

China's Self Conception, Struggle for Status, and New Assertiveness: An Analysis on China's Public Rhetoric on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)*

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Abstract

This article is a theoretical and empirical investigation on China's concerns for 'international status' in explaining China's 'new assertiveness' in the 2010s. While many relevant studies on China, since 2008, debate on whether China shifted to new, abrasive, assertive external policy, these studies are found to be rather limited in both theoretical and contextual rigor in identifying the actual mechanism where China's conception of its status and the world order plays a critical role in China's policy changes. For theoretical elaboration, this article develops an eclectic realist-constructivist

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framework of status competition on the basis of existing IR literatures, especially the works by Yong Deng (constructivist) and William C. Wohlforth (realist) on status competition. On the basis of the framework, this article devises testable hypotheses that can outline how China's conception of self-status is formed (main variables), changed, and influenced China's allegedly newly assertive external behaviors in the international system. For contextual rigor and testing of the status factor in explaining the *modus operandi* of China, the latter section of the article focuses on China's activities within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) - which many point out as the 'exemplary' case of China's new diplomacy - as the central empirical test-bed for the article's analysis.

Keywords: China, new assertiveness, status competition, realist-constructivism, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

I . Introduction

Upon the varying forecasts of cooperation and conflict between the longtime hegemon – the US – and the rising power – China, a significant portion of the international relations (IR) debate in the twenty-first century has hinged on determining whether China is a revisionist power against the existing US-led liberal world order. The phenomenon has been especially explicit surrounding China's 'new assertiveness' discourse that gradually emerged in the late 2000s, as China began to exercise its wealth and military power in the international arena.¹⁾ The realist camp in IR, on one hand, argued that China's alleged turn to the newly "abrasive, muscular,

or assertive” (Mastro 2015, 151) policy – in its territorial claims in the East and South China Sea, Taiwan issue and the increasing willingness to use its military forces up to this date (e.g. China’s interception of US Navy planes above the South China Sea in late 2014) – clearly manifests China as a revisionist power, where China’s zero-sum challenge against the US and the existing order becomes inevitable (Brezzezinski 2012; Friedberg 2015). Many neoliberal institutionalists and liberalists in the IR discipline, in contrast, disputed the realists’ view, claiming that China’s intricate economic ties to the US and the world, as well as China’s gradual adaptation to the Western norms and institutions, altogether make revisionism also costly to China (Ikenberry 2012; Fingar and Jishe 2012; Reeves 2013).

After all, however, it is now widely accepted that neither of the two perspectives accurately capture the *modus operandi* of China’s ‘new assertiveness’ in the late 2000s: While the realists and liberalists draw a dichotomous line between China’s revisionist versus conformist take against the existing international order, China actually reveals a complex mixture of revisionism and compliance against the existing order. Regardless of its ascent in material capabilities, China continues to restrict its revisionist turn to the outright use of forces, comply with the existing international

1) According to Alastair Iain Johnston (2013, 14-32), the new assertiveness debate emerged upon the key seven events during 2009 and 2010: 1) the Copenhagen Summit on Climate Change; 2) US arms sales to Taiwan; 3) Dalai Lama’s visit to the US; 4) China’s stating of the South China Sea as its “Core Interest” for the first time; 5) reaction to US carrier deployment to Yellow Sea; 6) Diaoyuda/Senkaku incident; and 7) response to South Korea Yeongpyeong incident.

norms and institutions (although selective), while at the same time gradually use multilateral diplomacy to enhance the legitimacy of its own values, political-economic system, and world vision.

Recently, indeed, many studies have coined the terms like “gradual modifier” (Park 2014) to capture the reality of China’s actions. And most importantly, a new strand of studies focusing on China’s ‘struggle for status’ in international arena has begun to explore non-traditional IR descriptions for China’s new assertiveness. In specific, scholars like Yong Deng have been seeking to break a new ground in accounting for China’s rise and prospectus of the US-China rivalry. Exploring into the sociology and psychology disciplines, Deng (2008) argued that the states’ non-material and social concern for “status” and “international recognition” functions as an independent factor (aside from material payoffs) to China’s persistent resistance to the predominant realist proposition, that China’s rise (power transition between the US and China) will be shattering of the existing system. Given China’s increasing sensitivity to its recognition in the international community, China is mitigating its unilateral material quests, becoming more willing to commit to the existing international standards, according to their logic (Deng 2008; Larson and Shevchenko 2010).

Intrigued by these new researches’ quest on the notion of ‘status,’ the main purpose of this research is to extend the discussions further and excavate any theoretical and empirical limitations that are to be remedied in these literatures.

For a brief preview, this article is composed of two main parts. First, this article begins from the discussions on two major limitations in Deng's piece: that the literature 1) entails disputable preconceptions on the realist paradigm, as well as the shortcomings in testable hypotheses on the workings of the status factor; and 2) lack in its contextual rigor in process-tracing and un-blackboxing of the actual linkage between China's conceptualization of its status and change in its policy. While due justification is elaborated later, this article draws a comparison between Deng's (2008) and William C. Wohlforth's status competition model (2009) to devise testable hypothesis on the workings of the status factor: What forms China's conception of its status?; how and why does it change and become implemented into actual external policies?

Then, for contextual rigor, the latter section of the article proposes the testing of the hypotheses and thickening of the causal mechanism between China's status concerns and policy change – through an empirical focus on China's behaviors within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). To clarify, the driving questions are: To what extent is China's concern for international recognition and status valid in the context of China's external policy within the SCO? What are the main variables determining China's conception of self-status? How and why did China's external policy, reflected in the SCO, change in the 2010s? What is the role of China's perception and concern for its status in the international arena upon these changes?

II. China's Self Conception, Status Competition, and China's New Assertiveness

As aforementioned, Yong Deng's *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (2008) is one of the most exemplary literatures, which explored into the sociology and psychology disciplines to argue that the states' non-material and social concern for "status" and "international recognition" better explains why China continues to be unconducive to the predominant realist propositions.

To clarify, the foundational question in Deng's research can be summarized as 'what explains China's contemporary struggle for positive status or self image in the international sphere?' In flat methodological terms, Deng placed China's contemporary non-revisionist external policy as the dependent variable for the study's investigation. And as for the independent factors, Deng, like many other non-realists, incorporated the social identity theory (SIT) to posit how China's non-material concern for prestige and recognition in the international community motivates China's sensitivity to mitigate its unilateral material quests and take more responsibility for the existing international standards (Deng 2008; see also, Larson and Shevchenko 2010). Yet, it should be stressed that Deng did not claim for a complete disregard for the material factors. Instead, the foundational contribution of Deng's work is, as he stated, the illustration of China's contemporary quest for status as "a function" of its interests in both of its domestic/internal

“material wellbeing” and “international recognition” (Deng 2008, 2) – “an amalgam of power, security, and social recognition” (Deng 2008, 21). In like fashion, Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko (2010) also defined China as “status seeker” and discussed China’s concerns on its relative status and disposition for prestige as the key complementary variable to the material components of power.

These researches’ elaborations on the states’ social concerns indisputably capture a fuller landscape of China’s contemporary external behavior. Nonetheless, alike any other scientific literatures that stimulate new discussions, inspirations and questions upon their findings, the rest of this section of the article will explore how these literatures can be also put to further challenge and debate when it comes to theoretical and contextual scrutinization of the discourse.

1. Status, Material or Social Construct? Theoretical Debates

Theoretically speaking, first and foremost, one of the main criticisms on Deng’s piece was that while Deng seeks to divulge the limitations of the realist paradigm, in particular, and remedy the “problem of fixation on [states’ disposition for] power” (2008, 8), Deng also does not fully answer to what extent the social concern for recognition is distinctive or independent of the material concerns. Put differently, as Deng himself writes that the status is about the states’ concerns for both “material wellbeing

and international treatment” (2008, 2), some of the critiques have gone further to argue that China’s self-control in outright assertive measures is the result of China’s calculation of its material capabilities and potential cost of its revisionist actions, that can still be explained by the traditional balance of power logic (Wang 2009, 178). Similar criticism would also apply to Larson and Shevchenko, as they concluded that the status continues to be “in large part based on military and economic power” and that even in the non-material realms, status cannot but also entail the consideration for “traditional geopolitical” conception of power (2010, 72).

By reserving the realist factors as necessary to their thesis on status concerns, these literatures indeed leave ample room for the criticism that realism is being smuggled back in frequently throughout their discussions. While this article does not necessarily concur with the criticism, one theoretical drawback that is shared among not only the above status literatures, but also these critiques, is the seemingly rigid assumption that the key tenets of realism are unique to the tradition. Namely, scholars like Deng are preoccupied with the aim to “reject” the key principles of the mainstream realist paradigm - especially the assumption that the state is a unitary actor, seeking to maximize their material capabilities (Deng 2008, 2, 13). The realists’ critiques against Deng downplay the status as to be simply a form of zero-sum positional conflict that is *derivative* of material capabilities (Gilpin 1981; Schweller 1999; Wilkins 2005). However, if we turn to the

phenomenal discussion by J. Samuel Barkin (2003) on “Realist Constructivism,” there is “no reason” to believe that the realists’ tendency to reduce the idea of power to quantitative and material measures is only inherent in the realist tradition (Barkin 2003, 330). All the more, as Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravscik (1999) famously posed “Is Anybody Still a Realist?,” a closer look into the realist paradigm reveals that the later generations of the tradition have gradually taken up the non-material factors as to be indispensable for a complete understanding of power and its multifaceted dimensions (see for example Walt’s balance of threat theory, 1985; Van Evera 1998; also, Lasswell and Kaplan 1950; Strange 1987; and Baldwin 1989). The constructivists also, vice versa, as Barkin examined, “explicitly accept that power matters in international relations” (2003, 329). Although scholars like Alexander Wendt (1987) initially critiqued against realism, many latter constructivists have worked to forge a critical balance between the material and cognitive/subjective/non-material understanding of international relations (see for example Rousseau 2006; Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007; and Buzan et al. 1998).

Aside from the contentious debate on what is and what is not the realist principles, this article finds that a more weighty theoretical shortcoming can be found in how Deng and others’ elaboration on ‘status concerns’ lack in any concretely testable and falsifiable hypotheses. Since the aim of Deng’s research focused on *ex-post* explanation of China’s current mitigated-revisionist external

behavior, China's 'concern for status' tends to become a static and descriptive explanatory factor. In specific, although Deng suggests that "China's status question is a function of the international... great-power politics, and China's self-definition of identity and interests" (2008, 15), Deng leaves the latter as a blackbox at large. Paying less attention to the process-tracing and concrete scrutinizing of the actual variables and causal mechanism behind the Chinese elites' self-conception of its status (identity), the research is designed to provide little room for theoretical maneuver over several questions, such as what would alter the nature of China's concern for status. Related, can we warrant that China's struggle for positive image and status will be always less conflictual? What is the probability that the concern for status may turn China's rise conflictual? Without theoretical and testable stipulation of the key variables behind China's status concerns, these questions remain out of the reach.

In close relation, the blackboxing of the formulation and workings of China's status concerns has significant repercussion on these literatures' lack in their contextual rigor. Many critiques have concurred, for instance, that these studies fall short of concrete depiction on how China's preference for international status is translated into its foreign policy in reality (Contessi 2009, 871). Although Deng makes a convincing correlation between China's status concerns and its gradual adjustment to the international human rights regime, turn towards multilateral diplomacy within the organizations such as the Six Party Talks,

ASEAN, SCO, and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, along with its restrained approach to Taiwan issue (Deng 2008), the actual linkage between China's conceptualization of its status and such adaptive policy change remains untapped.

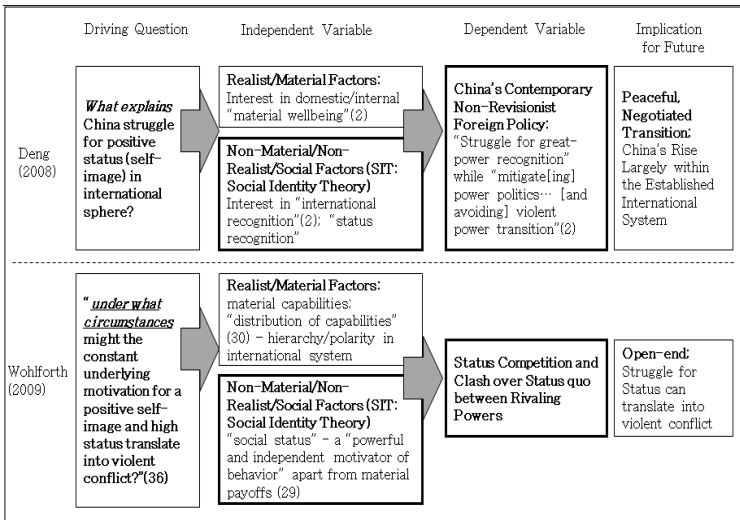
2. Wohlforth's Status Competition Framework for China's New Assertiveness

That said, this article proposes that a coalescence between the aforementioned Deng's work (2008) on China's status quest and William C. Wohlforth's status competition model (2009) can open up a new possibility to add both theoretical and conceptual rigor to the debate on China's contemporary struggle for status. Attention to public rhetoric studies is also suggested.

Although Wohlforth also incorporated the social identity theory (SIT) and argued how the "dubious... motivation" for "social status" functions as a "powerful and independent motivator of behavior" (2009, 29), the differences in Wohlforth's design of its question and research structure have been foundational in enabling the work's in-depth theoretical twist on China's status concerns discourse. As summarized in <Figure 1>, Wohlforth's driving question was in essence the following: "under what circumstances might the constant underlying motivation for a positive self-image and high status translate into violent conflict?" (2009, 36). While Deng's scope of research focused on the specific contemporary phenomenon of China's non-revisionist behaviors (dependent

variable), Wohlforth’s question entailed the following questions: When and why would China concern for status? What is the probability that the concern for status may turn conflictual? Can we warrant that China’s struggle for international recognition will be always less conflictual? Additionally, Wohlforth considered not only the contemporary US-China competition, but also the behaviors of rivaling powers in the mid-19th century Crimean war, and the late Cold War struggles between the US and Soviet Union.

〈Figure 1〉 China’s Struggle for Status: Discussions and Logical Frameworks



Some may argue that Wohlforth’s piece is a realist approach to status discussion. Indeed, Deng, himself, made a reference to Wohlforth as a representative figure of the realist paradigm - that

Wohlforth is addressing “status” as simply “a form of zero-sum” *derivative* of material capabilities (2008, 13). However, as <Figure 1> surmises, a close reading of Wohlforth’s logic indicates how such categorization becomes highly disputable: According to Wohlforth, not only is the concern for status a “powerful and independent” factor to China’s behaviors, apart from the “material payoffs” (2009, 29), his main logic is that the states’ non-material “basic disposition” for status and recognition is a key complementary factor to the concern for relative material capabilities. He argues that the non-material concept of status functions as a distinctive factor that aggravates the probability of status competition and clash over status quo between the rivaling powers, which simultaneously arises from the narrowing of the gap in their material capabilities: “Once linked to status,” issues often become “indivisible and thus unavailable... for possible intermediate bargains” (Wohlforth 2009, 33).

Moving on, another main rationale for incorporating Wohlforth’s framework is that his analysis put forth testable hypotheses and theoretical formulations on China’s pursuit for status. Above all, upon the foundational premise that there is a “basic disposition” of great powers for “status competition” - often “similar but upward” trend in the competition between rivaling powers (Wohlforth 2009, 37), most profoundly, Wohlforth puts forth a working hypothesis that the rivaling powers are more likely to compete for status and clash over the status quo when there are “ambiguous hierarchies” (Wohlforth, 30); that the dissatisfaction of the rivaling powers

“arises not from dominance itself but from a dominance that appears to rest on ambiguous foundations” (Wohlforth, 37). If we are to tailor these hypotheses to better attend to the US-China rivalry, we can come down to the following hypotheses for test: First, given the “basic disposition” for higher status, China’s conception of self status is dependent on a constant reflection and cognitive conceptualization of US’s status in the world order. Second, China is more willing to engage in status competition with US when China perceives an ambiguous hierarchy between the two countries. Differently put, the recent new assertiveness phenomenon is the result of the changes in China’s conception of self status in the world order and the increasing ambiguity in the hierarchy (be it in perceptual or material in nature) between US and China.

Lastly, as for the necessary empirical sites to test these statements, this article finds the public rhetoric studies on the key Chinese official figures and ministries (Chinese elites) will prove valid. As their statements are the empirical “site(s) of invention” for the elites’ collective identity and rhetoric “to explain, justify and support” their policies (Goodnight 2006, 249), the process-tracing of their “communicative action” (Payne 2007, 510) and “all speech acts” will prove “critical” in identifying the values promoted by the participants (Krebs and Patrick 2007, 36).

Summing up, the rest of the article will focus on two major tasks: First, test above principles/hypotheses to un-blackbox the workings of China’s status concerns and competition; second,

explore the linkage between China's conceptualization of its status and actual change in its policy through empirical study on the Chinese elites public statements.

III. Case Study: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

To get to the point, this article proposes to fulfill the two tasks – testing of the hypotheses and thickening of the causal mechanism between China's status concerns and actual policy change – through an empirical focus on China's behaviors within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The main rationale is that the unfolding of debate within the academia and media on the SCO, since its foundation in June 2001, has come to be a microcosm of the current debate on China's increasing status concerns, 'new assertiveness,' and its ultimate intentions in retrospect to the existing international order.

Originally, the embryo of the institution formed in 1996 when China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (current SCO members except Uzbekistan) came to form "Shanghai Five" as a channel of dialogue to resolve their national security and border demarcation issues that stemmed from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although the Shanghai Five became institutionalized into the form of SCO in 2001, undergoing a rapid institutional growth as it adopted a charter in 2002,²⁾ the evaluations in the early 2000s were often met with general disdain and suspicion for

the longevity of the organization (Hessbruegge 2004; Blank 2005; Song 2014). Yet, in mesh with China's rise and increasing preeminence within the SCO, marked by the establishment of the SCO's Secretariat in Beijing in January 2004, as well as the first joint military exercise between China and Russia under the SCO framework – Peace Mission 2005 – the discourses on the SCO began to shape upon whether the SCO is a key revisionist, anti-Western, and anti-US vehicle to advance China's status and sphere of influence in the world politics (Yuqun 2007; Qingguo 2007).

Resembling the aforementioned landscape of the ongoing contentious debate on China's revisionist struggle for status versus status quo interests, a distinctive polarization of the assessment of the SCO can be sighted since the late 2000s: On the one end of the spectrum, the experts like Mary Dejevski and US state department official Evan Feigenbaum concluded in 2009 that the SCO seemed “to have vanished from the scene,” and that “concrete achievements” of the SCO are hard to be seen, respectively (Byrnes 2015; see also Blank 2005; Plater-Zyberk and Monaghan 2014); in a stark contrast, others have defined the organization as fundamentally revisionist, placing emphasis on the late 2000s' China-led initiatives to expand the scope of the organization to address the 2008 global financial crisis, Afghanistan issue, as well as the

2) The first SCO Charter was signed in 2002, which addresses 26 articles that outline the goals, principles, organization structure and operation principles. The SCO also further institutionalized heads of states annual summits, ministerial level regular meetings, and joint working groups during this period.

increasing Chinese military participation in the SCO joint exercises. Placed in between the opposite ends, scholars like Deng sorted the SCO as the “epitome of China’s new diplomacy” (2008, 221) – China’s reliance on “multilateral diplomacy” to elevate its status and recognition within the Central Asian region and “beyond” (2008, 217-222), without bringing shattering changes to the existing international system (see also, Fei 2010); a reflection of China’s strategic mitigation of its power politics within the multilateral norms of the international system (Global Times 2014; Tiezzi 2014; Weitz 2014).

Meanwhile, these literatures on China and its SCO policy seem to be falling in similar trap to Deng’s theoretical and contextual blackboxing of the linkage between China’s increasing status concerns and changes in its external policy. Differently put, the process-tracing and proving of how and why China’s growing status concerns are translated into its maneuver within the institution remains unaddressed. Against these grounds, this article proposes the SCO as a concrete empirical test-bed for the article’s hypothesis on the workings of China’s status conception and foreign policy behaviors. The rest of this article will be devoted in presenting the findings to the following questions: To what extent is China’s pursuit for international status valid in the context of the SCO? What are the main variables determining China’s conception of self-status? How and why did China’s external policy, reflected in the SCO, change in the 2010s? What is the role of China’s

perception and concern for its status in the international arena upon these changes?

IV. China's Moderate Status Concerns (2001-2004)

For preview, the main findings from the article's analysis on China's behaviors within the SCO are that China's self conception of its status is composed of two parts: 1) perceptual and material self-evaluation on China's level of rise in capabilities (internal assessment) and 2) conceptualization of US's status and capabilities in the world order (external assessment). The more the gap narrowed between the two, China proved to be more dynamic and active in its struggle for higher status within the SCO and beyond.

1. Period of Unambiguous Status Hierarchy: Unchallengeable US; China's Seeking of the Status as US-Follower (Early 2000s)

To elaborate on the findings, first and foremost, China remained relatively moderate in its status concerns during the incipient period of the SCO in the early 2000s (approximately in the years 2001-2004). As the domestic elites' statements and documents have revealed, China's portrayal of its own capabilities was markedly 'inferior' to the 'primacy of the US in the world order. The 2002 Chinese defense white paper (hereafter, DWP), for

instance, reflected the domestic consensus that the US-led “hegemonism and power politics still exist” in the world order. With repetitive emphasis on the *unambiguous* understanding of hierarchy in the world order, the statements reassured China’s moderate pursuit for higher status: Defining its place in the world as a country “yearn[ing] for lasting peace” and “follow[ing]” the road for peaceful development, “China will never seek hegemony, nor will it join any military bloc or crave for any sphere of influence” (Ministry of National Defense 2004). China proved even less willing to engage in the struggle for higher status, given its preoccupation with local and regional interests to preserve its sovereignty and focus on the problems on the internal “unity, territorial integrity and security” in its vicinity (Ministry of National Defense 2004) - the multi-ethnic concerns, safeguarding of social stability, Taiwan issue, as well as the border area concerns, to name few.

Given the unambiguous hierarchy between US and China, as Wohlforth suggested, China’s assertiveness and struggle for status is hard to be seen in China’s behaviors within the SCO. The most distinguishable phenomenon here is China’s *passive* and *reactive* comments on the neighboring countries’ growing suspicions on China’s activities within the SCO. For example, the 2002 DWP depicts China’s consistent efforts to reassure that the SCO is “a partnership rather than alliance,” “a permanent regional anti-terrorist organization” to address the world’s concern on counterterrorism activities (Ministry of National Defense 2004).

Also, the SCO is mentioned in the last section of the discussions on APEC, ASEAN+3, and ARF as the examples of Chinese multilateral efforts in maintaining international peace. Likewise, state counselor Tang Jiaxuan emphasizes the regional orientation of the SCO – that the activities are restricted to the scope of “regional security and stability,” “promoting good-neighborliness” in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2004). Despite the actual achievements in the deepening of the SCO institution in the period (SCO Charter and the first joint exercise), as in <Table 1>, Chinese president Hu Jintao retains the moderate comments in the assessment of the SCO. Foreign minister Li Zhaoxing at the SCO foreign ministers’ conference in 2003 also provides a moderate congratulatory remark that the SCO requires far more deepening of the institution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2003). Overall, China’s conception of the unambiguous status hierarchy is also prevalent in the form of reactive remarks on the SCO.

<Table 1> Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the early 2000s

Year	Members	Main Issues/Meetings/Missions
2001	+ Uzbekistan	- Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) established (Uzbekistan joined), 14-15 June 2001 (Head of State, 1st Summit) - Heads of Prime Ministers, 13-14 September 2001, Almaty
2002		- Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 7 January 2002 - Ministers of culture meeting, 11-12 April 2002 - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 26 April 26 2002 - Ministers of economy and trade, 28-29 May 2002

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Head of State (2nd Summit), 7 June 2002, St. Petersburg - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 5 September 2002 - Ministers of defense meeting, 20 November 2002 - Ministers of transport meeting, 20 November 2002
2003		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 29 April 2003 - Head of State (3rd Summit), 28-29 May 2003, Moscow - 'Cooperation 2003' SCO Anti-Terror Exercise - China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (First exercise within SCO framework, China's first multilateral joint military power) 6-12 August 2003 Location: Kazakhstan (Ucharal) and China (Ili) Total Size: Over 1,000 troops - Ministers of economy and trade, 5-6 September 2003 - Ministers of defense meeting, 10 September 2003 - Ministers of transport meeting, 10 September 2003 - Heads of Prime Ministers, 23 September 2003, Beijing - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 23 October 2003
2004	+ (Observer) Mongolia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 15 January 2004 - Ministers of foreign affairs meeting, 23 April 2004 - Establishment of the SCO Secretariat - Heads of Prime Ministers, 23 September 2004, Bishkek

Source: Collected from Chung (2006) and Fen (2011).

Furthermore, China's military activities in the framework of the SCO also remained relatively moderate, especially in comparison to the latter military drills in the late 2000s: The Cooperation 2003, for instance, as listed in <Table 1>, was China's first time military joint exercise within the SCO. Nonetheless, especially in

comparison to the Peace Mission 2005, which took place two years later, the 2003 exercise involved far smaller number of troops in the drill. In numerical terms, the total number of troops from the five SCO states, except Uzbekistan, was only above 1,000 in the 2003 exercise, while the Peace Mission 2005 involved a total number of 10,000 troops, where 7,000 Chinese troops and 1,800 Russian troops participated.

To recap, this specific time period repeatedly portrayed the unambiguous hierarchy in the US-led unipolar order, which lied in close linkage to China's pursuit to establish its status as a 'follower' to the existing international system. The moderate and low-profile struggle for status stimulated China to keep its strategies and goals within the SCO also modest and unshattering of the world order.

V. China's Reassessment of Self and Struggle for Status (2005-2012)

Intriguingly, however, China's moderate representation of its self status and low-profile policies within the SCO begin to depart for a change since the year 2005.

1. Reevaluation of Self Status and Increasingly Ambiguous Status Hierarchy

As the public statements illustrated, the period marked China's gradual engagement in reassessment of its self status in the world order in consecutive to the relative advancements in its capabilities. The 2006 DWP, for instance, is a clear example where China credited its own advancements – that “Never before” has China's position in the “rest of the world” became crucial (Ministry of National Defense 2007). The 2008 DWP also reflects China's acknowledgement on its own development – that “The achievements made in China's modernization drive have drawn worldwide attention.” Additionally, in 2010, the public rhetoric also outwardly acknowledge that China is now “at a new historical point” where it “has never been more closely connected with those of the international community” (Ministry of National Defense 2011).

Another key stimulus behind China's such reevaluation in its status seems to be China's conceptualization of the US' relative decline in its place in the world order: Beginning with a general statement that the world is “moving toward multi-polarity” in 2006 (Ministry of National Defense 2007), the 2010 DWP is as explicit as to state that “multi-polar world is irreversible” (Ministry of National Defense 2011). In the 2012 DWP, China further depicts the world order as to be at a “new historical starting point” where China's armed forces need to undertake “noble and lofty” missions, assuming responsibilities that are “paramount and honorable” (Ministry of National Defense 2013).

In the midst of such increasingly outward positional prestige

remarks on part of China, the process seems to be again upholding Wohlforth's hypothesis that states are more likely to engage in status competition when there is ambiguous hierarchy between the rivaling powers. Indeed, the public statements have far more openly, and with less moderation, acknowledged China's place in the world: that China is "playing an active and constructive role," with "notably elevat[ed] international position and influence" (Ministry of National Defense 2009). Moreover, although China continued to uphold the "banner of peace, development and cooperation," as well as its commitment to refrain from "seek[ing] hegemony or engage[ing] in military expansion" (Ministry of National Defense 2008; 2010), China began to more openly react and criticize the US: In 2011, the Chinese elites retorted the US's decision to annually release the "Report on military and security developments involving the People's Republic of China"; that the US is "exaggerat[ing]," "pointing fingers at China's rightful and normal development" of military - an attempt to disseminate the "China military threat theory" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2011).

All the more, the period is explicit in how China's active engagement in the struggle for status is translated into more overt and claiming rhetoric and strategy on the SCO activities. Starting in 2006, China depicted the SCO to be "enter[ing] a new stage of substantive growth" (Ministry of National Defense 2007). In relation, China's official responses against the criticisms on the SCO activities are also notable: While president Hu, for instance, continued to emphasize the transparency of the SCO activities and peaceful

intentions, he responded to the increasing international suspicion on the organization by stating that “What the SCO has achieved is there for all to see” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2008); that although the SCO is becoming ever more “an intriguing subject for some in the West,” “Everything on the agenda of the SCO main bodies is transparent” (The Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2009a). The statements also revealed China’s objection against the West’s intervention: The activities of SCO are reflection of the “desire to find [their] own solutions to the challenges facing the region,” and therefore “should cause no concern to those who share the goals of making the world and the Eurasia more secure...” (The Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2009b). Simply put, the tone of the statement is a distinctive reflection of a change from the previous *reassuring* statements on its peaceful intentions to a more *active, claiming, and refuting* responses.

For more empirical evidences, a closer look on the SCO joint military exercises provides important references for the changes. To start with, the Peace Mission 2005 (18-25 August 2005, in Russia) drew international attention as the first SCO joint military exercise performed by the two largest members of the SCO – China and Russia – with the largest number of troops involved in the exercise. As listed in the <Table 2>, the period onwards saw a consecutive joint military exercises among the SCO member states, where the participation by China and Russia took a large portion of these exercises. Certainly, many scholars and experts have observed the increasing military presence of Chinese and

Russian troops in these exercises, stirring the suspicion on the intentions of China and the SCO as an anti-West security organization. Moreover, although the 2007 Peace Mission involved a smaller number of troops, a total of about 6,500 troops, the exercise again received a lot of attention for it being the first joint exercise bringing together troops from all SCO members – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, 9-17 August 2007. The mission is also known to have included about 80 aircrafts and 500 combat vehicles from Russia and China. The next Peace Mission followed during 22-26 July 2009, where China and Russia again brought together about 2,600 troops (1,300 troops from each). The Peace Mission 2010 proceeded among China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, with a total of 5,000 troops, 9-25 September 2010. These 2010 participants again joined for the Peace Mission 2012, but this time with a smaller number of 2,000 troops, 8-14 June 2012.

〈Table 2〉 Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Peace Missions
(2005–2012)

Year	Participating Members	Main Issues/Meetings/Missions
2005	China, Russia (First time)	Peace Mission 2005 - 18-25 August 2005 - Location: Vladivostok(Russia), China - Total Size: Approx 10,000 troops (7,000 Chinese, 1,800 Russian troops)
2007	China, Russia,	Peace Mission 2007

	<p>Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (All members - first and last time)</p>	<p>-9-17 August 2007</p> <p>-Location: China (Urumqi) and Russia (Chelyabinsk)</p> <p>-Total Size: 6,500 troops</p> <p>-500 combat vehicles from Russia and China, about 2,000 Russian and 1,600 Chinese personnel, two paratrooper companies (around 100 men each) from Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, and a platoon from Kyrgyzstan.</p> <p>-Hardwares: China - 16 Mi-17 transport helicopters, 16 Z-9 attack helicopters...</p> <p>-Other states including Iran, Pakistan, India and Mongolia were present as observers.</p>
2009	<p>China, Russia</p>	<p>Peace Mission 2009</p> <p>-22-26 July 2009</p> <p>-Location: Khabarovsk, Russia</p> <p>-Approx 2,600 troops (Approx 1,300 troops from each)</p> <p>-Hardwares: paratroops, tanks, self-propelled guns, armored personnel carriers, helicopter gunships, fighter planes, and jet transports</p>
2010	<p>China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan</p>	<p>Peace Mission 2010</p> <p>-9-25 September 2010</p> <p>-Location: Kazakhstan</p> <p>-Total Size: 5,000 troops</p> <p>-Kazakhstan: 1700; China: 1000; Russia: 1000; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan: 100-plus respectively</p> <p>-Phases: 1. Delivery of troops; 2. Strategic consultation; 3. Planning of Campaigns; 4. Drills involving actual troops and armaments</p>
2012	<p>China, Russia, Kazakhstan,</p>	<p>Peace Mission 2012</p> <p>-8-14 June 2012</p>

<p>Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location: Tajikistan - Total Size: 2,000 troops - Kazakhstan: Parachute attack task forces, army aviation and frontline aviation forces with some Mi-24 and Mi-17helicopters, as well as 2 Su-27 fighters - China: 1 motorized-infantry company and 1 artillery squad - Kyrgyzstan: 1 mountain-infantry company and 1 special-operation squad - Russia: 1 motorized-infantry battalion with BTR-80 armored personnel carrier - Tajikistan: 1 parachute attack battalion and one motorized-infantry battalion. In addition, China, Kazakhstan, Russia and Tajikistan sent their air forces to participate in the exercise.
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Source: Collected from China Military Online (2012); McDermott (2007); Weitz (2011); Global Times (2014).

In addition to the active joint military exercises, China proves to be more overt in seeking new initiatives within the SCO framework. An exemplary case is China’s 2009 initiative to extend the SCO activities to Afghanistan issue. During the special conference on Afghanistan convened under the SCO framework, 27 March 2009, Chinese vice foreign minister Song Tao remarked that SCO should extend its efforts to address the “spillover effect” of Afghanistan’s conflict in the region (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009a) – to vie for US influence in the Afghanistan region. Another important case is president Hu’s initiative to expand the SCO framework to deal with the political and economic implications of the 2008

global financial crisis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2009b).

Overall, China's rapid economic development and increased presence in the international arena (internal), as well as the observation of US's relative waning (external) mark the period as China's gradual *reassessment* of its status as *a major power in ascent*. The elevation is driven by the *blurring of status hierarchy* between US-China relations, resulting in a simultaneous increase in China's ambiguous or mixed behaviors as a rising state. In relation, China became more overt in their military presence in the SCO activities, putting forth more *claiming* and *refuting* responses to the international criticisms on their activities, while seeking for new initiatives within the SCO framework to further its interests in the region and beyond.

VI. China's Struggle for 'Major Country' Status (2013 -)

As president Barack Obama and president Xi Jinping struck a "new model of major country relations" during the bilateral meeting in 2013, this article finds that the ambiguity in status hierarchy between the two countries is deepened in the period. China's engagement in the status competition and SCO activities are confident and at times assertive.

1. Ambiguous Status Hierarchy and Major-Country Status Competition

The new model of major country relations, according to president Xi, is based on three main pillars of characteristics: “no conflict or confrontation, mutual respect, and win-win cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013a). The most important implication this article finds is that, most of all, the phrase signals China’s conception of self status elevated to the level of parity to the longtime hegemon, the US. As China’s conception of the US’s status continues to be pervaded by US’s internal weakening, heightened by the fiscal austerity, together with China’s continuous growth in its capabilities in multi-dimensions, China’s self-esteem can be observed.

On a more equal grounds, ambiguous stratification in power, China no longer disguise its heightened quest for status and recognition in the international sphere. Foreign Minister Wang Yi at a symposium in 2013, as an example, outwardly claimed for diplomacy with “Chinese Characteristics.” He also termed China “a champion” of world peace, contributing to the “reform of the international system” “toward a more just and equitable direction” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013b). In like manner, Foreign Minister Wang Yi openly stated that although China does not seek “to prevail over any other country,” it wants “to make the pie bigger” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014a) - become a country that is “more active” as “a responsible and big country” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014b).

As China became more willing to view and acknowledge its major country status in the international hierarchy, the parallel

changes in its SCO activities can be observed. Although China maintains its official stance that China acts within the SCO as a ground for “neighborhood diplomacy,” the “regional peace and development,” and not for a security alliance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013b) nor “targeting any third party” (Ministry of National Defense 2014), China’s initiatives within the SCO have clearly grown in these years. One instance, China presented the SCO along with APEC and BRICS as the measures for advancing the *change* “toward multi-polarity in the world” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013c). In addition to the previous efforts to expand the SCO framework to address Afghanistan issue as well as the problem of 2008 financial crisis in the previous phase, China also led the initiative to open up the SCO to incorporate more members into the organization. In 2014-2015, most prominently, the international media have paid close attention to the SCO’s move to add India and Pakistan as full members of the SCO – an attempt to change “the political map” and “the balance of power” (Kucera 2015).

In respect to the SCO’s military initiatives, there had been two Peace Missions in 2013 and 2014, <Table 3>, in which the preeminence of China and Russia’s leadership became far more pronounced than the previous years. In continuation of the Peace Mission 2005 and 2009, the Peace Mission 2013 has been another China-Russia event where a total of about 1,246 troops from China and Russia came together for the joint exercise. The Peace Mission 2014 has also drawn hot attention from the media, as it was the

largest SCO multilateral joint exercise, larger than the Peace Mission 2007, where a total of around 7,000 troops came from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. And most profoundly, this exercise was the first joint military exercise held in China, where China acted as chief director of the operation for the first time. China's leadership in the 2014 exercise has been followed up in detail by the international media: The media reported not only the chief leadership of China in the military operations, but also on how nearly 6,000 Chinese personnel were involved in the exercise where Chinese 38th Group Army ground forces and air force with over 50 aircraft types engaged in the drill; from other members, 2,200 troops came from Russia (900), Kazakhstan (300), Kyrgyzstan (486) and Tajikistan (281) (Global Times 2014). In addition, the experts have paid closer attention to the equipments involved in the exercise, concluding with the assessments that the joint military exercises like Peace Mission 2013 and 2014 function as an international stage for China to display its "most advanced military hardware" including the armed WZ-10 and WZ-19 helicopters. The equipments involved also vary from special ops, electronic counter measure technologies, to reconnaissance units, with far more extensive equipments from previous exercises, varying from drones, early-warning aircraft, air-defense missiles, tanks, and armored vehicles (Tiezzi 2014).

〈Table 3〉 Shanghai Cooperation Organization Peace Missions in
2013–2014

Year	Participating Members	Missions
2013	China, Russia	<p>Peace Mission 2013</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 27 July-15 August 2013 - Host: Russia - Location: Chelyabinsk, Russia - Total Size: 1,246 troops - China: 646 troops: Army battle group: 350 (24 armored vehicles of various types, 12 self-propelled guns and 6 helicopters); Air force battle group: 50 (5 JH-7A); Comprehensive support group: 196; Directing Department: 20; Campaign Headquarters: 30. - Russia: 600 troops: Ground force: 350; Air force battle group: 50 (4 Mi-24 helicopters, 2 Mi-MT helicopters and 4 Su-24); Support detachment: 150; Directing Department: 20; Campaign Headquarters: 30. - 3 phases: troop deployment, battle planning and simulated combat.
2014	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	<p>Peace Mission 2014</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 24-29 August 2014 - Host: China - Location: Inner Mongolia - Total Size: 7,000 troops from the five countries - Ground & air forces, special ops, electronic countermeasures, and reconnaissance - Hardware: Drones, KJ-200 early-warning aircraft, air-defense missiles, tanks, armored vehicles, Russia's Su-25 jets and MI-8AMTSh, assault helicopters, China's the most advanced kinds WZ-10 and WZ-19 helicopters

Source: China Military Online; *Global Times* (2014).

Summing up, China's reassessment of US's status in reflection of China's continued ascent have been the key factors that steadily intensified the ambiguous hierarchy between the two powers. As Wohlforth hypothesized, the closing of the perceptual and material gap between the two states has been the foundational stimulus to China's relatively far overt, confident, and at times assertive participation in the SCO's activities in the 2010s.

VII. Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to deliberate on the theoretical and empirical value of the status factor in explaining China's new assertiveness. The article sought to identify how China's conception of self status is formed (main variables), changed, and implemented to the external policies. The SCO, a regional security organization, which many pointed out as an 'exemplary' case of China's new diplomacy, has been the central test-bed for the article's analysis.

<Table 4> Empirical Findings: China's Struggle for Status (2001–2014)

China's Conception		2001-2005	2005-2012	2013 -
China's Self Status	Internal Assessment	Inferiority (Domestic conditions)	In Ascent (internal advancements as well as in the diplomatic sphere)	Confidence

	External Assessment (US Status)	Primacy (Unchallengeable)	Waning (Increasingly Challengeable)	Waning towards 'multipolarity' (Challengeable /Comparable)
	Self Status Conception	Follower	Reassessment: Major Power in Ascent (Challenger)	Competitor
Status Hierarchy (US-China)		Unambiguous Status Hierarchy	Increasingly Ambiguous Status Hierarchy	Ambiguous Hierarchy
China's SCO Activities (Rhetoric)		Moderate, Passive	Increasingly Claiming, Refuting	Assertive, Confident

The main findings of this exercise can be surmised as the following <Table 4>: Most profoundly, China's conception of self status is formed of two components. One is the internal assessment of China's own capabilities and scope of influence, while the other is the external assessment of US's status in the world order. Substantiating the hypothesis that China is more willing to engage in status competition when there is ambiguous hierarchy between the rivaling powers, the narrowing of perceptual and material gap between China and the US, since 2000s, resulted in China's noticeable change from moderate to a more active and claiming actions and statements on its SCO activities.

On the basis of these findings, the main contributions of this research are, first, accumulating the theoretical and contextual rigor to the discussion on the social status factor in the China's new assertiveness debate. Second, this article also functions as a practical update on the changes in China's rhetoric on and actions within the SCO. And lastly, the findings of this article shed some

meaningful implications on the prospectus of US-China relations. To elaborate on this last point, the empirical findings of the years after 2013 should be taken under a closer look. As stated, these years are when China's concern for status and relevant SCO policies are elevated to the highest in relative to the previous phases. Nonetheless, what is needed to be stressed is the fact that the period also saw the US and China's ultimate striking of the bargain as "major country relations." Also, despite the increase in China's military presence in the SCO joint exercises, as discussed earlier, China within and beyond the SCO continues to practice multilateral norms of the international standards. In retrospect, these results provide concrete contextual proving of Deng's argument that the preference for higher status can be the explanatory factor to China's complex exhibition of both assertive and compliant behaviors within the SCO and beyond. Future research should implement the process-tracing of China's perception change and policy change in other multilateral organizations as well, such as the BRICS, AIIB, and NDB, thereby expanding the sample and strengthening of the article's exercise.

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요약

부상하는 중국의 자기인식 변화와 국제사회에서의 지위경쟁에 대한 이론적 실증적 고찰: 상하이협력기구(SCO)에서의 중국의 역할 강화를 중심으로

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2000년대 후반부터 대두된 중국의 공세적 외교행태(new assertiveness)에 대한 국제정치논의는 현실주의와 구성주의적 접근으로 이분화되어 이루어져 왔다. 현실주의는 중국의 경제력/군사력 증대라는 물질적 변인을, 구성주의는 중국의 국제사회에서의 자기인식/지위추구라는 비물질 동인을 강조한다. 이 가운데 본고는 각 시각을 대표하는 William C. Wohlforth와 Yong Deng의 연구를 비교해제하여 실질적으로는 현실주의와 구성주의가 공통된 전제들을 기반하고 있음을 밝히는 현실주의적-구성주의(realist-constructivism)라는 이론적 접근을 주장한다. 또한 본고는 기존 연구들이 중국의 세력증대/인식변화라는 변인들과 중국의 대외행태/정책변화 사이의 실증적인 연관관계를 보여주는 데 미흡하다고 주장한다. 이를 극복하기 위해 중국이 주도적으로 참여하는 상하이협력기구(SCO)를 주요 사례로, 중국이 어떻게 국제사회에서의 지위를 확립하고 새롭게 ‘자기주장’(new assertiveness)을 관철시키는지 실증분석하고자 하였다.

주제어: 미중관계, 지위경쟁, 현실주의적-구성주의, 상하이협력기구(SCO)