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The Peaceful Rise Narrative:

Chinese State Discourse on Territorial Claims in East Asia

Topic and Research Question

This research investigates how Chinese state discourse frames its territorial claims in East Asia and examines whether this discourse aligns or contrasts with the official narrative of China's "peaceful rise." As China rises as a major power, its language and behavior increasingly shape international norms and regional balances. The peaceful rise narrative, rooted in principles like anti-imperialism, non-interference, and Confucian harmony, presents China as a cooperative actor. However, its official rhetoric surrounding disputed territories often reveals assertive, securitized, or nationalistic elements.

Given the intensification of regional tensions, particularly under Xi Jinping's leadership, this study explores whether China's discursive strategies reflect ideological continuity or strategic recalibration. By focusing on three key cases—the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Amur River dispute—this research aims to uncover patterns in how sovereignty, diplomacy, and identity are negotiated through language.

Research Question:
How does Chinese state discourse frame its territorial claims in East Asia, and to what extent does this framing align or contrast with the "peaceful rise" narrative?

State of the Art

This research draws on an integrative and multi-dimensional review of the literature to examine how the Chinese state constructs discourse around its territorial claims in East Asia. Anchored in constructivist international relations theory, the study explores how language, identity, and power interact in shaping state behavior. Central to this inquiry is the evolving concept of China's "peaceful rise," which has shifted from a developmental promise into a strategic narrative with geopolitical implications.

The review engages with key theoretical works such as Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane's **Theory of Ideas in Foreign Policy**, Zheng Wang's concept of collective memory and national identity, and the discourse-analytical framework developed by Chilton, Schäffner, and Dunn. It also includes empirical studies such as Lams' analysis of Xi Jinping's speeches and research on discursive legitimacy in Chinese foreign policy.

While existing research has addressed China's use of discourse in isolated contexts, this thesis adopts a lens across multiple case studies to assess how ideology, power, and rhetoric are intertwined in shaping Chinese claims.

Methodology and Approach

This study adopts Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) as its principal methodology, supported by process tracing and a most-similar-case comparative design. The aim is to explore how Chinese state discourse frames territorial claims in East Asia and whether this framing aligns or contrasts with the narrative of a peaceful rise.

The empirical analysis focuses on three case studies: the South China Sea, the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Amur River dispute. These cases were selected based on their geopolitical importance, temporal overlap, and similar structural characteristics. A most-similar-systems logic enables controlled comparison, allowing for the identification of discursive variation across cases with shared regional dynamics.

Primary data include Chinese defense white papers, official speeches, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements from 2000 to 2024. These sources are analyzed through qualitative content coding to identify narrative markers, rhetorical patterns, and strategic framing. The analysis is further contextualized using process tracing, which tracks discursive shifts over time in response to leadership changes, geopolitical tensions, or diplomatic developments.

The analytical framework is structured around four dimensions: (1) alignment with diplomatic processes, (2) national security framing, (3) nationalist narratives in times of tension, and (4) adaptation over time. These criteria guide a comparative interpretation of China's territorial discourse and shed light on how rhetorical strategies are adjusted depending on the audience, conflict partner, and broader strategic context.

This integrated approach deepens understanding of discourse as a tool of statecraft—used not only to reflect national interests but also to shape perception, legitimize actions, and reinforce China's positioning in the regional and global order.

Main Facts

This thesis demonstrates that Chinese state discourse surrounding territorial claims is highly adaptive and strategically framed according to context. Each of the three case studies reveals distinct rhetorical patterns shaped by the nature of the conflict and the relationship with the involved party.

In the South China Sea, China frames its claims through historical rights and maritime sovereignty while also projecting a cooperative stance in regional diplomacy. Although peaceful development is referenced, the discourse integrates elements of deterrence and strategic ambiguity, reflecting tensions between legal legitimacy and national security.

In the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, the discourse is more regulated and controlled, focusing on historical sovereignty, national dignity, and the protection of territorial integrity. While the peaceful rise narrative is present in formal statements, the dominant themes emphasize the legitimacy of China's position and the need for vigilance, especially in the face of perceived external challenges.

By contrast, in the Amur River dispute with Russia, discourse is notably conciliatory. The peaceful rise narrative is dominant, emphasizing historical reconciliation, mutual benefit, and long-term cooperation. China presents itself as a responsible actor capable of resolving territorial conflicts through diplomacy.

Across all three cases, the thesis finds that discourse is calibrated based on strategic interests, audience sensitivity, and geopolitical context. This variation suggests that ideological consistency is not always prioritized; rather, discourse is employed as a flexible instrument of statecraft.

Results

The central finding of this thesis is that China's peaceful rise narrative operates as a flexible strategic discourse rather than a fixed doctrine. It is used to project stability and responsibility, but in practice adapts to shifting geopolitical conditions, audiences, and strategic priorities.

In the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, discourse adopts a restrained and regulated tone. While sovereignty and historical legitimacy are emphasized, the rhetoric remains cautious. Calls for dialogue and diplomatic restraint help sustain the peaceful rise narrative, even if its influence is limited during periods of tension.

In the South China Sea, Chinese discourse is more ambivalent—blending appeals to regional cooperation with firm assertions of maritime rights. This duality reflects a pragmatic strategy: using cooperative rhetoric externally while reinforcing sovereignty claims domestically and regionally.

The Amur River Delta case shows the most consistent alignment between discourse and practice. Language centered on reconciliation and mutual benefit reinforces China's image as a power capable of resolving disputes peacefully, validating the peaceful rise narrative in both tone and substance.

Across all cases, the peaceful rise narrative is selectively modulated based on diplomatic context, domestic priorities, and conflict dynamics. Chinese state discourse is not only reactive but also performative—constructing legitimacy, shaping perceptions, and balancing competing objectives. Where rhetoric and actions align, peaceful rise appears credible; where they diverge, the narrative is softened and strategically recalibrated.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at https://utheses.univie.ac.at/

About the Author

Rania Mrini holds a Bachelor's degree in Law from Université Paris-Est Créteil (UPEC). She will soon begin studies at Sciences Po Aix. Her academic interests lie at the intersection of international law, political discourse, and East Asian foreign policy. After graduation, she aims to join a research institute or policy think tank working on globalization, international governance, and regional security dynamics.

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