Constructing a “new type of great power relations”: the state of debate in China (1998-2014)

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Research Highlights and Abstract

• Provide the first comprehensive study of Chinese discourse of new type of great power relations
• Contribute to a broader understanding of how new political concepts and ideas are gradually established in China
• Use content analysis to study 141 Chinese academic articles with title ‘new type of great power relations’ in the title

China’s re-emergence as a global power has intensified its conflicts with the United States. Power transition theory suggests that the rising power and the exiting hegemony are unlikely to settle with peace. In order to manage the confrontation with the United States, China has called for establishing a ‘new type of great power relations’. This article explores how this Chinese-coined concept is introduced by Chinese leaders, and subsequently filled with real meaning, in an incremental manner. It provides the first comprehensive study of the Chinese discourse of new type of great power relations using content analysis to study 141 articles written by Chinese scholars. It finds that the academic debate of this concept can be traced back to the late 1990s when China still considered itself as a normal power. China’s international identity has shifted with China’s rise and thus changed the contemporary debate on new type of great power relations. This article argues that there are neither predetermined strategic intentions nor real substance contained by this concept at this stage. Indeed, China itself is concerned that it may be constrained by its own concept.

Keywords
China, China–US relations, new type of great power relations, United States

Introduction

China’s re-emergence as a global power has triggered heated debates on the future Sino–US relationship—the most important relationship in world affairs. How these two great...
powers live with each other is likely to shape the future international order. Power transition theory suggests that the rising power and the existing hegemon are unlikely to settle with peace. John Mearsheimer (2014a), for example, argues that a declining United States and a rising China will be engaged in security competition, with a considerable potential for war. However, others argue that given its economic and political openness, the current international order is able to accommodate China’s peaceful rise (e.g. Reilly, 2012). The tragedy of great power politics may be avoided if the United States and China could manage their complicated bilateral relationship. In facing the increasing conflicts with the United States and its rising power status, China has proposed a series of initiatives to manage Sino–US relations. In 2012, during his trip to Washington, Xi Jinping called for ‘a new type of great power relations in the 21st century’. This represents a high-profile Chinese initiative to avoid confrontation between the rising power and the existing hegemony.

In subsequent high-level meetings between China and the United States, Xi Jinping has repeatedly insisted on this Chinese-coined concept of new type of great power relations. For example, during Xi Jinping’s meeting with Thomas Donilon, National Security Advisor to the US President, Xi said that

> Both sides should, from the fundamental interest of the people of the two countries and of the world, join the efforts to build up China-U.S. cooperative partnership, trying to find a completely new way for the **new type of great power relations**, which would be unprecedented in history and open up the future. (People’s Daily, 2012; emphasis added)

To some Chinese scholars, this Chinese initiative is a continued exploration of Sino–US relations in the context of China’s rise. This dates back to the 2008 financial crisis when the ideas of ‘G2’ and ‘Chimerica’ were introduced by some American analysts to manage Sino–US relations. At that time, China under Hu Jintao’s leadership clearly rejected these ideas. Nowadays, Xi Jinping’s proactive diplomacy is attempting to reshape the future Sino–US relations by promoting the idea of ‘new type of great power relations’. Whether this concept is the revised version of ‘G2’ or ‘G2 with Chinese characteristics’ is debatable, but it is certain that the core of this Chinese-coined concept shares the same purpose as the idea of ‘G2’ and ‘Chimerica’: the hope that China and the United States will not repeat the tragedy of great power politics.

While China has been keen in promoting this concept in the international arena, the United States’ attitude has been very ambiguous. A key reason for this ambiguous attitude is that neither this concept nor China’s strategic intentions of using this concept are clear. Nonetheless, the vagueness of this Chinese-coined concept has not prevented it from generating enormous public and academic interest (e.g. Kerr, 2013; Zhao, 2015). Some argue that this concept is a ‘bad’ idea for the United States (e.g. Mattis, 2013) or even a ‘trap’ for the United States set by the rising China (e.g. Erickson and Liff, 2014), while others consider its birth as an opportunity to ‘seeking a durable foundation for U.S.-China ties’ (Lampton, 2013) and to integrate a rising China into the established world order. The way in which this Chinese-coined concept is perceived internationally provides a good basis to understand China’s initiative; however, it is equally important (if not more so) to observe domestic perceptions within China.

Indeed, it is less often noticed that Xi’s new type of great power relations has also evoked huge academic and public interest domestically within China. As Qi Hao points out, the domestic disagreements over ‘new type of great power relations’ are ‘far more than’ that between the United States and China (Qi, 2015). What are Chinese scholars
and analysts debating about new type of great power relations? Amy King’s (2014) analysis of the Chinese discourse of new type of great power relations with a focus on where Japan fits in this concept provides a good basis to start from. As King concludes, Japan only plays a marginal role in this Chinese-coined concept. Indeed, to some Chinese scholars, Japan does not fit into this concept at all, no matter how loosely it is defined.1

This article provides the first comprehensive study of Chinese discourse relating to this new type of great power relations. It does this using content analysis to study 141 academic articles titled ‘new type of great power relations’ (in Chinese). Instead of providing a new radical interpretation of China’s strategic intentions, the modest goal of this article is to provide hard evidence as to what agreements and disagreements over new type of great power relations are within the Chinese academic (and policy) community. It intends to identify the diverse (and mainstream) views within China and to open this domestic debate to a wider non-English-speaking community.

This article also aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how new political concepts and ideas are gradually established in China. As we argued before, in China, when new concepts are put forward by Chinese leaders, they are not always clearly defined (Zeng et al., 2015). Frequently, the process of filling the new concept with real meaning occurs subsequently and incrementally. In other words, the new academic focus within China is generated by key leaders’ political agendas. This article argues that this is a part of the process to construct this ‘new type of great power relations’. As this article will show, the academic discussion on this concept has existed as early as the late 1990s when it was mainly referred to as Sino–Russia relations. However, this debate had disappeared for a decade until Xi Jinping reused this concept for Sino–US relations. Since Xi Jinping pointed out the broader picture of this concept, it has been left for Chinese scholars to fill Xi’s vague vision of new type of great power relations with (greater) substance. As this article will reveal, the current academic discussion on new type of great power relations is fundamentally different from that of the late 1990s. The link with the first use of this concept is accidental and probably not realized by most people who use it.

At this stage, it is clearer what new type of great power relations is not than what it is. In China, it has been frequently argued that the rise of China is not repeating the history of great power politics as China is different from the previous great power. This is to say, it is not the ‘old/or traditional’ type of great power relations that has been discussed by the literature of great power politics and security dilemma (Holslag, 2015; Kirshner, 2012; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014b). Yet, China is still incapable of elaborating what it is. The current Chinese discourse concerning this new type of great power relations still consists of broad, vague principles with few specific substances. This is because of the early development stage and China’s deliberate strategic vagueness. This does not mean China has a predetermined strategic intention in promoting this concept. This strategic vagueness arises as a result of the need to cover China’s inability to elaborate its own concept and allow diplomatic flexibility. However, it is clearly recognized that if China continues to maintain this conceptual vagueness, it may lead to misconception of international society on China’s strategic intentions.

This recognition also involves with a strong fear within China that if it fails to provide a convincing elaboration of this concept, China will lose its discursive power and may even be constrained by its own concept. This fear again reflects that power does include not only hard power in military-economic terms but also discursive power. This is to say, power could come from the ‘discourse’ in international politics. Thus, this new type of great power relations provides us a case to study the power struggle between China and
the United States over discursive power. This power struggle is not the one with battle ships and submarines, but one over discourse.

This article is organized as follows. It will first introduce the research methods that were used followed by the introduction of authors in the debate. The second section will discuss the context of this concept including its history, why China introduces this concept now and how it fits in China’s grand strategy. The third section analyses its current substance, and the last section discusses the nature of this Chinese debate including influence of theory, method and scholars.

**Research methods: content analysis and interviews**

As a part of my project on Chinese perceptions, this article further contributes to a methodological approach that can be used to systematically study Chinese language materials in a reliable and replicable manner. With the rise of China, Chinese perceptions have attracted considerable academic interest. So far, relevant studies rely on two primary research methods: structured/unstructured interview and document analysis. While structured interview (i.e. survey studies) provides reliable results based on a large sample, they are often time-consuming to undertake and require considerable resources. Compared with surveys, document analysis is easier to conduct and more transparent and replicable. Yet when conducting document analysis, many relevant studies rely only on a small numbers of Chinese articles/documents. Although these representative samples help to understand what is being said, they fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of Chinese perceptions.

Among the few that have comprehensively studied Chinese perceptions (e.g. Huang, 2015; King, 2014; Niu, 2014; Pang and Wang, 2013; Zhang, 2015, 2012; Zhu and Pearson, 2013), while they provide valuable empirical contributions on Chinese perceptions, the relevant studies could benefit from employing more sophisticated research methods. Reading and interpretation are highly subjective, and thus, personal bias is involved. This is especially true of scholars who work in the field and have their own understanding of Chinese politics. This variation and subjectivity of interpretation are wider still when it comes to the nature of Chinese writing on politics, which is often underpinned by materialist dialectics. The error of subjective interpretation cannot be eliminated, but can be controlled to some acceptable extent.

My project employs content analysis with coding to study Chinese perceptions. We first identified the relevant articles and then drafted a coding scheme. After piloting the early versions of my coding scheme, a code manual was developed to inform the coding process. The coding process strictly followed the instruction of my coding manual. This helps to make the research more objective and reliable. To take intra-coding reliability as an example, the same person’s understanding on the same article may be different at different times. This may, for example, be caused by increased knowledge or a new understanding of politics. The code manual helped to minimize this variation and thus maintain intra-coding reliability. More importantly, the author is keen to promote transparent, open empirical research in international relations (IR) and politics. All data including my coding manual, codebook, online-appendix and other replication materials are available from my research page.

More specially, in this project, I used the official concept ‘new type of great power relations’ (新型大国关系 in Chinese) as the search term during the data collection. As I focus on the academic debate, I only searched for the China National Knowledge Infrastructure’s (CNKI) ‘journal articles’ database. All journal articles with ‘new type of
great power relations’ in the title in the CNKI were collected. This included 184 articles covering period from 1998 to 2014. In order to test the robustness of my search result, I conducted the second round of searching using two similar terms ‘新型的大国关系’ and ‘新型大国的关系’—whose literal meanings are exactly the same with the official concept. In the second round of searching, I found another article published in 2005 titled ‘新型的大国关系’ (Zhao, 2005). After removing irrelevant results such as leaders’ talks, conference review, news reports and duplicate articles, I identified 141 articles as my research object.

Because of the large amount of data that I collected, my data analysis was divided into two stages. The first stage mainly focused on what and why this new type of great power relations is new. The relevant findings are reported in this article. The second stage will analyse the Chinese definition of ‘great power’ and more specifically which countries are considered as great power in this new type of great power relations (see Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

Notably, content analysis does not provide the full explanation of Chinese perceptions—it only tells us what is available in the text and the weight of each view in the Chinese debate from a quantitative perspective. In order to further understand Chinese perceptions beyond the text, my project was supported by interviews with some influential Chinese scholars who wrote on the topic (conducted in Beijing between 9 and 15 April 2015). My previous two projects used a similar methodological approach to study Chinese perceptions of regime legitimacy and core interests (Zeng, 2014, 2015; Zeng et al., 2015). It allowed us to compare the topic of new type of great power relations with the previous two and to identify the similarities and differences.

**Authors in the debate**

Among the selected 141 articles, Chinese universities contribute 77 articles (54.6%), as Figure 1 shows. The most active ones are Renmin University (12 articles), Fudan University (9), University of Foreign Studies (7) and Peking University (6). Nonetheless, this does not mean this debate is purely academic. Rather, it has important policy implications for three reasons. First, this academic debate is closely related with policy discussion. Chinese academic writings of politics and IR are very different from the English academic literature—the principal purpose of many Chinese academic writings is to provide policy recommendations. This kind of writing style is called a ‘challenge-response’ mode (Zhu and Pearson, 2013). In this mode, the article usually starts by describing a problem first and then suggests a solution to solve this problem. This writing style is confirmed by my previous studies on core interests and regime legitimacy. In the Chinese debate on core interests, for example, many articles start with a problem such as how China’s core interests are harmed by foreign governments, and this is followed by a set of policy suggestions on what China should do (Zeng, 2015; Zeng et al., 2015). This pattern is very similar when they are debating new type of great power relations, as I will discuss later.

Second, as Figure 1 shows, the Chinese policy community also participates actively in the debate. Chinese state-affiliated think tanks contribute 34 articles (24.1%). The authors are mainly based in four state-affiliated institutions: China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (11, affiliated with the Ministry of State Security), Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS; 10, affiliated with the State Council), China Institute of International Studies (7, affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Shanghai Institute of International Studies (4, affiliated with Shanghai Municipal Government).
Local party schools and military colleges also contribute eight and five articles, respectively. In addition, six articles are written by senior officials including Wang Yi, the Minister of foreign affairs; Cui Tiankai, the Chinese ambassador to the United States; Yu Hongjun, the vice minister of the Chinese Communist Party’s International Department; He Yafei, the Deputy director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council and the former vice minister of foreign affairs; and Ma Zhengang, the former Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom. This indicates that this debate is heavily influenced by the policy community.

Third, at the very least, Chinese academic discourse presents the view of an elite group that will have influence and cannot simply be ignored by the Chinese government. Therefore, this debate provides an important angle for us to uncover different thinking on Chinese foreign policy within China.

Driven by the complexity of international affairs and China’s deeper global involvement, the process of making Chinese foreign policy has been increasingly relying on Chinese academic community and think tanks. Many Chinese governmental organs have regular consultation mechanism with academic and intellectual community (Gong et al., 2009). Indeed, as mentioned above, those think tanks are directly affiliated with certain governmental organ, and their jobs are to provide policy advice for their parent departments. Many foreign affairs offices would also invite some external experts to participate in the policy research and making process when dealing with important diplomatic issues (Gong et al., 2009).

In addition to the above institutional channels, Chinese scholars have also exerted their influence in other ways. For example, in recent years, the Chinese politburo has institutionalized a collective learning system in which all politburo members are required to attend (Tsai and Dean, 2013). Top Chinese scholars are invited to deliver lectures to the top decision-makers. This collective learning system does not only exist at the top but in the entire bureaucratic system—for example, the Central Party School has organized increasingly numbers of workshops and symposiums for ministerial and departmental level officials in China. Moreover, internal report (内部参考) is also one of the important channels for Chinese scholars to influence policy. When a government-funded research project is complete, internal report is considered as a key (or perhaps the most important)
research result. When I conducted interviews in Beijing, many Chinese scholars often told me stories about whose internal reports were delivered to the top decision-makers and thus facilitate certain policies or diplomatic initiatives.

**Historical context: how New is the new type of great power relations?**

Given that the concept ‘new type of great power relations’ gradually emerges in public and academic discussions after Xi Jinping officially proposed it in 2012, we should not be surprised that many non-Chinese scholars consider ‘new type of great power relations’ as a new concept, first proposed by Xi Jinping. Indeed, many influential Chinese scholars also consider it to be a new concept (Niu, 2013: 2, Yang, 2013a). For example, Niu Xinchun (2013) argues that ‘new type of great power relations is a brand new concept. There is no textbook or existing model for us to follow’ (p. 2). Zhao Xiaochun (2013), Professor at the University of International Relations, argues that “to build new type of great power relations” was first proposed by comrade Xi Jinping during his American visit in February 2012’ (p. 6).

Yet, to some China observers and analysts, there is nothing new about Xi’s ‘new type of great power relations’. In Daniel Blumenthal’s analysis, this is an ‘old type of great power relations’ because Sino-US relations will be as competitive as the relationship between rising power and existing hegemony in the history (Blumenthal, 2015). To Andrew Erickson and Adam Liff (2014), it represents ‘old type of values and order’. To Peter Mattis, it is ‘new facade on the old rhetoric of peaceful coexistence’ (Mattis, 2013). To some extent, this article supports the above conclusion but for different reasons.

Whether this concept is new depends on how ‘new’ is defined here. Xi Jinping is certainly not the first Chinese leader who used this concept. Hu Jintao used it to describe the future relationship of Sino-US in the near end of his term. According to Hu, the United States and China should ‘strive to develop a new type of great power relationship that is reassuring to the peoples of both nations and gives the peoples of other countries peace of mind’ (Glaser, 2012). Earlier than Hu, the then State Councillor, Dai Bingguo, mentioned this concept in May 2010 during the US–China Strategic Economic Dialogue (Dai, 2010). According to Dai, this term refers to ‘mutual respect, living in harmony, cooperation and win-win’ which is slightly different from Xi’s version, which focuses mainly on cooperation and win–win (Zhong, 2014).

Back in 2000, Jiang Zemin (2006) pointed out in a Politburo conference that

in the past decade, we have been actively developing new type of great power relations that mainly focus on non-alignment, no confrontation, no direct action against a third country. We have established a fundamental framework of 21st century bilateral relations with the US, Russia, France, the UK, Canada, and Japan one after another. (p. 546)

Jiang’s talk clearly indicates that both the content and targeted countries of this concept are different from that now. Non-alignment, non-confrontation and not directly against a third country were its three major principles in Jiang’s discourse, which is similar but different from Xi’s discourse. In addition, in Jiang’s discourse, great power refers to a group of traditional Western powers, but the current mainstream view either points to the United States alone or extends it to include emerging non-Western power (Zeng and Breslin, 2016).
Notably, this concept in Jiang’s discourse was very similar to another concept, that of a ‘new type of state relations’ (新型国家关系), which also consists of the above three principles. In Jiang’s speech in Moscow, ‘new type of state relations’ was mentioned three times (Jiang, 2001). At that time, it mainly targeted Russia (Zhong, 2014). Given the high similarities between these two concepts, it is possible that the original target of new type of great power relations was Sino–Russia relations instead of Sino–US relations. The previous discussion about this concept clearly focused more on ‘new type of relations’, while the current discourse is built on China’s new identity as rising power or perhaps global power, and thus, ‘great power relations’ is the key.

As a result, we should not be surprised that the term ‘new type of great power relations’ appears in academic discussion long before 2010. Figure 2 shows the number of Chinese academic articles with ‘new type of great power relations’ in the title. As Figure 2 shows, the Chinese academic discussion of this concept can be traced back to as early as the late 1990s. Yu Cheng, an author unknown, argued in 1998 that the strategic collaboration between China and Russia—including border negotiations, military talks, and joint statement on multipolar world—under the leadership of then Chinese president Jiang Zemin and the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin provides a firm basis for establishing new type of great power relations (Yu, 1998). In this article, the concept of a new type of great power relations is very similar to, if not the same as, the then official discourse of ‘new type of state relations’.

Li Yihu, a professor of Peking University, argued in 1999 that the world would become multipolar—formed by United States, China, Russian, Japan and the European Union (EU)—in the 21st century (Li, 1999). In this multipolar world, the strategic partnership would replace the old ‘group politics and alliance politics’ and thus formed ‘new type of great power relations in the 21st century’—exactly the same words with what Xi said during his trip to Washington in 2012. According to Li, this new type of great power relations in the 21st century reflects a new type of security concept, which is opposite to the group and alliance politics based on the cold war mentality.
The article of 2005 written by Zhao Bole, a professor of Yunnan University, argues that China, India and Brazil have become ‘emerging powers’ because of their rapid development (Zhao, 2005). Contrary to the prediction of some realists, the rise of China and India does not attempt to challenge the hegemony and undermine the existing international system. Thus, Zhao concludes that Sino–India relations are a new type of great power relations. This relationship is new because (1) China and India are both developing countries and thus have different standpoints with traditional great powers; (2) they both consider economic development as the most important goal and prefer a peaceful international environment; and (3) they both pursue highly independent foreign policies.

**Why does the world need new type of great power relations now?**

Figure 2 also shows that the debate has almost disappeared for a decade until 2012. After Xi Jinping officially proposed establishing a new type of great power relations in 2012, this immediately evoked enormous academic interest within China—a large number of workshops/seminars/conferences on new type of great power relations were organized in China. My brief search shows that China’s National Foundation of Social Science has funded 10 projects with ‘new type of great power relations’ in the title so far. In the early 2015, Fudan University established the Collaborative Innovation Centre for New Type of Sino–US Great Power Relationship. In this context, the growing academic interest has produced a large amount of articles on new type of great power relations and thus reawakened the debate in 2012.

The articles published in 2012 and 2013 usually start with why new type of great power relations is needed for China and the world. The most frequently mentioned reason (68%) by Chinese scholars is to avoid ‘Thucydides trap’, by which a rising China and a declining United States may lead to conflicts. It is widely argued that this new type of great power relations could help to avoid this trap.

In addition, some also argue that this concept provides a new identity for both the United States and China that can accommodate the ‘great revival of China’ without challenging the American belief that ‘the US will never accept to be No. 2’ (Wang, 2013b: 59). It is also a Chinese attempt to defend itself. As Zhang Xiaoming argues, China wants to use the idea of ‘new type of great power relations’ to replace the widely believed ‘Thucydides trap’ in order to undermine American pressure (Zhang, 2014). A new type of Sino–US great power relationship will also help China to ‘maintain and extend the period of strategic opportunities’ (Chen, 2013b: 4). This period of strategic opportunities refers to the current peaceful international environment by which China can focus on economic development. In this sense, this new type of great power relations is a part of China’s peaceful development strategy (Li, 2013a).

Nonetheless, there is no consensus as to the prospect of Sino–US relations. Optimists argue that the United States and China have already broke the Thucydides trap (Yang, 2013b: 102). Thus, the new type of great power relationship between the United States and China has already taken place (Chou and Zhang, 2013: 41; Yu, 2013b: 5). As Da Wei (2013) further explains, ‘to establish Sino-US new type of great power relations is not to build from scratch. Sino-US relations in the past 20 year have actually been certain kinds of new type of great power relationship’ (p. 64.). Pessimists argue that it is questionable whether a new type of great power relations exists (Zhang, 2014: 51, Footnote 2). It is argued that the current Sino–US relationship is neither a really new type of relationship
nor a great power relationship because the United States has not treated China as a great power (Li, 2014: 9; Shi, 2014a: 28). To some extent, this pessimistic view echoes the realist perspective about the inevitable conflict between a rising China and a declining United States—although it does not directly endorse with the literature written in English on the theme.

As mentioned, in the debate, some argue that it was the Americans who first started to explore future Sino–US relations and proposed some ideas such as ‘G2’ and ‘Chimerica’. The Chinese-coined concept ‘new type of great power relations’ is a ‘continuation of this exploration’ (Zhang and Jing, 2013: 25). This exploration might involve another purpose: the rights of initiative. It is argued that China had been in a passive position in the Sino–US relations that accepted American definition of Sino–US relations (Pang, 2013: 15; Ruan, 2012: 27) such as ‘constructive, cooperative and candid’ and ‘responsible stakeholder’ (Pang, 2013: 15). Proposing a new type of great power relations is thus an attempt to change China’s passive position. However, as I will discuss later, some Chinese scholars are also concerned that if they fail to provide a convincing elaboration of this concept, China will not only lose the rights of initiative but also be constrained by its own concept.

**Chinese enthusiasm and American ambiguity**

The American attitude towards this Chinese-coined concept remains very ambiguous (Li and Xu, 2014) if they are not against it (Yamaguchi, 2014). So far, the Obama administration has not shown its clear support to this Chinese-coined concept. Nonetheless, Chinese official propaganda has been explicitly and implicitly suggesting that the United States has accepted it. This is understandable insofar as it helps the Chinese Communist Party to win domestic support. We find that this view is also widely held in the debate. Some scholars even argue that this concept is very popular with American political and academic circles, as well as American public (Dong, 2013) and has already become American official concept of its China policy (Jin and Zhao, 2014: 52). This indicates a high Chinese expectation and enthusiasm to promote this concept.

Needless to say, there are good reasons for China to hope for the United States to recognize this concept. From the strategic perspective, once the United States accepts this concept, it also recognizes China’s status as a ‘great power’, and thus, China will win the commensurate strategic space (Shi, 2014b). In addition, it will be seen as the victory of Chinese diplomacy under Xi’s leadership. As Zhou Fangyin (2013), Director of CASS, further states,

in the current unequal power balance between the US and China, the establishment of new type of great power relation means that the US has made relative important strategic compromise to China or at least the US has decided to make significant and substantive strategic tolerance on China. As the US is the global hegemony and the only superpower, the Sino-US new type of great power relationship means that the US indirectly accepts that China enjoys the similar international status with the US. In other words, this is to acknowledge that American unique status in the world has been shaken or lost to some extent. If the US and China establish a real meaningful new type of great power relationship, its international implications are that the rise of China has become a fact. If the US and China form an equal great power status, then it is equal to the US having made a relative significant compromise—at least, other countries will think in this way. (p. 19)
The role of new type of great power relations in Chinese grand strategy

How does this new type of great power relations fit in with China’s grand strategy? In recent years, Deng Xiaoping’s ‘keeping a low profile’/peaceful development as China’s grand strategy for decades has been increasingly challenged because of China’s changing security environment. Some argue that this strategy has led to the loss of China’s security interests, and thus should be changed, while others argue that China is not strong enough to do so. This is arguably the most important contemporary debate in Chinese foreign policy. After Xi Jinping took power, this debate becomes more intensified. This debate has expanded now to almost all areas of Chinese foreign policy. In the debate on core interests, some argue that with the intense territorial disputes in South and East China seas, ‘keeping a low profile’ has been increasingly incapable of protecting China’s core interests, specifically security interests (Zeng, 2015; Zeng et al., 2015). Others argue that this view exaggerates the threat of territorial disputes on China’s core interests, and ‘keeping a low profile’ is still the right thing to do.

Similarly, the relevant debate expands to the discourse of a new type of great power relations. On one hand, a few argue that ‘keeping a low profile’ is obsolete. China’s growing strength has made it harder to keep a low profile than before (Chen, 2013a). Nor has this strategy been effective in improving China’s international image and maintaining its own security (Zou and Li, 2013). As such, China needs a new grand strategy, and a new type of great power relations is one of the steps towards constructing such a new grand strategy. This view is criticized by many supporters of the current grand strategy. For example, as Cui Lei (2014) argues,

> with the growth of China’s strength, many people become complacent and have hallucinations. They think that China is strong enough to challenge the US and could abandon ‘keeping a low profile’ strategy. Thus, they sometimes inadvertently show arrogance in foreign exchange and policy statements. (p. 43)

To some Chinese scholars, the new type of great power relations is consistent with a peaceful development strategy because it is claimed that China will become a new great power that will rise peacefully (Cui, 2014; He, 2014; Li, 2013b: 35; Li and Bi, 2013: 74; Yuan, 2012). This view is also shaped by their judgement on American future role in the world. As Li Yongcheng (2013b) argues, ‘Chinese leaders should objectively assess the US and avoid exaggerating its decline and underestimating its international leadership or even have wrong judgement on its future trend and abandon Deng Xiaoping’s “keeping a low profile” too early’ (p. 35).

Although there are more supporters of ‘keeping a low profile’ than opponents, the role of Xi’s new type of great power relations in his vision of China’s grand strategy is still unclear. Future studies should look into the debate on China’s grand strategy, especially the period after Xi took power.

Two pillars: ‘new relations’ and ‘great power’

The concept of ‘new type of great power relations’ consists of two key words: ‘new relations’ (新型关系) and ‘great power’ (大国). Chinese scholars have different emphases on these two key words. On one hand, some focus on ‘new type of relations’, which contrasts with ‘traditional relations’ (Liu, 2013: 154; Wang, 2014: 77). It is argued that Chinese diplomacy should have a broader focus. China should develop a comprehensive new type
of IR that not only focus on great countries but also on small countries, international organizations and trans-national enterprises (Chen, 2013c: 19–20). Thus, the primary focus should be on ‘new type of relations’ (Zheng, 2013). This view implies that new type of great power relations is only one of the Chinese-coined diplomatic concept. Similar concepts include ‘new state relations’—a term used by Jiang Zemin and the predecessor of new type of great power relations, as I will discuss later—and ‘new international relations’ (e.g. Su, 2013).

On the other hand, while acknowledging the importance of ‘new’, others emphasize ‘great power’ because this relates to China’s world status (Shi, 2014b). As mentioned before, once the United States accepts this term, it means the United States recognizes China’s great power status and thus will share power with China (Shi, 2014b). It is argued that establishing China’s relations with great powers has gradually become a ‘core’ of Chinese diplomacy (Zhao and Yin, 2012: 81). In this sense, a ‘new type of great power relations’ can be interpreted as a significant (if not core) part of Xi Jinping’s ‘big country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics’.

Thus far, the Obama administration seems to be only positive to the first half of this Chinese-coined concept (i.e. ‘new type of relations’) but ambiguous with the second half (i.e. ‘great power’) because of its vague definition. The following sections will focus on ‘new type of relations’ and what is new about the ‘new type of great power relations’.

What is New in this new type of great power?

Although the term ‘new type of great power relations’ does not originally derive from Sino–US relationships, Chinese scholars and officials have been filling this concept with new meanings. Yet when explaining what is new in this new type of great power relations, the current academic discourse mainly reiterates the broad, vague diplomatic principles with little specific substantive content. Currently, the debate focuses on three key principles highlighted by Xi Jinping: no confrontation, mutual respect and win–win. These principles are mainly designed to manage future Sino–US relations and thus avoid the potential conflict between the rising power and the existing hegemon. While these principles signal good wishes for Sino–US relations, they are open for interpretation and the Chinese debate has not clarified the substance as well as how they can be put into practice yet.

‘No confrontation’ is not new as it was one of the three principles of new type of great power relations in the late 1990s. As mentioned, it aimed to promote a sort of peaceful coexistence between China (a normal power) and other major countries. However, while its meaning remains the same, the contemporary discussion is related to manage the relations between China (a rising power) and the United States (the existing hegemon). It appeals that the United States and China should objectively understand each other’s strategic intentions and manage disagreement in a non-confrontational way. Yet, the debate does not provide much guidance on how to put this principle into practice, for example, to ease the tension between the United States and China in South China Sea.

Mutual respect is a more vague principle. A key message of mutual respect is that the United States and China should respect each other’s core interests. From the Chinese perspective, it is unfair that China never attempts to challenge the US core interests, while the United States often do so (Qian, 2013: 14). Thus, this request is completely legitimate. From the US perspective, this is the most problematic part of this concept because Chinese core interests could expand to territorial disputes such as South and East China seas (Yamaguchi, 2014).
In the Chinese debate on new type of great power relations, 41.8% of articles argue that the United States should respect China’s core interests. Yet, the core interests are not clearly defined in China. Our previous article on Chinese core interests finds that Chinese discourse of core interests is a vague concept, and there is no consensus on what China’s specific core interests are (Zeng et al., 2015). Similarly, when debating on the new type of great power relations, very few clearly defined what China’s core interests are. This deliberate conceptual vagueness would enable to allow more flexibility for Chinese diplomacy while avoid potential domestic (nationalistic) criticism (Campbell et al., 2013).

Moreover, there is also a sort of vagueness involved in those defined core interests. Take China’s political system as an example, which is one of few clearly defined core interests in both Chinese official and academic discourses. A key (or perhaps the most important) message of mutual respect is that the United States should respect (rather than attempt to overthrow) China’s one-party system. As Wang Jisi (a leading scholar in China) and Wu Shengqi elaborate, mutual respect means that China will respect (and not challenge) the United States’ world status only if the United States will do so to China’s current political system (Wang and Wu, 2014: 7). Yet, to respect China’s political system might mean that the United States needs to stop its attempt to promote human rights and democracy in China. This could be expanded to a series of issues including freedom of speech, Internet freedom, religious and ethnic minorities, and labour rights, which are considered by the Chinese government as attempts to end the communist party’s monopoly on power. Given that the United States has been keen in supporting these issues for decades, it is unlikely for the United States to endorse the Chinese position at this stage. Therefore, some US analysts suggest the American government to accept Xi’s proposal on new type of great power relations if China is willing to remove reference to core interests from this proposal (Hadley and Haenle, 2015).

The principle of win–win contrasts with the zero-sum game in the old type of great power relations, as I will discuss later. In China’s new type of great power relations, win–win stands for a new framework of bilateral relations that benefits both sides. It focuses on shared interests and common development instead of competition and struggle. By highlighting this principle, China also wants to send the message that the rise of China is not a threat but an opportunity in which the international society will benefit from. In short, by promoting these three principles, China’s call for new type of great power relations wants to (1) show its sincere commitment to peaceful development and (2) gain international recognition on China’s status as a great power.

Nonetheless, at this stage, neither China’s strategic goal nor how to achieve this goal by promoting this concept is clear. The development of this Chinese-coined concept is still at its early stage. As Da Wei (2013) elaborates,

Currently, the Chinese government and academia are stuck in statement of principles such as enhancing strategic mutual trust, making good use of the current mechanism, and strengthening cooperation in issues like North Korea’s nuclear weapon and climate change. These statements are no doubt correct but too vague. Their elaborations on how and why ‘new type of great power relations’ is ‘new’ are not sufficiently specific and clear. If this tendency continues, China might gradually lose its real control over this concept. This is a problem that the academia should focus. (p. 60)

Chinese scholars also realise the danger of conceptual vagueness and thus urge the development of a convincing theory of new type of great power relations (Niu and Song,
2013: 135). As Qi Hao (2015) points out, if China fails to make this vague concept clearer, it may let the international society misunderstand China’s strategic intentions. It is also believed that the United States has been filling this concept with their preferred meanings (Niu and Song, 2013: 135). Thus, if China could not produce a sound explanation, it will lose the power of the interpretation of this concept. It may even be constrained by its own concept. Generally speaking, the current academic discourse is evolving. Before 2011, the relevant debate was isolated. During the period of 2012 and 2013, it mainly focused on the importance of establishing, that is, why the world needs new type of great power relations and broad principles of establishing this relationship. Some specific policy suggestions about how to build this relationship gradually emerged in 2014.

So far, instead of elaborating on what the new type of great power relations specifically is, the debate clarifies what it is not. It is most frequently mentioned that this new type of great power relations is very different from traditional great power relations that rising power will inevitably challenge the existing hegemonic power such as Germany–United Kingdom before the first and second world wars and Japan–United States in the early 1940s. As such, the new type of great power relations is a ‘new’ answer to an ‘old’ question on how to deal with potential conflicts between rising power and exiting hegemonic power. It is also different from the US–Soviet Union relations, based on a cold war or zero-sum mentality.

In addition to comparing this new type of great power relations with traditional great power relations in history, it is argued that this concept is new because the current Sino–China relations are different from the previous one (Yuan, 2012). In the past, the Sino–US relation is the relationship between the only superpower (i.e. the United States) and a normal major country (i.e. China). As such, it is similar to US–Japan or US–Russia relations. However, nowadays, Sino–US relations involve the relationship between No. 1 and No. 2, or the rising power and the hegemonic power, which is fundamentally different from before.

The nature of the debate: theory, method and influential scholars

The final section of this article explores the nature of the Chinese academic discourse including theory, method and scholars. Figure 3 shows the frequency of theories that inform the debate. Realism is the most frequently mentioned theory. In all, 22% of articles mention realism, but this theory is only used to present the pessimistic views on great power politics. It usually sets up a context for authors to explain why a new type of great power relations is needed. Some are directly critical of realism. For example, Yu Hongjun argues that using realism to deal with contemporary international issues ‘not only do[es] not work but [will] also harm the entire world and future generations’ (Yu, 2013a: 9). Nonetheless, these authors do not propose a better theoretical approach when criticizing the realist views. While many do not agree with realism, they recognize the danger of great power politics. For example, Chen Jian (2012), Dean of International Relations in Renmin University, argues that 2012–2024 is ‘the most dangerous decade for Sino–US relations. If it is not handled properly, there will be friction or even war between the US and China’ (p. 13).

Liberalism and idealism are mentioned by 11% and 4% of articles, respectively. This does not mean that these articles support a liberal approach, as I will discuss later. Some are directly critical of idealism. For example, Su Changhe (2014), Vice Dean at the Fudan
University, argues that it is wrong for idealism to exaggerate the effects of different political systems between the United States and China as a barrier to build new type of great power relations (p. 35). Thus, it is ‘easier’ for idealism to make a ‘bigger’ mistake than any other theory when dealing with international politics (Su, 2014: 35). In addition, constructivism, English school and Marxism are mentioned by 5.6%, 2.84% and 2.84% of articles, respectively.

Collectively, I find that the Chinese discourse of new type of great power relations generally lacks theoretical engagement. There are only 33.33% of articles in the debate that mention the above IR theories. In other words, a majority of 141 articles do not mention any theory at all. It is notable that the word ‘mention’ is used here because most Chinese articles either simply mention these theories as theoretical schools without using them as the most preferred explanatory theory or use them to explain the behaviour of others (especially the United States) instead of Chinese actions and intentions. The only exception is constructivism. Although constructivism is less mentioned in the debate, it is often used as a sole theoretical framework to analyse the new type of great power relations by a couple of articles. English school is also used by an article as the sole explanatory theory (Zhang, 2014).
This minimal engagement with IR theory in the discourse of new type of great power relations is not unique in Chinese literature. A similar pattern is found in the Chinese writings of, for example, core interests and globalisation (Zeng et al., 2015; Zhu and Pearson, 2013). In these topics, scholarship is mainly driven by policy or events rather than theory-oriented. In other words, Chinese authors are more interested in providing policy advice to Chinese policy-makers than making theoretical contributions. This is quite understandable, given that the academic debate on new type of great power relations is clearly generated by Xi Jinping’s political agenda.

In China, there is also an increasing dissatisfaction with the above mainstream ‘Western’ theories and a turn towards indigenous alternatives, that is, Chinese IR theory, as we find in the Chinese discourse of core interests (Zeng et al., 2015). Similarly, when debating on new type of great power relations, some argue that the above traditional Western IR could not explain the rise of emerging power and that this Chinese-coined concept transcends those Western theories (Wang, 2013b: 61). There are two views of the Western ingredients of this Chinese-coined concept. Some argue that the Western nation-state international system is not sustainable and that the world should learn from Eastern philosophy, such as all under the heaven (tian xia) and ancient East Asian order (Wang, 2013a: 68). As such, this concept represents a challenge of ‘non-Western countries to the Western dominance and it has gradually accumulated as a new discourse system’ (Yang, 2013a: 14). Others argue that this Chinese-coined concept also absorbs the essence of Western theories. Thus, it is a combination of Chinese traditional spirit and common values of humankind (Yu, 2013a: 8). Some have also considered it as China’s significant theoretical contribution to contemporary IR theories (Zhang, 2013).

In terms of research methods, I find that all 141 articles follow qualitative approach. Unlike their views, their methods are not diverse. Almost all use historical analysis, with a few of the articles involving interviews. As such, most articles follow a longitudinal design that compares historical periods with contemporary world politics with a few involved with case study (e.g. Taiwan) to analyse the broader picture of new type of great power relations.

Figure 3 also shows the frequency of scholars that are cited in the debate. Kenneth Lieberthal is the most influential Western scholar in the debate. His book co-authored with Wang Jisi Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust (Chinese edition) is particularly popular within the debate. John Mearsheimer is also widely cited on the account of his offensive realism. However, most disagree with Mearsheimer’s pessimistic views on China’s peaceful rise, and his views are often introduced to set the context on why new type of great power relations is needed. Other influential Western scholars include Joseph Nye (often with the concept of soft power), Barry Buzan (be cited to represent the English school), Samuel Huntington (with his ‘The Clash of Civilizations’), David Shambaugh, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Keohane and Robert Ross, among others.

Chinese scholars are of equivalent importance, if not more so in this debate. The most influential Chinese scholars are all leading scholars in China, which include Yuan Peng (Director of Institute of American Studies in The China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations), Wang Jisi (Former Dean of the School of International Studies at Peking University), Qin Yaqing (President of China Foreign Affairs University), Yan Xuetong (Dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University), Zhou Fangyin (Director of Periphery Strategy Research Centre at Guangdong Research Institute for International Strategies), Yang Jiemin (President of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies) and Chen Jian (Dean of the School of International Studies at
Renmin University and the Former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations), all of whom have contributed at least an article to the debate except Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong. Yuan Peng, the most influential scholar in this debate, is widely cited for his active work on this topic.

Above all, both Western and Chinese scholars play important roles in the debate, and Chinese scholars are slightly more influential. This pattern differs from the Chinese discourse of core interests—in which Chinese scholars play a principal role (Zeng et al., 2015)—and that of regime legitimacy which is dominated by Western scholars (Zeng, 2014).

Concluding remarks

With China’s rise, Sino–US relations have become increasingly important and perhaps dangerous. How China fills the substance of the new type of great power relations and how the United States responds to these Chinese initiatives probably will determine the Asian landscape and perhaps the international order in decades to come. New type of great power relations means a positive signal about China’s responsible behaviour to some and a ‘trap’ to others. A better response to this Chinese initiative requires a more comprehensive understanding as to how and where it comes from. As this article shows, the academic discussion on new type of great power relations can be traced back to the late 1990s when it referred to China’s relations with Russia—a relationship among normal powers. Yet, driven by China’s rise, China’s international identity has shifted as to a unique great power and rising power (or even a superpower). Consequently, this shift has fundamentally changed contemporary debate on new type of great power relations—a debate that focuses on Sino–US relations and how to manage conflicts between a rising power and existing hegemon.

Nonetheless, as this article reveals, while there is a broad agreement on the importance of new type of great power relations to Sino–US relations, no consensus is reached on what new type of great power relations is and how China is going to put it into practice. Nor does it contain certain specific meaning until now. It would perhaps be misguided to presume that the ‘new type of great power relations’ comes with a predetermined, clear strategic intention. The use of this concept is neither determined nor unified.

There is also a strong fear that China may lose the discourse power of this concept if Chinese academics and analysts fail to provide specific substance for this concept—for example, this term may be interpreted by others (especially the United States) in ways that serve others’ interests rather than China’s. In other words, Chinese thinkers are concerned that China may be trapped by its own concept—no less than their counterparts in the United States. In this regard, the power struggle between China and the United States here does not lie in economic or military domains but discursive power. For China who aims to move from being a norm/system taker to a norm shaper, it is important to develop its discursive power and ability to define and operationalize core concepts to meet Chinese objectives. Given the current conceptual vagueness of new type of great power relations, the struggle over discourse is far from over.

In addition to ‘new type of relations’, ‘great power’ is the second pillar of this Chinese-coined concept. What is a great power and which country is qualified as great power? The author’s next goal is to turn the attentions to how great power is defined in this concept. As we shall discuss in the next article, the contemporary Chinese discourse of new type
of great power relations has been moving towards, what we call, a G2 with Chinese characteristics—a G2 relations defined by and for China/Chinese interests in Chinese terms (Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

Looking beyond the debate, the new type of great power relations is one of the Chinese initiatives in the broader context of China’s rise. It is almost certain that we will witness more Chinese terms that come with China’s theoretical power and rising power status in the global order. This has already been demonstrated by the initiative of ‘One Belt One Road/New Silk Road’. A better understanding of China’s rise and its strategic intentions requires closer observation in terms of China’s every move. How these new concepts evoke domestic response with China deserve is of equivalent importance to the international response. To be sure, my methodological approach is not the only way to study the relevant areas. However, it provides a systematic, replicable way to examine these Chinese debate and discourses in a relatively large body of work and in a relatively brief and concise manner.

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Notes

1. Interview conducted in Beijing in April 2015.
2. https://sites.google.com/site/zengjinghan/data
3. My final search was conducted on 22 December 2014.
4. It is included in my dataset because the author used both ‘新型的大国关系’ and ‘新型大国关系’ in the main text and referred them to the same meaning.
5. Nonetheless, I cite some conference review in this article for references.
6. In the case of multiple authors, only the first author’s institution is counted.
8. Although a few also noted that the United States is reluctant to accept it (e.g. Pang, 2013; Shi, 2014a: 28; Zhang, 2014: 56) and that they know that the United States might have a different interpretation over this term (e.g. Li, 2013a).

References


