

# On the Change of China's Identity, Interests and Behavior in Its Climate Diplomacy From 1999 to 2014

YANG Wenrui<sup>[a],[b],\*</sup>; WANG Wei<sup>[a],[c]</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Ph.D. Candidate, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai, China.

<sup>[b]</sup>Lecturer, Communication University of China, Nanjing, China.

<sup>[c]</sup>Lecturer, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, China.

\*Corresponding author.

**Supported by** the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities in China (NR2016029).

Received 22 March 2016; accepted 9 May 2016

Published online 26 June 2016

## Abstract

According to the constructivist international relations theory, the social structure of international politics not only influences an agent's behavior, but more importantly constructs its identities and interests. Are there any change happened to China's national identity, interests and behavior after its participation in the global course on tackling climate change? If so, what are these changes? This article uses content analysis to examine the identity and interests change in China's climate diplomatic discourse from 1999 to 2014 and analyses the data related to China's action on curbing climate change in the same period. After analyzing, this article finds out that there is a gradual change of China's identity: From a developing country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" to a major developing country that is willing to take responsibilities proactively under the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". As for its national interests, it finds that China's national interests change in three aspects, namely, level of importance, nature and identities of developed and developing countries in its national interests network. It also finds the change in China's behavior: China's carbon intensity per unit of GDP rises slightly during the 1999-2005 period, but it decreases year by year after 2005, which demonstrates China's fulfillment of its commitment to the world. It is argued that there is a process of inter-

constructive practices among China's identity, interests and behavior.

This article analyzes the change of national identity in the speeches of China's leaders and relevant ministries in international conferences on climate change and China's Action Reports and White Papers on tackling climate change (1999-2014). Then it analyzes China's national interest and behavior concerning climate change in the same period and the relations among the three, namely identity, interest and behavior of China. This article adopts a content analyzes of these speeches and reports (1999-2014) to depict China's national identity change. Then it analyzes the discourse related to China's national interests in these materials. Next, it analyzes China's behavior in tackling climate change by looking at the data released by the U.S. Energy Information Administration and PBL in the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. After that, it analyzes the relation among China's identity, interests and behavior through a comparative study of the three.

**Key words:** Identity; Interests; Behavior; China; Climate diplomacy

Yang, W. R., & Wang, W. (2016). On the Change of China's Identity, Interests and Behavior in Its Climate Diplomacy From 1999 to 2014. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 7(3), 1-7. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/8580> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/8580>

## INTRODUCTION

Climate change, a pure scientific problem when it was first discussed, has evolved into a major global political, economic and diplomatic issue, which has witnessed a wide disparity between the developed and developing countries on how to cope with it. China's guiding principle is to shoulder "common but differentiated responsibilities" as a developing country. However, with

the rise of China's national strength and its international status, China's stance on climate issues in its diplomatic discourse has been undergoing constant changes. How does China's identity evolve? Why does it happen? This article attempts to answer these two questions from constructivist perspective.

There are many researches on China's national identity building. Li (2012) thinks the implementation of China's foreign policy depends on the overall structure caused by the interaction among agents in the international system. In the international system, a nation's identity is a determining factor of its interests, stance and methods to achieve its interests. China always sticks to its position as a developing country, but with the rise of its national strength, China is increasingly recognized by the world as a "major power." These two roles require totally different participating mechanisms in international interaction and generate completely different results, so that China is faced with a dual-identity dilemma (Li, 2012, pp.4-20). Qin (2009, p.2) contends that in modern times, a major problem faced by China is how to view its relation with the international system. What are we? What is China? These questions have puzzled China for more than a century. Identity change reflects the change in China's relation with the outside world, or to be more specific, it is the result of participation in the international system. Therefore, to analyze the reasons for the change of national identity, one needs to discuss how international environment influences China's interactions with other agents. Xu (2008, pp.40-55) analyzes China's effort in building an identity of a responsible major power at the conceptual level and the practical level from the perspective of power, and he argues that China's effort is constrained by an external dilemma and internal tensions.

However, researches on Chinese national identity in its climate diplomacy are very limited, and among them very few have used empirical analysis method. This article attempts to overcome these shortcomings.

---

## 1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As an application of sociology to international relations and an outgrowth of critical international relations theory, constructivism has changed the configuration of international relations theory in 1990s. The analysis in this article mainly draws on theoretical insights offered by Wendt (1999), Katzenstein (1996), Guo (2001), and Qin (2012). Wendt emphasizes the systemic effects of international politics on states and pays special attention to structure. Contrasting to neorealist who views structure as distribution of material capacities among states, Wendt views it as "distribution of ideas." He further refers to shared ideas as culture, which is part of the structure. Meanwhile, Wendt defines norms as "shared beliefs" (Wendt, 1999, p.185), which tend to be one form of culture. On some occasions, Wendt defines

culture as "shared knowledge" and norms and rules as its manifestations (Ibid., p.253). Constructivists believe that norms, as part of the structure, have both constitutive and causal effects on agents. As Peter Katzenstein says in *The Culture of International Security*:

[We] use the concept of norm to describe collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity. In some situations norms operate like the rules that define the identity of an actor, thus having "constitutive effects" that specify what actions will cause relevant others to recognize a particular identity. In other situations norms operate as standards that specify the proper enactment of an already defined identity. In such instances of norms have "regulative" effects that specify standards of proper behavior. Norms thus either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behavior, or they do both. (Katzenstein, 1996, p.5)

Guo (2001) further defines the concept of norm as the international political and cultural norm. In sociology, culture is discussed at a personal level, and in political sociology, culture's functions are mainly measured on a national base; while in international political sociology, culture is often related to the international community or the international society. International political culture mainly refers to the minimum consensus reached by the international society at a certain stage over the basic issues related to the existence and development of human society, such as international relations, international politics, international order, international morality, war and peace, survival and development, international exchanges, international authority and international governance (pp.298-313).

---

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Then, does China change its national identity, interests and behavior over time through participation in international mechanism to cope with global climate change while it under the guidance of "shared concept"? What are the changes? What is the relation among them? This paper attempts to answer these questions:

**RQ 1:** How does China change its national identity in its climate diplomacy?

**RQ 2:** How does China change its national interests in its climate diplomacy?

**RQ 3:** How does China change its national behavior in coping with climate change?

In Wendt's theory on the relationship among identity, interest, and behavior, an agent's identity affects its interest, interest is rooted in identity, and identities and interests determine states' behaviors. Identities and interests are socially constructed by domestic politics and the international system. Furthermore, Wendt argues that "[a]gents themselves are on-going effects of interaction, both caused and constituted by it" (Wendt, 1999, p.316). He shows that identity can be produced and reproduced through the interactions among states, particularly through cultural selection such as imitation and social learning.

More specifically, he argues that identity is rooted in an actor's self-understanding and others' representation of the actor. Wendt put it plainly, "identities and their corresponding interests are learned and then reinforced in response to how actors are treated by significant others" (Ibid., p.327).

Wendt pays special attention to the significance of international systematic culture (or shared knowledge, expectation, concept, etc.) on nations, which shows a holism methodology. In terms of world view, Wendt disapproves total material determinism of advocating the value of ideas. He recognizes the existence of material factors, but he stresses that the objective factors can only produce influence on the behavior through the common idea shared by the community. The social structure of international politics not only influences an agent's behavior, but more importantly constructs its identities and interests.

Another theory related to the analysis of this article is the processual constructivism theory of Qin Yaqing incorporates two key Chinese ideas: "process" and "relations" in the structural constructivism. It focuses on interactive practices among states, and emphasizes the independent ontology of social processes which play an important role in constructing international norms and state identities. Qin contends that China would have a peaceful rise through its practice of joining and understanding the international community, which in turn would generate its identity change and a peaceful development (Qin, 2012, preface, p.11).

Based on the above theory, this article proposed a hypothesis to examine the relation among China's national interest, its behavior of participating in the global course on curbing climate change, and its national identity.

**RH:** There is a processual constructive relation among China's national interest, its behavior of participating in the global course on curbing climate change, and its national identity.

### 3. METHOD

This article analyzes the change of national identity in the speeches of China's leaders and relevant ministries in international conferences on climate change and China's Action Reports and White Papers on tackling climate change (1999-2014). Then it analyzes China's national interest and behavior concerning climate change in the same period and the relations among the three, namely identity, interest and behavior of China.

This article adopts a content analyzes of these speeches and reports (1999-2014) to depict China's national identity change. Then it analyzes the discourse related to China's national interests in these materials. Next, it analyzes China's behavior in tackling climate change by looking at the data released by the U.S. Energy Information Administration and PBL in the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. After that, it analyzes the relation among China's identity, interests and behavior through a comparative study of the three.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1 Change of National Identity

This article conducts a content analysis of the speeches and reports (1999-2014) to depict China's national identity change. Table 1 shows China's national identity in its climate diplomatic discourses mentioned above.

**Table 1**  
**China's National Identity in Its Climate Diplomatic Discourses (1999-2014)**

Year	National identity (times mentioned)
1999	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A developing country (1)
2000	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A developing country (1)
2001	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A developing country (1)
2002	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (3) A developing country (1)
2003	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A developing country (1)
2004	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A developing country (1) A responsible country (1)
2005	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A responsible developing country (1)
2006	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (1) A responsible developing country (1)
2007	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (5) A responsible developing country (3) A country that shoulders its responsibility within its ability (1)
2008	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (4) A responsible developing country (1) A country that is responsible to its own people and people in other countries (1)

To be continued

Continued

Year	National identity (times mentioned)
2009	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (7) A country that is responsible to its own people and people in other countries (7) A responsible developing country (1)
2010	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (4) A responsible developing power (2) One of the developing world powers (1)
2011	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (4) A country that is responsible to its own people and people in other countries (2) A responsible developing world power (1)
2012	A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (4) A country that is responsible to its own people and people in other countries (2) A developing world power (1) A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (2)
2013	A country that plays a constructive role (1) A highly responsible country (1) A developing country (1) A proactively responsible country (6)
2014	A responsible world power (3) A country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities" (2) A developing country (1)

As can be seen from the table, China's national identity has changed during the 1999-2014 period and the change can be categorized into three phases:

Phase One (1999-2003): China emphasizes that it is a developing country sharing "common but differentiated responsibilities".

Phase Two (2004-2009): While maintaining the same stance as Phase One, China stresses that it is a responsible country.

Phase Three (2010-2014): While maintaining the same stance as Phase One, China stresses that it is a proactively responsible world power.

The above analysis answers **RQ1** and shows that China's identity becomes more positive and confident in its climate diplomatic discourse.

#### 4.2 Change of National Interests

National interest refers to all things that meet its people's material and spiritual need. At the material level a country needs security and development, while at the spiritual level a country needs to respect and recognition of the international community. In this research, national interests are defined by a country's demand and aspiration at both levels.

Researches have realized that the only sound foundation for a country's sustainable foreign policy is a clear sense of its national interests. According to a report made by The Commission on America's National Interests, there are four levels of national interests: fundamental, vital, important and minor. The fundamental interests refer to the basic conditions of national survival and continuation, and they are related to a country's fundamental system and values, and its principle of happiness. The vital interests are those that must be safeguarded, or else the country's mission of maintaining world peace, security and happiness will be severely affected. The important interests are those that cannot be disrespected, or else the country's ability of

safeguarding its fundamental interests will be damaged. The minor interests are those that if damaged temporarily, the country's fundamental interests will not be severely affected (Ni, 2006, pp.254-255).

This article analyses China's national interests by examining their level of importance and finds that in the period from 1999 to 2006, China regards environmental protection and curbing climate change as important interest for 17 times, as vital interest for only 2 times. From 2007 to 2014, China regards it as important interest for 40 times, as vital interest for 37 times. The results show that China accords more importance to environmental protection.

The article then examines the nature of China's national interests. Are they exclusive interests, mutual benefits or common interests of all people in the world? After a content analysis of the above mentioned material, this research discovers that in the period from 1999 to 2006, exclusive interests of China are mentioned 16 times while the global common interests are mentioned only 3 times; from 2007 to 2014, China's exclusive interests are mentioned 44 times while the global common interests are mentioned 34 times. It is quite obvious that China emphasizes the global significance of its actions on tackling climate change.

The study then examines the identities of other countries in China's national interest network. Wendt has analyzed three types of anarchical culture: Hobbes culture, Locke culture and Kantian culture and he contends that they construct different identity relationship: enemies, rivals and friends respectively. A country as a member of the international community can only acquire its identity and national interests through learning. Because there are mainly two camps of countries in the climate change negotiations, this research uses "developed countries" and "developing countries" as keywords to search for the national identities of related countries and lists them in Table 2:

**Table 2**  
**The Identities of Other Countries in China's National Interest Network**

Year	Developed countries (to the other camp)	Developing countries (to the other camp)
1999	Irresponsible partners	Victims to be helped
2000	Possible partners	Victims to be helped
2001	Possible partners	Possible partners
2002	Unkind partners	Victims to be helped
2003	Potential partners	Countries need help
2004	Irresponsible partners	Victims to be helped
2005	Irresponsible partners	Countries need help
2006	Irresponsible partners	Countries need help
2007	Partners that should be more responsible	Countries need help
2008	Partners that should be more responsible	Countries need to act
2009	Partners that should be more responsible	Countries need to act
2010	Partners that should be more responsible	Countries need to act
2011	Partners that should strengthen dialogue and cooperation	Partners that should strengthen dialogue and cooperation
2012	Partners that should strengthen cooperation	Partners that should strengthen cooperation
2013	Partners that should strengthen cooperation	Partners that should strengthen cooperation
2014	Partners that should strengthen cooperation	Partners that should strengthen cooperation

Table 2 shows that in China's national interests network, the identity of the developed countries changed from the irresponsible, unkind partners to partners with whom for developing countries to strengthen cooperation. It also shows the change of the identity of developing countries: from victims to be helped to countries need to act and cooperate with the other camp.

The above analysis answers **RQ2**. In summary, China's national interests change in three aspects. First, in terms of level of importance, China accords more importance to environmental protection. Second, in terms of the nature of China's national interests, China emphasizes more the global significance of its actions on tackling climate change. Third, by observing the identities of developed and developing countries in China's national interests network, this paper finds that China emphasizes more the importance for developing countries to fulfill their responsibilities and to strengthen cooperation with developed countries.

### 4.3 Change of National Behavior

The most important measure China takes as a responsible country in tackling global climate change is to steadfastly pursue a low carbon economy. Energy conservation and remission reduction, the primary approaches towards the

objective low carbon economy is realized by bringing down energy consumption per unit GDP<sup>1</sup>, a strategy that is in keeping with China's role as a developing country.

China, itself as a developing country, has always taken the same side with other developing countries in requesting the developed countries to take the lead in cutting carbon dioxide emissions, without committing to cut emissions themselves. Until the end of 2007, China for the first time promised to take measures aiming at slowing down climate change, but not without certain conditions. In the same year, China had taken a series of measures to deal with climate changes, among the most noticeable are formulating *China's national program to address climate change*, establishing a national steering group for coping with climate change and enacting some laws and regulations. In the year 2009, China has for the first time promised on its own accord to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 40% to 45% per unit GDP by 2020. What China has done in keeping this promise? The present study has analyzed Chinese carbon intensity data from the year 1999 to 2011 issued by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA)<sup>2</sup>. GDP is calculated according to PPP of the year 2005 and each unit represents the amount of carbon dioxide emission (metric ton) per 1,000 USD GDP.

**Table 3**  
**China Carbon Emission Intensity (CCEI) (1999-2011)**

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
CCEI	2.2	2.2	2.1	2	2.2	2.3	2.3	2.2	2	1.9	2	1.9	1.9

*Note.* \* GDP is calculated according to PPP of the year 2005 and each unit represents the amount of carbon dioxide emission (metric ton) per 1,000 USD GDP.

<sup>1</sup> See Building a resource-efficient and environmental-friendly society. Retrieved from <http://www.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/shiyiwu/1125609.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Energy Information Administration. Retrieved from <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=91&pid=46&aid=31&cid=regions&syid=1999&eyid=2011&unit=MTCDPUSD>

Table 3 shows from the year 1999 to 2002, China's carbon emission intensity decreased somewhat. From 2003 to 2005, the figure stood at a high of 2.2 or 2.3. From 2006 to 2011 China's carbon emission started to decrease, with the figure for the year 2011 being 1.9, representing a decrease of 17.4% in comparison with 2005. Since the data issue by EIA had stopped updating since 2011, I have instead referred to China's carbon intensity data of the year 2014 issued by PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency<sup>3</sup>. According to this report, China's carbon emission intensity was 750, 700, and 650 respectively for the consecutive 2011 to 2013, with each unit representing the amount of carbon dioxide emission produced in turning out 1,000 USD worth of GDP at the PPP of the year 2011. The above analysis answers **RQ3**. As is shown by the data, China's carbon emission intensity was decreasing year by year from 2011 to 2013.

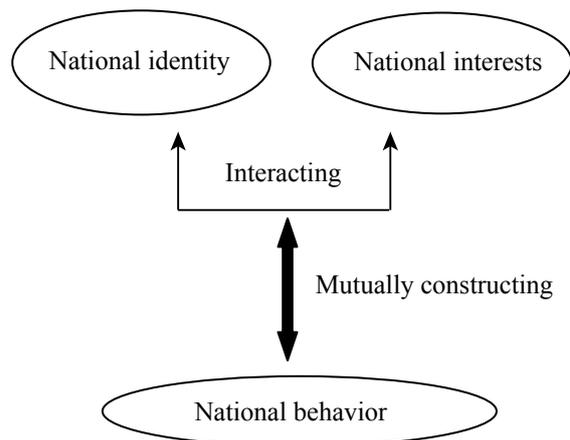
## DISCUSSION

Analysis of the shifts of China's identity, national interests and behavior has shown that China has asserted increasing confidence in the expression of national identity. While maintaining the principle of 'a common but differentiated responsibility' and holding on to a stance appropriate to a developing country, China endeavors to build its identity as a big and responsible country. Considered alongside China's national interest at the same period, the issue of dealing with climate change is gaining prominence in China's national strategy and is inherently motivated by the goal of sustainable development and pertinent to the key interest of the country and its people. To honor its promise in tackling global climate change, China has reduced its carbon emission year by year since it promised to take measures to slow down climate change under certain conditions since 2007. In a way, China did live up to its promise to its people and the world to be a responsible country in dealing with global climate change.

Viewed from the perspective of constructivism, China's national identity, national interest and behavior in its climate diplomacy are mutually supportive, lending a constructive force to each other. Simply paying lip-service will not do in building China's national identity. To match one's word with his/her deeds has been a much valued virtue for the Chinese people since time immemorial. If China's promise is not kept, the national identity it seeks to create will be like a house built on sand. The international community acknowledges China's identity as a big responsible country when and only when it takes concrete measures to deal with climate change,

<sup>3</sup> PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. Retrieved from <http://www.pbl.nl/en/publications/trends-in-global-co2-emissions-2014-report>

in keeping with its foreign propaganda. Actions will have an impact on national interest, which in turn influences the construction of national identity. Conversely, the change of national identity and interest will have a close bearing on the change of national behavior. According to process construction theory proposed by Qin (2012), the three factors are in a dynamic relationship of mutually constructing.



**Figure 1**  
**Relationship Among National Identity, Interests and Behaviors**

Similarly, Wendt defines three degrees to which norms can be internalized by states: The first degree of internalization refers to the situation in which states observe cultural norms "because they are forced to," the second degree of internalization "because it is in their self-interest," and the third degree of internalization "because they perceive the norms as legitimate" (Wendt, 1999, p.250). The above analysis shows China is actively joining international organizations dealing with climate change, accepting international climate system based on UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and Kyoto Protocol and taking actions to honor its promise. China's national behavior indicates it is willing to conform to norms. Xu (2008, p.53) also thinks that China has behaved differently from its past since mid-1990s in multilateral mechanisms.

As it is reflected in China's climate diplomacy discourse, the construction of China's national identity is closely related to its national interests, its active participation in international systems as well as the concrete actions it takes to keep its promise in tackling global climate change. The mutually constructive interaction among national behavior, national interests and identity within the constraint of international norms has brought about the change of China's national identity.

## CONCLUSION

Through a content analysis of discourses in China's climate diplomacy from 1999 to 2014, this study manages

to find gradual changes of China's national identity. The general trend emerging from the analysis is that, though the principle of shouldering common but differentiated responsibility remains unchanged, China has turned from a developing country with very limited commitment to a big and responsible country, ready to take more actions suitable to its international standing. This study has also explored the causes leading to the changes from the perspective of constructivism, using empirical methodology and locates the interactive relationship among national interests, behavior and identity as the driving force for the changes of China's national identity.

---

## REFERENCES

---

- Guo, S. Y. (2001). *Constructivism and international politics*. Beijing: Long March Publishing House.
- Katzenstein, P. (1996). Introduction: Alternative perspectives on national security. In P. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Li, S. J. (2012). China's dual-identity dilemma and its countermeasures. *World Economics and Politics*, (4), 4-20
- Ni, S. X. (2006). *Contemporary western international relations theories*. Shanghai: Fudan University Publishing House.
- Qin, Y. Q. (2009). *Global system and China's diplomacy*. Beijing: World Knowledge Publishing House.
- Qin, Y. Q. (2012). *Process and relation: A cultural construction of China's international relation theories*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Xu, Z. Y. (2008). Power and responsibility: The identity construction of China as a responsible world power in the Post-Cold War Era. *Fudan International Relations Review*, 40-55.