Critical Issues Confronting China:
Rebranding China in International Affairs
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President Trump has reportedly told former President Carter that “[he’s] worried about China surpassing the U.S. as the world's top economic superpower.” Is this worry justified? Being bombarded almost every day by conflicting signals from and analysis about China in the multitude of media coverage, how can we tell: what is China? What are China's future directions? What are China's strategies and tactics? Xiaoyu Pu, Associate Professor of the Political Science Department at the University of Nevada, Reno, dismantled the prevailing theories about China’s past and prospects and untangled many confounding signals into a logical picture.

Born in Sichuan Province in 1979 and educated in Ohio in the 2000s, where he received his PhD from Ohio State University, Pu expressed gratitude to China’s paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, for his setting China on a trajectory of opening and reform, which made Pu’s own overseas study possible. Settling in Reno, Nevada, he called America his “home country,” but refused to be pigeon-holed into either the “pro-China” or the “pro-U.S.” camp. He wished to understand China objectively and promote mutual understanding between the two countries.

Against the backdrop of two influential books, Graham Allison’s Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap? and Michael Pillsbury’s The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower, Pu rebutted the prevailing American view that China, dissatisfied with its status, has persistently tried to advance its power and world standing and that this attempt will inevitably lead to conflict with the established powers. However, does China have a coherent strategy? Pu thought not. He noted that China’s top leaders are actually vague in their foreign policy goals, while elucidating social economic goals clearly in their speeches. What is unambiguous in their foreign policy pronouncements is their insistence that China is still a developing country, despite America’s disagreement.

Like large companies periodically adjusting their business strategies, China is repositioning itself on the global stage, which Pu called “rebranding” its image. Pu identified not only various ways of signaling power and status but also the internal tension between China’s multiple identities, including developing country, socialist country, emerging power, regional power, great power, and super power, and its intention to appeal to multiple audiences, including domestic audiences, regional audiences, the global south, and the West.

Depending on the audience, China has different incentives to signal higher or lower status. For its domestic audience, Chinese top leaders try to demonstrate China’s international power
and status in order to secure their legitimacy domestically, as well as to flaunt the People’s Liberation Army’s absolute loyalty to the Communist Party and President Xi through large-scale military parades on important occasions. But these ostentatious displays have caused international backlashes as the established powers find them alarming and take them as a sign of China vying for the global superpower status. Consequently, Beijing is rethinking this exaggerated triumphalism.

A more incipient and costless way of signaling power and status is to put a spin on various narratives, where Pu defined a “spin” as a deliberate attempt to put the best face on one’s position, while stopping short of lying. On combatting global climate change, China highlights and supports the proposition of “common and differentiated responsibilities” because it provides a pretext for China to take on fewer responsibilities as a developing country than developed countries do. China emphasizes its developing country status with African countries in order to foster solidarity in multilateral institutions such as the UN and G20. At the same time, however, China also signals its recognition of the U.S. sole superpower status and unrivaled capabilities so as to reassure the U.S. that it will play within the international framework established and maintained by the U.S. Overall, China emphasizes its different identities to different audiences in order to achieve different goals.

In Pu’s view, China’s status-signaling is contested both domestically and internationally. Deng Xiaoping spoke at the UN general assembly in 1974 stating that “China is not a superpower, nor will it ever seek to be one.” China’s struggle for international status is primarily driven by domestic political calculations; at the international level, it is concerned about over-recognition of its status. With great power come great responsibilities. China is caught in the dilemma between seeking a great power status and accepting its corresponding responsibilities. While China touts its unique cultural heritage, its core socialist values, at least in name, include many universal values such as democracy, liberty, equality, and rule of law.

Pu ended his presentation with another personal observation to rebut the stereotypes of the American and Chinese peoples. Conventional wisdom views Americans as very individualistic and the Chinese much more collective-oriented because they are raised with Confucian filial piety. Yet a study has shown that the typical American lives within 18 miles from family, whereas he himself, like millions of overseas Chinese, lives across the Pacific Ocean from his mother and strikes out on his own.