.[113] The concept of the "G2"—a hypothetical collaboration that envisions the USA and China as the most influential states working together to address global issues—reflects China's undeniable role on the world stage.[114]

In hindsight, however, China's prestige in the decade starting in the mid-2000s may be most accurately characterised as overestimated given its still-developing capacity. Although not in mainstream theories, some scholars contend that its economic foundation and national capabilities did not adequately align with its expanding strategic demands and objectives.[115] This discrepancy between China's growing prestige and its inadequate capacity was highlighted domestically. Apart from the warning that "China remains predominantly inward-looking, with little interest in engaging with the outside world" and the potential danger of "strategic overreach,"[116] predominant arguments recognised the risks posed to China by the mismatch between its perceived prestige and its actual capacity,[117] cautioning that it was inadequately equipped to achieve its strategic goals.[118] Luo Jianbo, professor at the Central Party School, asserted that "Many countries view China as the saviour of the world economy … this vision reflects an immature mindset and unwarranted faith in our capacity, as the prosperity is not genuine."[119] From the outside, Robert G. Sutter

[108] Zhao Suisheng, *Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), p. 78.

[109] Steve Chan, Weixing Hu, and Kai He, "Discerning Revisionist and Status-Quo Orientations: Comparing China and the US," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2018), p. 624.

[110] Ibid., p. 638.

[111] Celia Hatton, "China's Secret Aid Empire Uncovered," *BBC*, 11 October 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41564841.

[112] Joshua Kurlantzick, *China's Collapsing Global Image* (Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), pp. 1–2.

[113] Alan Hunter, "Soft Power: China on the Global Stage," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2009), p. 373.

[114] Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Berslin, "China's 'New Type of Great Power Relations': A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?" *International Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (2016), p. 793.

[115] Pu Xiaoyu and Margaret Myers, "Overstretching or Overreaction? China's Rise in Latin America and the US Response," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (2021), pp. 40–59.

[116] Shi Yinhong, "Zhongguo zhanlve touzhi fengxian rizeng" ("The Risk of China's Strategic Overreach Is Increasing"), *Lianhe Zaobao* (*Joint Morning Paper*), 21 September 2016, https://www.zaobao.com.sg/special/report/politic/cnpol/story20160921-668655

[117] Xiaoyu Pu and Chengli Wang, "Rethinking China's Rise: Chinese Scholars Debate Strategic Overstretch," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (2018), pp. 1019–35.

[118] Yan Xuetong, "Waijiao zhuanxing, liyi paixu, yu daguo jueqi" ("Diplomatic Transformation, Interest Ranking and the Rise of Great Power"), *Zhanlve juece yanjiu* (*Journal of Strategy and Decision-making*), No. 3 (2017), p. 4.

[119] Luo Jianbo, "Zhongguo de jiushizhu xintai yao bu de" ("China Needs to Check Its Inflated National Ego"), *Financial Times* [Chinese Edition], 25 May 2017.

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argued in a 2005 report that China's influence was exaggerated in a pro-China "fever."[120] These analyses collectively point to the inflated sense of prestige enjoyed by China. In this scenario, ambitious institutional initiatives, a somewhat self-constrained approach and a cautious self-evaluation coexisted.

Therefore, China's prestige and capacity to influence the world were overestimated. This overrating primarily stemmed from optimistic external evaluations of China's future contributions to international society, its years of maintaining a low profile, and its willingness to address global crises.

In response, China adopted a creative approach to maintaining its international prestige and leveraging its overrated influence to maximise its power. During this period, China worked to amplify and project clout by establishing new narrative frameworks and institutions. The creation and international promotion of its "peaceful rise" demonstrated the way in which China utilised its accumulated prestige to lead the agenda and bolster its international status. Created by Zheng Bijian, a senior Chinese government advisor, this narrative has been widely employed by the leadership since 2004.[121] By highlighting the particularity of China's rise and rejecting the theory of hegemonic wars in history, the "peaceful rise" narrative aims to mitigate concerns over the looming China threat theory.[122] With its call for a "constructive and creative approach to enhance mutual trust," Beijing deliberately conveyed the message that China harboured no intentions of challenging the international order and that its ascent would contribute to rather than compromise global peace. Overall, as a main participant in and builder of the international system, the primary purpose behind China's prestige policy at this time was to use China's new global position to shape the rules and norms of major international organisations in a manner consistent with Chinese interests.[123]

The rationale of "peaceful rise" showcased how creativity was integrated into China's prestige-maximising strategy. On one side of this narrative was the argument that China's rise was different from those of its historical counterparts, such as Germany and Japan, which ended up fighting hegemonic wars.[124] China's embrace of the "peaceful rise" suggested that its leaders had learned from history that China must avoid the path of pre-World War II Germany and Japan as well as that of the Soviet Union in the Cold War and proceed along the path of peaceful development.[125] This drive to not repeat historic tragedies lies with China's integration into the international community and the benefits that it derives from the status quo.[126] Therefore, rather than seeing China as disadvantaged by the established US-dominated international system, Chinese leadership believed that China could take advantage of the benefits and public goods that it provided.[127] In this sense, it developed prestige as a supporter of the status quo and a benign rising power. On the other side of the narrative was an emphasis on China's peculiarity in terms of its domestic structure as an enabler of its peaceful rise. As Wen Jiabao, who first publicly endorsed this concept

[120] Robert G. Sutter, "China's Rise in Asia—Promises, Prospects and Implications for the United States," Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (2005), p. 5.

[121] Bonnie S. Glaser and Evan S. Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China: The Ascension and Demise of the Theory of 'Peaceful Rise'," *The China Quarterly*, Vol. 190 (2007), pp. 291–310.

[122] Hiroko Okuda, "China's 'Peaceful Rise/Peaceful Development': A Case Study of Media Frames of the Rise of China," *Global Media and China*, Vol. 1, No. 1–2 (2016), p. 125.

[123] Evan S. Medeiros, "China's International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification," Rand Corporation, Vol. 850 (2009), pp. 42–3.

[124] Guo Sujian, ed., *China's "Peaceful Rise" in the 21st Century: Domestic and International Conditions* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2006).

[125] Zheng Bijian, "China's Peaceful Rise and Opportunities for the Asia-Pacific Region," Speech at the Roundtable Meeting between Boao Forum for Asia and China Reform Forum, 24 April 2004.

[126] Glaser and Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China," p. 295.

[127] Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 213.

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as a senior leader, declared in late 2003, the success of China's peaceful rise was dependent on structural innovations and its own continued development.[128]

Its creativity was embodied in the claimed "new road" of China and Asia's future. By defining not only an ambition to rise but also one to adhere to a non-hegemonic path of peace, China uncovered an effective way to counter the negative influence of China threat theory and convince others with a positive image. In general, China's self-claimed exceptionalism from the Thucydidean argument and its willingness to operate as a status-quo-oriented country have been used to justify this new narrative. Amid overestimated prestige, the presentation of a peaceful rise in global affairs was predisposed by its limited national capacities.[129]

The theory of China's "peaceful rise" can thus be seen as a byproduct of its overestimation; the country leveraged its advantageous prestige to create a friendly environment despite its limited capacities. Faced with mounting concerns over the perceived threat posed by China's rise, the country opted to avoid direct confrontation and instead create a new narrative as a more viable and effective option. However, this scenario was not merely the product of China's narrative development in an advantageous situation. "Harmonious world" and "peaceful development" as the conceptual kin of "peaceful rise" represented how China utilised its influence to lead the international agenda in a manner based on its discursive innovations. As a defining discourse of Hu's diplomacy, "harmonious world" highlighted China's contributions in an uncertain and unstable world characterised by widening regional disparities, a tattered welfare system and mounting environmental concerns.[130] It turned down the traditionally reactive and combative view of foreign affairs as a "struggle," such as that espoused by anti-imperialism, but emphasised how intimately tied China had become with the international community.[131] It claimed that a binary logic dividing nations into either developed or developing categories overlooked differences in their own right. Instead, the "harmonious world" concept pursued a universal system that accepts the uniqueness of each nation, creating a balanced and peaceful system.[132] Similarly, the idea of "peaceful development," as an extension of "peaceful rise," inherited the logic that, unlike the aggressions of Western countries throughout history, China's development would represent a security guarantee to other countries as it ascends in the international system and would not entail military competition as a means of realising national revitalisation.[133] All of these narrative creations demonstrated the rationales behind it, which used China's exceptional history and characteristics to differentiate it from historical analogies of rising powers. It demonstrated a mixed attitude towards the existing world order, offering an alternative approach without challenging the status quo.

Overall, with an overestimated level of prestige, the strategy of employing creativity stemmed from a belief that establishing alternative institutions could enhance China's prestige without any need to challenge the status quo. Given China's rapid ascent to the status of the world's second-largest economy, it naturally sought greater prestige and status. This inflated perception of prestige, both domestically and internationally, reflected the illusion of a harmonious world in which prestige-building occurred without direct conflict. This perception held true in the late 2000s when geopolitical tensions and structural pressures between China and the USA had yet to fully materialise.

[128] Glaser and Medeiros, "The Changing Ecology of Foreign Policy-Making in China," p. 298.
[129] Ibid., p. 308.
[130] Zheng Yongnian and Sow Keat Tok, "Harmonious Society and Harmonious World: China's Policy Discourse Under Hu Jintao," *Briefing Series*, No. 26 (2007), pp. 1–12.
[131] Medeiros, "China's International Behavior," p. 50.
[132] Niall Duggan, "Harmonious World: It Seems It Was Only a Dream," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2017), pp. 328–9,
[133] Zheng Bijian, *China's Peaceful Rise: Speeches of Zheng Bijian 1997–2005* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), p. 11.

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Competing for Leadership amid Great-Power Rivalry in the 2010s

An overrated level of prestige in China's diplomacy arose after 2012. In November 2017, China officially declared that its "socialism with Chinese characteristics" had entered a "New Era" since the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012, marking a new historical direction (*lishi fangwei*) for China's development.[134] In this context, one aspect that demonstrated the novelty of this "New Era" was the "new phase in China's relationship with the world."[135] By December 2018, China's self-perception had reached new heights, with Chinese President Xi Jinping asserting that "China's international standing had never been higher and that it was moving closer to the centre stage of the world."[136]

China gradually came to recognise its own significance in global affairs—especially in global economic governance—and embraced its identity as a "great power." In November 2014, President Xi declared that "China must carry out great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics,"[137] meaning that China had officially launched a new roadmap of *Daguo Waijiao* (Great-Power/Major-Power Diplomacy). Some observers define China's great-power diplomacy not only as interactions between China and other major powers but also as diplomacy "rooted in China's own identity as a great power."[138] In essence, a new discursive framework was introduced: "major-power diplomacy." This framework legitimised China's efforts to proactively reform the international order, engage in ideological competition with the West, and assume greater responsibility for global affairs commensurate with its increased power and status.[139] Consequently, some argue that China transitioned from a more passive role to "showing greater initiative to actively promote its own agenda in shaping the US-China relationship."[140]

This heightened self-perception was starkly evident when Yang Jiechi, China's top diplomat in the 2010s, clashed with his American counterparts in Alaska in March 2021. Yang offered blunt criticism—"The US is not qualified to speak to China from a position of strength"—reflecting China's confidence and assertive stance bolstered by its strong record of economic development, solitary atmosphere of political development, and strong emergency system in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Observing the internal crises within the collective West and its generally inadequate responses to public health emergencies, Kevin Rudd remarked, "China now exudes infinitely more self-confidence than in years past."[141]

However, China's rising self-confidence did not garner the same level of appreciation from others in the international community. Many international scholars argued that China's newfound assertiveness stemmed from its heightened stake in global issues.[142] Observers suggested that China seemed to have adopted a stauncher and more "assertive" stance in international interactions relative to its previous position, sparking a new wave of concerns

[134] Xi Jinping, "Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui, duoqu xinshidai zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida shengli" ("Secure a Decisive Victory in Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society, Strive for the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era"), *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), 28 October 2017.

[135] "Renjian zhengdao kai xinpian" ("A New Episode of the Human Society in Right Direction"), *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), 22 July 2021, p. 5.

[136] Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society, Strive for the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

[137] "Zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi zai jing juxing" ("Central Foreign Affair Working Meeting Is Held in Beijing"), *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), 30 November 2014, p. 1.

[138] Chen Zhimin, "Zhongguo de waijiao chuangxin shifou xuyao waijiao geming" ("Does China's Diplomatic Innovation Require a Diplomatic Revolution"), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (*World Economy and Politics*), No. 12 (2014), pp. 37–51.

[139] Stephen N. Smith, "China's 'Major Country Diplomacy': Legitimation and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2021), orab002.

[140] Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p. 134

[141] Michael Smith, "Terse Alaska Meeting Ignites Anti-US Chinese Nationalism," *Financial Times*, 21 March 2021.

[142] Chen Dingding, Pu Xiaoyu, and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Debating China's Assertiveness," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2014), pp. 176–83.

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over the "China Threat."[143] However, some scholars disagreed with this "assertiveness argument," arguing that there was more continuity than change in China's foreign policy.[144] Nevertheless, a more ambitious China emerged, and it elicited increasingly nuanced perceptions from other nations. One indisputable fact remained: China's mounting influence and increasingly conspicuous participation on international platforms have revealed perceived disparities and captured global attention.

On the one hand, China began to perceive itself as an emerging major power or even a great power with the potential for international leadership on specific issues. The 19th Congress of the CPC emphasised China's "further rise in China's international influence, capacity to inspire, and ability to shape" as well as "its significant contributions to global peace and development."[145] China expressed its intention to play a larger role in international affairs, with some studies suggesting that China increasingly displayed "big power confidence" or embraced a "great power mindset."[146] These perceptions were rooted in China's glowing capacity and heightened self-awareness.

On the other hand, China's goodwill did not translate into a uniformly positive image among Western powers. In European and American narratives, China's image became progressively more "unfavourable," with an increasing number of negative news stories emerging around 2010.[147] For example, a 2013 survey from the Pew Research Centre indicated that, compared to 2011, Americans viewed China in "a markedly less favourable light."[148] Many citizens in Western countries hold relatively negative opinions of China, citing concerns over its so-called "unilateral" actions in international affairs, territorial disputes with neighbours and growing military power.[149] Since the mid-2010s, negative perceptions of China escalated in many regions, signalling a shift in citizens' perspectives regarding Beijing's prestige and international image.

As a result, China's international prestige policy was primarily shaped by two contrasting trends in the 2010s: a positive self-perception characterised by pride in its prosperous development and global influence; and a somewhat negative image constructed by Western public opinion, which has often vilified China.

In fact, China and other nations disagreed on the exact sources of its international prestige. China prioritised citing its rising power and successful development as crucial factors in its international prestige, the goal being to establish a superior position relative to its Western counterparts. China appeared to shift away from its previously low-profile approach and adopt a more prominent stance, both objectively and subjectively. Meanwhile, Western nations expected China to maintain a modest, benevolent image. However, China's subjective perception of its prestige did not necessarily align with how it was objectively perceived by others. Western nations struggled to counter China's new behavioural patterns and expressed concern that China's assertive international behaviour would negatively affect the international order. For example, some famous scholars in Europe and the USA, including

[143] Aaron Friedberg, "The New Era of U.S.-China Rivalry," *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2011.

[144] Alastair Iain Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2013), pp. 35–45; Björn Jerdén, "The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought into It," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 47–88.

[145] Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society, Strive for the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

[146] Hoo, *China's Global Identity*, p. 180

[147] It is necessary to note that China's international prestige is unequally distributed across different continents in addition to the holistic approach above. For example, in developing countries such as African states, China still enjoyed a very positive prestige according to some surveys. See Andrew Kohut, et al., "American's Global Image Remain Positive than China's," Pew Research Center, 18 July 2013, pp. 31–3.

[148] Jane Perlez, "In China and U.S., Mutual Distrust Grows, Study Finds," *The New York Times*, 18 July 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/18/world/asia/in-china-and-us-mutual-distrust-grows-study-finds.html.

[149] Kohut, et al., "American's Global Image Remain Positive than China's," pp. 31–3.

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Susan Shirk, Jonathan Holslag, and Trefor Moss, were invited to discuss China's international prestige in July 2016. They indicated that China's performance as a good global citizen, hard power, capacity to convince other leaders, and successful military modernisation could promote its prestige; meanwhile, differences in political culture and democracy, sharp economic slowdown, territorial disputes and some inadequate activities were likely to hamper China's international prestige.[150]

As a result, China encountered "the great divergence" when it came to its international prestige. Some scholars debated the reasons why China's international prestige had been questioned in Western public opinion, while China insisted that its actions would bolster its prestige in international society.

First, the academic and policy debate over China's assertiveness in the early 2010s exemplified the contentious dynamics between China and the West.[151] As anticipated, a confrontation arose in the mid-2010s, predominantly due to China's evolving prestige-seeking policy, which now had more competitive implications regardless of whether they were intended. Many recent studies argue that China has become a revisionist power.[152]

Second, China's ambitious launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the "century project" Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 alerted the West to truly consider their advantage and hegemony in the world. China has been accused of using foreign tools and economic statecraft to revise the status quo, challenge and attempt to overthrow the liberal international order—and even bid for hegemony.[153] China's progress in launching global initiatives finally triggered a sense of crisis in Europe and the USA.[154]

Third, the intensification of geopolitical competition and slowing economic growth prompted China to adopt a more assertive stance to safeguard its expanding interests and alleviate domestic pressures. While these initiatives were not intended to provoke conflict, they were pursued with greater determination and resolve. A significant turning point occurred in 2016 when the crisis in the South China Sea and arbitration rulings triggered a strong response from China. Consequently, geopolitical competition intensified, leading to a decline in China's image in many neighbouring countries. A new wave of the "China Threat" thesis gained traction across the Pacific Rim and even across Europe, with topics such as coercive diplomacy, debt traps, domestic interference, and human rights issues coming to the forefront.[155]

Fourth, the global pandemic and its political ramifications exposed more clearly China's competitive and prestige-seeking policies. From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the discourse war between China and the USA comprised manifold competitive interactions. In response to stigmatisation from the White House, China launched vaccine diplomacy and a series of international public safety cooperation mechanisms to enhance its prestige, particularly among countries lacking in vaccine production capacity. Moreover, faced with shortcomings in US vaccination policies, China openly criticised the USA as the "No. 1 failure in the fight against epidemics." In the face of ideological prejudice and attack, China's approach towards US allies also toughened. On the one hand, it adopted a confrontational

[150] China Power Team, "What Is the Source of China's International Prestige and Influence?" *China Power*, 27 July 2016, https://chinapower.csis.org/source-chinas-international-prestige-influence/.

[151] Chen, Pu, and Johnston, "Debating China's Assertiveness," pp. 176–83; Jerdén, "The Assertive China Narrative," pp. 47–88.

[152] Deng Yong, "China: The Post-Responsible Power," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2015), pp. 117–32.

[153] Lina Liu, "Beyond the Status Quo and Revisionism: An Analysis of the Role of China and the Approaches of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Global Order," *Asian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2021), pp. 88–109.

[154] Paola Subacchi, "The AIIB Is a Threat to Global Economic Governance," *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2015, https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/31/the-aiib-is-a-threat-to-global-economic-governance-china/.

[155] Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 22, No. 81 (2013), pp. 446–59; Deborah Brautigam. "A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme," *Area Development and Policy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1–14; Charlotte Gao, "Australia and China Spat Over Foreign Interference Escalates," *The Diplomat*, 15 December 2017.

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approach; on the other hand, it leveraged its substantial influence and economic scale to gain a diplomatic advantage.

Accordingly, in the mid-2010s, Chinese diplomacy increasingly leveraged its great power status and its corresponding prestige. China became more assertive in its responses to negative reactions from other countries, and some of its policies became more exclusionary. This shift was influenced by both internal and external perceptions. According to Thomas Christensen, this shift in assertiveness was particularly driven by mounting sensitivity to the international environment and a growing sense of insecurity.[156] From China's perspective, its foreign policy adjustments were often viewed as responses to the perceived injustices of the current international order; the West viewed them as a bid for hegemony. Here, it is clear that sense of security matters. China proposed the term "profound changes unseen in a century (*bainian weiyou zhi da bianju*)" in 2014 to describe the great-power transformation. Meanwhile, China changed its position regarding the period of profound changes, failing to mention its previous strategic judgement that "Peace and Development are the theme of this era (*heping he fazhan shi shidai zhuti*)"; it gradually changed its rhetoric from a "Period of Strategic Opportunities (*zhanlve jiyu qi*)" to a "New Period of Turbulence and Transformation (*dongdang biange qi*)." In line with these changes, it also referred to "a holistic approach to national security" and claimed to "coordinate development and security."[157]

China, aiming to rejuvenate its historic glory and modernise in a manner distinct from the West, sought to reclaim its historical status as a leading power.[158] Consequently, it gradually developed confidence in its unique approach to development—which it perceived as more effective than the Western model—and sought to assert its legitimate rights and interests (*zhengdang quanyi*). Some observers argued that China "seeks to present its development model as a very effective alternative to the traditional liberal free trade and democratic model of the West" in order to "actively promote its international prestige and influence."[159] In this process, China criticised the prejudice of the USA and its allies, grew more assured in its own choices, stirred nationalist sentiments, and approached international interactions with heightened vigilance, leading to a more competitive stance. In particular, Chinese nationalist sentiments played a significant role in throwing off the balance of China's perception of its international prestige, manipulating assertive rhetoric, national pride, and political prejudice to strengthen China's confidence in its own advantages; at the same time, they produced an increasingly positive self-evaluation with regard to its international prestige and, in turn, enlarged the perception gap between China and the West.[160]

The USA and its allies recognised the profound influence of China's ascent and harboured concerns regarding the potential decline of the West. Consequently, China's policies and measures were often viewed through a conflictual and even confrontational lens, with implicit or even presumed links to the hegemony or dominance of the international and regional order. Some research indicates that some assertive diplomatic rhetoric (e.g., "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy") "antagonizes the U.S. public and bolsters their support for aggressive

[156] Thomas J. Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing's Abrasive Diplomacy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (2011), pp. 54–67.

[157] Xi, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Comprehensively Building a Moderately Prosperous Society, Strive for the Great Victory of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era"; Xi Jinping, "Gaoju Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida qizhi, wei quanmian jianshe shehui zhuyi xiandaihua guojia er tuanjie fendou" ("Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive in Unity for the Comprehensive Construction of a Socialist Modernized Country"), *Renmin Ribao* (*People's Daily*), 26 October 2022.

[158] Xu Ying, "America's Perspective on China Has been Mistaken," *China's Daily*, 29 August 2023.

[159] China Power Team, "What Is the Source of China's International Prestige and Influence?" *China Power*, 27 July 2016, https://chinapower.csis.org/source-chinas-international-prestige-influence/.

[160] Xu Weifang, "Pride and Prejudice: The Dual Effects of 'Wolf Warrior Diplomacy' on Domestic and International Audiences," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241276250; Shaoyu Yuan, "Tracing China's Diplomatic Transition to Wolf Warrior Diplomacy and Its Implications," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 10, No. 837 (2023), pp.1-9.

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foreign policies toward China."[161] This antagonism ultimately led to widespread negative perceptions of China in Western public opinion and media[162] as well as a sense among scholars that China's "diplomatic activism" may face increasingly serious challenges and risks in public opinion.[163]

In summary, both China and the USA (along with its allies) became entrenched in inter-biased viewpoints, leading to a widening gap in their evaluations of each other's international behaviours. This fostered a sense of defiance, with each side convinced of their own correctness simply because the other side opposed it. Consequently, in the 2010s, China's international prestige was perceived positively by itself but negatively by Western peers, potentially exacerbating the strategic rivalry between the major powers. Compared to its previous path of socialisation and creativity on the global stage, China had to confront more conflicts directly in a highly competitive international arena. China faced some challenges in its efforts to bolster its prestige in the mid-2010s, as evident from its competitive mindset, which was clearly reflected in the structural competition between China and the USA across various domains. When viewed from various perspectives, each action may be interpreted through contrasting narratives, leading to significant distrust; this further contributed motivation to adopt a radical policy in the forthcoming years.

This vicious cycle has given way to China showing some hints that it would ignore the opinions of the West, accepting the prestige-related consequences. As declared by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, China will "'play along to the end (*fengpei daodi*)' if the United States is bent on suppressing the country … Chinese are never swayed by fallacies, deterred by intimidation or cowed by pressure (*buxinxie*, *bupagui*)."[164]

Conclusion

Prestige serves as a persistent universal motivator and informal ordering principle in international affairs. In the post-Cold War era, characterised by unpredictable shifts in the global balance of power, states' pursuit of influence and prestige has become increasingly significant in international politics, particularly for rising and resurgent powers.[165] The strategic competition between China and the USA may be framed as one for prestige.[166] Understanding China's pursuit of prestige through its diplomatic efforts can provide valuable insights into its international policies in the current era of uncertainty.

This study shed light on the logic and behavioural patterns guiding China's selection and implementation of prestige-oriented policies. Building on intersubjective and subjective dimensions, this study identified four basic types of prestige. By delineating typological categories based on perception and type of prestige, this paper made a significant contribution to the literature by elucidating the rationale behind changes in China's prestige policies.

[161] Xu, "Pride and Prejudice."

[162] China Power Team, "How Are Global Views on China Trending?" *China Power*, 15 February 2016, https://chinapower.csis.org/global-views/.

[163] Li Zhiyong, "Zhongguo 'fen fa you wei' waijiao de genyuan, xingzhi yu tiaozhan" ("The Origins, Nature and Challenges of China's Diplomacy of 'Striving for Achievements'"), *Guoji Zhanwang* (*Global Review*), No. 2 (2018), pp. 89–90.

[164] "Wang Yi tan zhongfang dui zhongmei guanxi de yuanze lichang" ("Wang Yi Talks about China's Principle and Position on China-US Relationship"), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 15 February 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbzhd/202502/t20250215_11555644.shtml; "China Will 'Play Along to the End' with U.S., Its Top Diplomat Says," *Reuters*, 15 February 2025, https://www.reuters.com/world/china-will-play-along-end-with-us-its-top-diplomat-says-2025-02-15/.

[165] Larson and Shevchenko, *Quest for Status*, p. 250.

[166] Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "A Quest for Joint Prestige: Rethinking the US-China Rivalry," *Global Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2018), pp. 80–5.

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Historically, studies on prestige have been hindered by conceptual ambiguity and insufficient explanations of the motives underlying prestige-seeking behaviour. By delineating four predominant approaches across different scenarios of prestige perception, this research explores the mechanisms behind the ways in which states perceive and respond to their international prestige. In the case of China, these two dimensions are inherently interwoven, as changes in either side can affect policy outcomes. Logically, in the context of underrated prestige, China has adopted certain norms to alleviate external pressure so that the deteriorating environment can be improved to facilitate China's immediate interests. In contrast, a learning approach may be identified in China's road to becoming a responsible power; this approach is not a tactical manoeuvre in the face of intimidating pressure but a transplanted diplomatic principle. Having enjoyed rising prestige after 2008, China was prompted by both internal and external perceptions to take a more active approach to making contributions. The adopted approach—creativity—presented China's global blueprint without bluntly challenging the status quo. Finally, as perceived antagonism grows higher and self-evaluation rises, a more competitive policy emerges that reflects the great power clash caused by contrasting internal and external evaluations of prestige. This study showed that four interrelated patterns illustrate China's logic surrounding and responses to the changing domestic and international environment. It not only provides a generalisable framework through which to understand the great power's prestige-seeking policy but also elaborates on the peculiarity of China's prestige-focused diplomacy.

Prestige and its diplomatic influence are becoming increasingly significant at the onset of Donald Trump's second term, which has given way to discussions of an international leadership transition creeping back into the policy limelight.[167] Washington's recent dealings in Ukraine and wavering alliance commitments have significantly eroded its prestige and unsettled its allies.[168] Meanwhile, achieving greater international supports, Beijing has advanced its global vision based on the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative; this shift points to a gradual yet consequential shift towards an order of mutual respect, coexistence, and non-interference.[169] Although the absence of the USA in global governance tilts the global balance further towards China's initiatives, maintaining stability in "the balance of prestige" requires a prudent stance. As Xi highlighted, China will actively participate in global governance, but "we have to live within our means."[170]

Through its theoretical advancement and empirical cases, this research made two notable contributions. First, it clarified the primary categories of prestige perceptions, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the diversity and specific policy implications associated with the pursuit of prestige rather than accepting a reductive, irrational approach. Second, it offered an innovative approach to understanding why and how China pursues prestige. Despite prestige being a fundamental driver of Chinese foreign policy, its role had not previously been comprehensively explored. By exploring four scenarios in modern Chinese diplomacy, this research not only developed analytical tools to summarise the country's primary approaches but also revealed the mechanisms behind its policy outcomes.

[167] Michael Schuman, "Trump Hands the World to China," *The Atlantic*, 19 February 2025, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/02/foreign-policy-mistake-china/681732/;
William Matthews, "Trump's 'America First' Foreign Policy Will Accelerate China's Push for Global Leadership," Chatham House, 14 November 2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/11/trumps-america-first-foreign-policy-will-accelerate-chinas-push-global-leadership.

[168] Jonathan Este, "Trump's Art of the Deal Horrifies Ukraine and Its Allies," *The Conversation*, 21 February 2025, https://theconversation.com/trumps-art-of-the-deal-horrifies-ukraine-and-its-allies-250461.

[169] Barry Buzan and Feng Zhang, "Multiple Modernities in Civilizational Perspective: An Assessment of the Global Civilization(s) Initiative," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (2024), pp. 104–26.

[170] Xi Jinping, "Tigao woguo canyu quanqiu zhili de nengli" ("Enhancing China's Capacity to Participate in Global Governance"), *Xinhua Net*, 24 September 2019, http://cn.chinadiplomacy.org.cn/2019-09/24/content_75240338.shtml.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers; they greatly appreciate the valuable comments and suggestions from Prof. Shi Bin, Prof. Tang Shiping, and Prof. Chen Zheng. In addition, the authors would like to offer thanks for the support from the National Social Science Fund of China (22AGJ012).

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2025, 18(3), 313–342, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poaf008, Article
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