

YONG DENG:

China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations

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Given the intense, ongoing debates on the implications of China's rise to great power status in the international system, coupled with Beijing's unprecedented and much-celebrated hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games, Yong Deng's latest book, »China's Struggle for Status« (which was also, notably, published around the time of the Beijing Olympiad), could not have come at a more opportune time.

A prolific scholar on China's international relations, Yong Deng does not fail to deliver a persuasive and thought-provoking analysis of the nature of China's international engagement in this ambitious book. »China's Struggle for Status« challenges conventional – particularly realist – perspectives on Chinese foreign policy by taking a critical look at the »status-driven« considerations guiding China's relations with the contemporary world. Unlike mainstream realist accounts of China's foreign policy, Yong Deng's study adopts a more nuanced and unique approach that draws on sociological and constructivist insights to shed light on the dynamics behind China's often mixed foreign-policy signals. In other words, rather than emphasizing the unmitigated struggle for power between states in an anarchic international system, Yong Deng highlights the significant roles that »identity-centered« ideas, such as status, reputation, and legitimacy, play in world politics and, more specifically, the ideational structures and constraints they impose on the foreign policy of a reemerging power, such as the People's Republic.

The central argument motivating Yong Deng's investigation is essentially the notion that »China's struggle for status has been a struggle for great-power recognition by balancing acceptance and autonomy, compliance and revisionism, power and legitimacy, and globalization and nationalism,« as China moves from the periphery of world politics to occupy centre stage (p. 2). Indeed, sensitivity to »international status« (»guoji diwei«) and the belief in the exigency of cultivating a positive reputation have long been an integral part of Chinese foreign policy. »Status« here refers to a »state's concerns over its material wellbeing and international treatment with the goal of engineering mutually reinforcing growth in both« (p. 2). And as such, in adopting a status-driven policy, the state's objective becomes primarily »upward mobility through participation in the globalized world« (pp. 2–3). At the heart of the analysis, therefore, is a concern with what can effectively be termed China's »identity management« in the post-Cold War era, the main challenge facing Chinese elites being that of maintaining a peaceful and secure international environment within which it can further its modernization drive at home and ensure its steady rise to great power status abroad (p. 3).

To illustrate his arguments, Yong Deng broadly examines how the People's Republic has adapted to a changing international environment, post-Cold War and post-9/11. He considers six major issue-areas, which also constitute corresponding chapters of the book. In Chapter 3, the issue of China's stance towards human rights is spotlighted, with international human rights norms identified as a »constitutive principle of contemporary international society« (p. 69), to the extent that they may even constitute a new »standard of civilization.« This poses considerable problems for the People's Republic, whose human rights record has consistently attracted international criticism. However, as Yong Deng demonstrates, there have been noticeable improvements in this area, with the Chinese government increasingly acknowledging its global responsibilities in an attempt to project a positive, benign identity, as well as to boost its legitimacy among other members of the international community.

Closely related to this attempt at positive image-building are the attempts made by Chinese foreign policy elites to allay fears of a »China Threat.« This idea of China posing a major threat to the stability and peace of the international order is treated at length in Chapter 4, in which Yong Deng provides an insightful analysis of the various official Chinese and academic responses to this notion. Yong Deng provides a number of interesting quotations from Chinese scholars and policy-makers, which he ably uses to demonstrate the complex and prismatic nature of the intellectual debate on this issue within China.

Subsequent chapters are mainly dedicated to empirical cases related to China's bilateral and multilateral relations. Chapter 5 looks at China's strategic partnerships with Russia, the European Union, and India. Chapter 6 focuses on China's uneasy, but necessarily interdependent, relations with Japan, whilst Chapters 7 and 8 analyze, respectively, China's participation in multilateral processes in Asia (the Six-Party Talks, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Association of South East Asian Nations) and Africa (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation), and China's increasingly problematic relationship with Taiwan as it reemerges as a great power.

Chapter 8, in particular, deserves special note. After a discussion of cross-Strait relations that underscores the centrality of the politics of status and recognition, Yong Deng aptly brings to light a significant paradox plaguing the already fragile situation, which is based on China's pursuit of a status-driven foreign policy agenda. By rhetorically affirming its pursuit of a »peaceful and constructive« foreign policy trajectory, so as to enhance its international status, China has brought about its own rhetorical entrapment, which effectively makes a resort to force unviable (since this would go against its new identity). At the same time, however, an emphasis on its international status has made any notion of Taiwanese independence from the mainland not only unpalatable, but also ever more intolerable, as the issue has become intricately bound up with China's national pride and reputation (see pp. 245–69).

Significantly, this observation would probably have gone unnoticed, if not for the application of a status-centered conceptual approach to understanding China's foreign policy motivations. The value of »China's Struggle for Status« thus lies in its refreshing theoretical outlook, which goes beyond mere realist or materialist reasoning, by bringing into relief a timely and important subject-matter, previously neglected in the international relations literature. Moreover, Yong Deng's ability to evade the pitfalls of blind optimism, on the one hand, and over-pessimism, on the other, in his account of China's contemporary foreign relations, is equally worthy of praise. Indeed, given the rapidity of China's rise and its corresponding economic growth, it is often tempting to constantly expect more from China, overlooking the many ongoing difficulties it still faces, both domestically and in its path towards greater security and integration as a legitimate member of the international community.

The sole shortcoming of this study, perhaps, and one which may leave some readers a little disappointed, is its treatment of certain empirical cases, which sometimes seems rather »superficial« – the discussion merely scratching the surface of complex matters and deep-rooted problems (for example, the sections on Sino-African and Sino-EU relations) – and occasionally disjointed, leading to some minor logical inconsistencies. Furthermore, although it is understandable that, given the comprehensive and ambitious scope of the book, Yong Deng was unable to explore in great depth every issue addressed (presumably as a result of space limitations), if he had allocated some space for an explanation of the necessary linkage between domestic factors and China's international behavior (which he himself stresses throughout the book), this would have rendered his analysis even more nuanced and »complete.«

Nevertheless, these are only slight imperfections, and »China's Struggle for Status« remains an ideal book for those who are fascinated by the rise of the »Yellow Dragon« and the possibilities it brings for change in the international system. Indeed, there is much in this book that makes it an excellent cornerstone for future scholarship on China's international status and its dynamic foreign relations.

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