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### **Diplomacy :**

## **A Slogan to Restrain Domestic Hardliners that**

## **Emerged in the mid-1990s**

Amane YAMAZAKI (The Canon Institute for Global Studies)

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一般財団法人 キヤノングローバル戦略研究所

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# **The Rise of the *Taoguang Yanghui* in Chinese Diplomacy<sup>1</sup>: A Slogan to Restrain Domestic Hardliners that Emerged in the mid-1990s**

YAMAZAKI Amane<sup>※</sup>

(The Canon Institute for Global Studies)

## **Abstract**

This article aims to explore the background of the rise of *Taoguang Yanghui* (TGYH), which is a well-known key phrase of China's diplomatic guidelines after the Cold War. This study argues that from the mid-1990s onward (and in 1996, in particular), both the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Zheng Bijian began to emphasize the TGYH policy in order to restrain domestic hardliners in China such as the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Chinese leaders have been cautious about mentioning TGYH because of the risk of invoking criticism. Furthermore, it is conceivable that TGYH has not been an official policy that directs Chinese diplomacy in the post-Cold War era.

## **Introduction**

A mainstream view on the Chinese foreign policy after the Cold War is that China has (or had) followed the principle of *Taoguang Yanghui*—keeping a low profile (韬光養晦: hereinafter, TGYH)—which was allegedly proposed by Deng Xiaoping around the late 1980s or the early 1990s [Friedberg, 2011, chapter 6; Gong, 2014]. Others have argued that the incumbent Xi Jinping administration switched TGYH to *Fenfa Youwei*—striving

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※ yamazaki.amane@canon-igs.org

for achievement (奮發有為)—as its overall strategic direction, tilting the Chinese attitude to other countries toward a more assertive course than before [Yan, 2014]. Chinese experts still praise TGYH as Deng Xiaoping’s political legacy that contributed to China’s struggle to surmount a severe external environment during the rapid transitional period between the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era [Zhang, A., 2019, pp. 375–376].

Although TGYH is widely known as a significant phrase that relates deeply to Chinese contemporary diplomacy to date, the question remains as to why and how the concept of TGYH ascended and came to be recognized as Beijing’s primary diplomatic guideline.

Whereas the existing literature analyzed the evolving process of TGYH by tracing it back to the 1990s, it has not investigated this subject in detail [Chen and Wang, 2011; Kawashima, 2011]. Li Yanming points out that TGYH is closely linked to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Zheng Bijian,<sup>2</sup> both of which are crucial actors in Chinese politics. On the other hand, Li’s study does not even minutely unravel the background and the process of the adoption of TGYH in Chinese diplomacy [Li, Y, 2017].

This paper aims to investigate the aforementioned question with primary sources in Chinese and secondary materials in Chinese, English, and Japanese. The auxiliary information and analyses will supplement the lack of original documents of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), to which scholars, including many Chinese, are unable to gain access. This study

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<sup>2</sup> As described later, Zheng Bijian is a key person who worked for propaganda campaigns to promote Deng Xiaoping’s political theory. He is also known for his proposal of the “peaceful rise” (和平崛起) in 2003 (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007).

essentially covers events during the tenure of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao from 1989 to 2012.

In this article, I argue that since the mid-1990s, some Chinese cadres and officials, especially the MFA, began to use the term TGYH as a means of promoting moderate diplomacy and a soft stance toward other countries to ensure flexible foreign policies. In 1996, which marked a turning point in Beijing's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era, China encountered difficult situations both domestically and internationally. MFA officials tried to coin a narrative that TGYH was a diplomatic principle directly suggested by the charismatic supreme leader, Deng Xiaoping, in order to counter hawkish hardliners within the policymaking community and general public who argued for assertive and militant reactions to the U. S. or Taiwan. This research also finds that Zheng Bijian played a vital role in propagating TGYH as a novel orientation of Chinese foreign policy and Deng Xiaoping's heritage. The hesitation of Chinese leaders to mention TGYH in public is attributed to the potential risk that it would provoke domestic antipathy. In conclusion, TGYH does not seem to be Beijing's formal strategy because neither the CCP nor the current government have granted an official status to this guidance.

This article is organized as follows. I first pursue the origin of TGYH and clarify its linkage with the MFA. Second, I discuss the intertwinement of TGYH with the MFA and Zheng Bijian, an important figure who was personally familiar with Deng Xiaoping. Third, I illustrate why a dovish group such as the MFA began to propagate TGYH to the Chinese domestic audience amid the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Fourth, this study implies that TGYH is a politically risky term in China. Finally, I conclude this study with the implications of the contemporary position of TGYH in Chinese diplomacy.

### **Reviewing the Origin of TGYH and its Relationships with the MFA**

Regarding the origin of TGYH, the following views are prevalent. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s China was undergoing harsh conditions influenced by political changes in socialist countries in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, the Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989 that brought strong pressure from Western governments to bear on Beijing, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. To overcome these ordeals, Deng Xiaoping, who was the supreme leader at the time, proposed TGYH as a diplomatic policy guideline. Notably, it was not a temporary prescription for addressing these difficulties, but rather the fundamental orientation of China's foreign policy afterward. Since the 1990s, China has engaged in a diplomacy faithful to this guidance [Friedberg, 2011, chapter 6; Gong, 2014].

To verify how Deng Xiaoping referred to TGYH in available materials is a first step to shed light on the roots of the principle. Although the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* is often quoted as the illustration of his announcement of TGYH by experts, the phrase itself never appears in the book. In the relevant part of the third volume of this collection, it is articulated that, on September 4, 1989, Deng pointed out the following terms as a way of responding to the international situation: “observe calmly, hold one's ground, respond soberly (冷静觀察、穩住陣腳、沉着応付).” While these terms are certainly expressed in combination with TGYH in later years, TGYH is not specified in the applicable passage (Deng, 1993, p. 321). Deng's only reference to TGYH is found in his speech during the Southern Tour in April 1992, which is filed in the second volume of the *Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping's Life* (Party Literature Research Center under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2004, p. 1346).

Even though the origin of TGYH is still obscure, some materials and media coverage in the early 1990s implicate a clue to the mysterious dictum for examination. For instance, an essay contributed by a member of the Wuhan Committee Party School in May 1991 stipulates that:

At the moment, facing an international situation, “keeping a low profile (TGYH)” and “be good at maintaining a low profile (善於守拙)” guidance raised by our central party are the accurate policies for the people of the CCP amid the key and tough period that Socialism replaces Capitalism, and those are important guidance for developing ourselves and advancing by means of defense (Zeng, 1991, p. 37).

In the same month, the *Township Forum* magazine introduced a brief story that Deng Xiaoping had cited TGYH, yet described neither the specific time nor place, and the commentary did not feature foreign affairs, but rather youth cadres in rural areas (Liu, 1991, p. 35). In March 1992, a bulletin of the Gangsu Province Party Committee, the *Party Construction*, internally informed its members of essential comments and speeches by the CCP leaders. One such notification was “observe calmly, hold one’s ground, respond soberly, keep a low profile, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership (冷靜觀察, 穩住陣腳, 沈着応付, 韜光養晦, 善於守拙, 絕不当頭).” Out of these idioms, the two phrases “hold one’s ground, respond soberly (穩住陣腳, 沈着応付)” are highlighted in boldface type and restressed by being separated from the others, but TGYH is not emphasized here. In addition, the figure who spoke the aphorism is not associated with a personal name on this page (The Party Construction, 1992, p. 1). Given

this information, it could be possible that some recognition of TGYH was transmitted down the hierarchy of the CCP. In September 1991, the *New York Times* succinctly reported that Deng had mentioned TGYH (Wudunn, September 8, 1991, p. 13). In November of the same year, the *Mirror*, a Hong Kong-based magazine, also published an article that Deng referred to as the “24 character” guideline: “observe calmly, hold one’s ground, respond soberly, keep a low profile, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership (冷静觀察, 穩住陣脚, 沈着応付, 韜光養晦, 善於守拙, 絕不當頭)” (Zhuang, 1991, p. 84). Even though these rumors and reports connote TGYH’s evolution in the early 1990s, it is very difficult to assert that Deng or the CCP officially determined the phrase as a guidance for diplomacy at this point simply because of insufficient evidence, such as an official document.

Incidentally, TGYH is often combined with another famous keyword: *Yousuo Zuowei*—make due contributions (有所作為: hereinafter, YSZW)—and the two words are expressed together as “*Taoguang Yanghui, Yousuo Zuowei*” (韜光養晦, 有所作為: hereinafter, TGYH, YSZW). However, no publication has identified that Deng Xiaoping himself combined TGYH and YSZW or mentioned them simultaneously. The latter (YSZW) is manifested in the third volume of the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping* (Deng, 1993, p. 363). Considering that TGYH was once described in the second volume of the *Chronicle of Deng Xiaoping’s Life*, it follows that TGYH and YSZW arose at different times and places, respectively.

Taking the lack of steadfast evidence into account, it is not surprising that one scholar holds a skeptical view as to whether Deng directly referred to either TGYH or “TGYH, YSZW” (Kawashima, 2011, pp. 18–19). In terms of the origination of “TGYH, YSZW,”

Zhang Qingming argues that there is no evidence proving when and under what conditions Deng Xiaoping presented it (Zhang, Q., 2009, p. 199). Briefly speaking, Deng has been broadly seen as the proposer of the idea of “TGYH, YSZW” for a long period of time, even without any apparent proof that he actually referred to the phrase around 1990 (Glaser and Murphy, 2009, pp. 18–19).

If this is the case, how then did Chinese leaders after Deng Xiaoping address the TGYH concept? First of all, it is necessary to survey whether Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, the two leaders after Deng Xiaoping, referred to TGYH at any meetings of the CCP or government in relation to Deng. If TGYH is viewed as being a precious and authoritative policy or strategy in Chinese diplomacy since the Cold War, it is likely that the dictum would have been used by at least one of Deng’s successors. Yet, mention of TGYH was not found in the memorial speech by Jiang Zemin delivered just after Deng passed away in February 1997 (Jiang, 2006, pp. 627–645), neither did Hu Jintao allude to TGYH in his speech at the commemorative ceremony of the 100th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping’s birth in August 2004 (Hu, 2016a, pp. 204–221). While TGYH is understood as being the basis for the direction of China’s diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, neither Jiang nor Hu made remarks about TGYH in the symbolic allocutions connected with Deng’s achievements throughout his lifetime.

On the other hand, it so happens that Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao have mentioned TGYH at places other than conferences pertinent to Deng Xiaoping’s political and personal accomplishments. A secondary source without detailed information indicates that Jiang Zemin mentioned TGYH in his speech in July 1991 (Zhu, August 14, 2010, p. 6). On the assumption that this testimony is correct, the most likely gathering at which he would have referred to TGYH would be the National Central Conference on Work

Relating to Foreign Affairs held in Beijing in July 1991. Many CCP members and government officials were present at the plenary and, reportedly, Jiang and Premier Li Peng gave important speeches on foreign affairs (Xinhua, July 27, 1991, p. 1). However, since the *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* that contains Jiang's key speeches and discourses does not include this oration in 1991, it remains difficult to determine the occasion of the reference to TGYH. The only place in the *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* where Jiang explicitly refers to TGYH is the statement at the 9th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in August 1998, which is recorded in the second volume of the publication. The manuscript in the *Selected Works of Jiang Zemin* states that Jiang referred to TGYH and YSZW when discussing Deng's foreign policy (Jiang, 2006, p. 202).

Hu Jintao mentioned TGYH several times, according to the *Selected Works of Hu Jintao*. The second and third volumes of the collection note Hu's reference to TGYH on three occasions: the Small Round-table Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in August 2003 (Hu, 2016a, p. 97), the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in August 2006 (Hu, 2016a, 518), and the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in July 2009. Notably, at the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors, TGYH was depicted by Hu in the new shape of "Uphold keeping a low profile (TGYH), actively make due contributions (YSZW) (堅持韜光養晦, 積極有所作為)" (Hu, 2016b, pp. 236–237)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Hu's utterance of the "uphold keeping a low profile, actively make due contributions" discourse is widely considered as a tipping point in Chinese foreign policy by China observers, which shifted Beijing's strategic postures from soft to hard. On the other hand, Bonnie S. Glaser, who conveyed the specific explanation about the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors, construes that the nuance of the conference would not signify a "sea change of China's foreign policy," but rather indicates an "adjustment (*tiaozheng*) that affirms the trend toward China's more active involvement in select issues that are crucial to the country's national interests" (Glaser, 2009). The author's position on this transformed TGYH and YSZW narrative is similar to Glaser's, observing that this conference and the reworded mantras involving these words are not a

Allegedly, Wen Jiabao, the Premier of Hu's administration, also touched upon TGYH during his tenure. Wu Jianmin, a former Chinese diplomat who had served as ambassador to France, writes that Wen stated at the 10th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in August 2004 that "TGYH, YSZW" would endure as China's consistent foreign policy guideline even after 100 years (Wu, 2005, p. 11).

The commonality between Jiang and Hu (and potentially also Wen) is that they were predisposed to mention TGYH in meetings attended by senior officials from the MFA. This tendency suggests that Chinese leaders such as Jiang and Hu referred to TGYH at places in which a large number of diplomats were in attendance. In sum, it can be said that the TGYH is inseparably tied to the MFA.

### **TGYH's Rise in December 1995:**

#### **The Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping**

##### **The Roles of the MFA in Narrating TGYH**

How did TGYH become a key phrase related to the MFA? According to Chen Youwei, a former Chinese diplomat, in October 1989, six months after the Tiananmen Square incident, the MFA submitted an internal report on international affairs which contained a description of Deng Xiaoping's "24 character" guideline for foreign policy: "observe calmly, keep a low profile, hold one's ground, respond soberly, make friendships, and know what is going on (冷静觀察, 韜光養晦, 站穩腳跟, 沈着應付, 朋友要交, 心中

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milepost in China's holistic strategy. As several scholars maintain, careful investigation is required to conclude whether Chinese behaviors became more assertive from the late 2000s than before and to determine the beginning of Chinese assertiveness as well as the driving force behind Beijing's pugnacious words and actions (Johnston, 2013; Jerdén, 2014).

有数)” (Chen, 1999, p. 100). Due to it being impossible to obtain this confidential document, it is uncertain whether the report gave a factual account of the idioms.

One of the high-ranking officials who first referred to TGYH was Qian Qichen, the former vice-premier and foreign minister. He made a speech at the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in December 1995, and mentioned the term TGYH [Kawashima, 2011, p. 19]. The two documents issued in 1996 record Qian’s speech that the foreign minister elucidated Deng’s reference to the “20 character” strategy in the context of international situations around the end of the Cold War. Qian declared that Deng, who witnessed the change of the Cold War structures around 1990, proposed the strategic guidance: “observe calmly, respond soberly, hold one’s ground, keep a low profile, make due contributions, and so on (冷静觀察, 沈着応付, 穩住陣脚, 韜光養晦, 有所作為等)” (Qian, 1996a, p. 3; Qian, 1996b, pp. 6–7). In addition, Tian Zengpei, the Vice Minister of the MFA, revealed that Deng proposed the strategic guideline of “observe calmly, respond soberly, hold one’s ground, keep a low profile, and make due contributions (冷静觀察, 沈着応付, 穩住陣脚, 韜光養晦, 有所作為)” in his closing remarks at the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in the manner of Qian Qichen (Tian, 1996, p. 361).

An interesting instance in this context is the *Encyclopedia of Deng Xiaoping’s Thoughts and Theory*, which was published in December 1994, around a year prior to the above speech by Qian Qichen. In the encyclopedia, Qian himself expounds the section of Deng Xiaoping’s thoughts and theory on foreign policy. He articulated that, in the aftermath of the drastic changes pursuant to the dismantling of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, Deng raised the strategic guidance of “observe calmly, respond soberly,

hold one's ground, broaden friendships, never claim leadership, know timing, and make due contributions (冷静觀察, 沈着应付, 穩住陣脚, 廣交朋友, 永不当頭, 把握時期, 有所作為).” Yet, Qian does not set forth TGYH in this article at all (Qian, 1994, p. 236). Considering Qian's reference to TGYH along YSZW in the following year, not mentioning the term in this article was unnatural.

With regard to the origin of TGYH, Dai Bingguo, a former state councilor, stated that “TGYH, YSZW” was originally “quoted from Comrade Deng Xiaoping's remarks from the late 1980s to early 1990s” (Dai, 2010). Nonetheless, Zhang Qingming indicates that evidence of Deng's actual mention of TGYH has not been publicized so far, and the relatively authoritative remarks on TGYH are in the speech by Qian Qichen in December 1995 (Zhang, 2009, p. 199)<sup>4</sup>. According to Zhang, after the statement by Qian, the core element of the “20 character” guideline was believed to be “TGYH, YSZW” (Zhang, 2009, p. 186). Wang Jisi also points out that TGYH and YSZW have become widespread in China since around 1996 (Wang, 2011, p. 8), and this year coincides with the time when the contents of Qian's speech were promulgated in a timely manner.<sup>5</sup>

According to Wang Jisi, TGYH and YSZW were initially notified only to a small number of policymakers and pundits in China. Importantly, he explains that this is because the peculiar term derived from an ancient Chinese proverb that could easily be misunderstood at home and abroad (Wang, 2011, p. 8). Still, if Wang's explanation is

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<sup>4</sup> M. Taylor Fravel considers Qian's speech in December 1995 as an authoritative statement regarding the “20 character” strategy, although he does not clarify the reason in detail (Fravel, 2008, pp. 134–135).

<sup>5</sup> Two Japanese scholars also suggest that a temporal gap exists between the proposal of TGYH by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1980s or the early 1990s and the diffusion of the dictum in China from the mid-1990s [Takahara and Maeda, 2014, p. 104].

correct and the reference to TGYH is politically risky, why had the key term prevailed among the general population since the mid-1990s?

As mentioned earlier, the phrase TGYH began to spread domestically in the mid-1990s. For example, the back cover of the original Chinese version of the book, *China That Can Say No*, a best-selling book released in 1996, shows the dictum “observe calmly, defend its ground, respond soberly, keep a low profile, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership (冷静觀察、守住陣地、沈着応付、韜光養晦、善于守拙、絕不当頭),” attached to the name of Deng Xiaoping (Song, Zhang, and Qiao et al., 1996). Partially owing to gradual dissemination of the narrative, the U.S. Department of Defense consequently described Beijing as having an ambitious strategy called “TGYH, YSZW” in the annual report on China’s military power in 2002 (The U.S. Department of Defense, 2002, pp. 7–8).

If the Chinese side intended to hide the TGYH principle, it would be rational to keep it more confidential. Indeed, doing so was viable for the CCP or the government, given their secretive nature as a socialist power. Nevertheless, TGYH has become well-known among the Chinese since around 1996. From a different perspective, it can be interpreted that the term TGYH was intentionally exposed for some reason in China. If so, an artificial and intentional factor was functioning during the period, and the deliberate leak of information led TGYH to gain attention in the policy community in Beijing as the spirit of Deng Xiaoping’s ideas on Chinese statecraft.

Granted that TGYH was not written in Qian Qichen’s explanation of Deng Xiaoping’s ideas on foreign policy in the *Encyclopedia of Deng Xiaoping’s Thoughts and Theory*, as a form of diplomatic guidance, TGYH was divulged at some point between the

publication of the encyclopedia in 1994 and the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in December 1995 or the exhibition of the Qian Qichen's speech draft in 1996. It was then that TGYH emerged as a key phrase at the heart of Deng's diplomatic strategy.

### **Zheng Bijian and TGYH**

As the previous section argued, TGYH has primarily appeared as a discourse among Chinese elites involved in foreign affairs such as the MFA. However, other party cadres or governmental officials outside MFA also referred to TGYH through the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in 1995. A particularly notable person is Zheng Bijian.

Zheng Bijian is known as the originator of the slogan for China's peaceful rise in later years. His career working as the secretary of Hu Yaobang and a speech writer for Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin, is unique even among many CCP elites. Additionally, he rendered indispensable service to the propaganda campaigns that sought to propagate Deng Xiaoping's political theory, including participation in the Southern Tour in 1992 and the compilation of the *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*. Adding to his distinguished career, Zheng had a close personal relationship with Deng (Glaser and Medeiros, 2007, pp. 296–297).

When Zheng Bijian delivered a speech at the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in December 1995 alongside Qian Qichen, Zheng emphasized TGYH in front of the other senior MFA officials. He applauded that one of Deng's diplomatic achievements was the establishment of an insightful strategic direction, "TGYH, YSZW," in the midst of the turbulence in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (Zheng, 1996, p.

19). Before the remarks in 1995, Zheng had introduced Deng Xiaoping's perspective on world affairs around the end of the Cold War, and he presented Deng's dictums of "observe calmly, hold one's ground, respond soberly, and keep a low profile (冷静觀察, 穩住陣腳, 沈着応付, 韜光養晦)" in a round-table discussion in June 1991, according to the first volume of the *Essay Collection of Zheng Bijian* (Zheng, 2005, p. 156). Zheng was possibly the principal player who disseminated TGYH as a slogan created by Deng Xiaoping, besides the MFA.

Furthermore, the relationships between TGYH and the Publicity Department of the CCP are crucial as Zheng Bijian was a deputy director of the party organ from 1992 to 1997. Nishikura Kazuyoshi writes that he obtained an internal document that designates a guideline for the press of the Publicity Department of the CCP in the first half of 1992, and the classified resource included TGYH as a part of Deng Xiaoping's "24 character" guideline (Nishikura, 2017, p. 11). In December 1996, Ding Guangeng, Director of the Publicity Department of the CCP and Zheng's superior, also articulated in his speech that Deng proposed the policies of TGYH and YSZW when Western countries were imposing economic sanctions on China (Ding, December 24, 1996, p. 9).

In a nutshell, it is likely that TGYH was promoted as Deng Xiaoping's own proposal based on a consensus between the MFA, Zheng Bijian, and the Publicity Department of the CCP. Moreover, it is reasonable to conceive that TGYH has broad appeal within the CCP and the PRC government as a result of a coalition among these different actors<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In 1991, the MFA and the Publicity Department of the CCP drafted a secret document for a propaganda campaign against the U.S., in which critical tones on Washington come to the fore in the wake of prevailing anti-Americanism after the Tiananmen Square incident and the successive unrest between the two countries. Yet, to cope well with the complexity of China's U. S. policy, Deng Xiaoping argued for flexibility in

That said, the MFA should have been the prime mover that took a major initiative to promote TGYH domestically, given that it was bolstered at the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in December 1995, which was hosted by the government agency.

The next section focuses on the MFA in particular and attempts to clarify their bureaucratic preference for advertising TGYH in Chinese politics during the mid-1990s.

### **Emergence of TGYH and Domestic and Foreign Environments in the mid-1990s “1996” as a Turning Point**

Essentially, the timing of the ascension of TGYH is decisive and the key to deciphering the riddle of the illustrious dictum. It was in 1996 that TGYH arose as a discourse by senior officials of the Chinese government. Although the speech by Qian Qichen was delivered in December 1995, both documents recording his speech were publicized in 1996, as already noted.

For three reasons, 1996 and the surrounding years were a watershed for China in the post-Cold War era: the first is Deng Xiaoping’s retirement from politics; the second is the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis and Beijing’s unstable relations with the U. S.; and the third is the domestic controversy over China’s foreign policy in the new age.

First, in spite of withdrawing from politics due to health issues, Deng Xiaoping was still the most significant figure in the CCP, and his theory and discourse maintained political prestige across Chinese society. In such a milieu, Zheng Bjjian played a major role in shaping Deng’s theory and thoughts [Glaser and Medeiros, 2007]. On the other

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negotiations with the U. S. government by soothing anti-American ideologists (Whiting, 1995, pp. 303-306).

hand, Deng's retirement could deepen the lingering fragmentation between diplomats and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), in the process of creating China's foreign policy. The PLA officers viewed Deng as a legendary comrade thanks to his brilliant military career during both the anti-Japanese guerrilla war and the civil war against the Kuomintang. Deng assumed a particularly important role in resolving frictions between the MFA and the PLA when military personnel complained about China's external policy, which was chiefly implemented by diplomats (Swaine, 1998, p. 35). In other words, Deng's absence meant that the CCP would lose the last man capable of easing the tension between the MFA and PLA. Jiang Zemin was inferior to Deng in terms of authority and influence over the PLA as he lacked a military background. Moreover, the new leader's relationship with military officers was weak and fragile, despite the fact that he enjoyed the highest position and status in the Communist Party. The disadvantage suffered by Jiang constrained him from acting as a mediator between the PLA and other organizations (Shambaugh, 1996).

Second, the mid-1990s overlaps with the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. At that time, the China threat theory was beginning to spread in East Asia as a repercussion of the PLA's belligerence with no hesitation to use force throughout the crisis, as well as the South China Sea disputes with several Southeast Asian states. Against this backdrop, some Chinese elites began to opine that a mitigation of the China threat theory abroad was requisite to improve the external environment. Lee Teng-hui's visit to the U. S. in 1995 and rising tensions in the Taiwan Straits had induced China to adopt assertive postures toward other countries, and this assertiveness backfired as its responses simply made East Asian nations more anxious about Beijing's intention as a rising power and urged Washington to further strengthen its ties with Taipei. For some Chinese people, it was

expected that the ideal style of China's diplomacy after the military confrontation was to prioritize cooperation with regional governments (Goldstein, 2001, p. 843). In conjunction with the worsening situations, China continued negotiations for its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the mid-1990s. The most difficult hurdle for China's entry into the WTO was bargaining with the U. S., and a stable relationship with Washington was a prerequisite for the successful settlement (Liang, 2002).

Last but not least, the MFA and PLA were debating over what kind of foreign policy should be formulated after the end of the Cold War. For example, the MFA and PLA disagreed over how to treat the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea under the Territorial Sea Law enacted in China in February 1992. The MFA, which wanted to keep an intimate nexus with Japan, worried that if the bill included the Senkaku Islands, it would stimulate protests from Tokyo. As opposed to the MFA, the PLA strongly insisted on the inclusion and specific articulation of the Senkaku Islands in the legislation. In the end, the PLA's claims passed, and the Senkaku Islands were articulated in the Territorial Sea Law (Nishikura, 2017). By the same token, the MFA and PLA continued intense controversies over the South China Sea since the late 1980s (Garver, 1992).

The Third Taiwan Strait Crisis further exacerbated the discord between diplomats and the military concerning overall foreign policy, especially on Taiwan affairs and U.S.–China relations. The essence of the MFA–PLA discord is, if simplified, that the latter prioritizes assertive postures while the former prioritizes moderate and soft policies (Swaine, 1998, pp. 33–36). The PLA has considered Qian Qichen and the MFA to be feeble against Washington over trade, human rights, and especially Taiwan issues. The PLA was the most hawkish force against Taiwan, and Jiang Zemin was compelled to accept their demands due to the adverse circumstances surrounding him (Shambaugh,

1996, pp. 234–236). When Lee Teng-hui visited the United States in 1995, both Qian Qichen and Jiang Zemin were forced to criticize themselves in front of the military. In particular, Qian came under attack from the PLA as the foreign minister reported to the members of the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP that the Taiwanese president was not ready to travel to the U. S. (Shambaugh, 1996, p. 210). Put simply, Qian Qichen and the MFA were pushed into a corner by the PLA during the crisis in the mid-1990s.

The process of China's foreign policymaking often follows the structure that the party's highest leadership develops a general strategy and entrusts each organization of the party and government with policy execution. The MFA is responsible for the tactical tasks of implementing diplomatic strategy without explicit commands from the top-ranking cadres of the CCP (Lu, 1997, p. 108). In return for the cardinal role in diplomacy, the MFA, being in charge of negotiations with foreign governments, may occasionally find it necessary to assume a conciliatory attitude or compromise with them in the context of bilateral or multilateral agreements. Again, owing to its moderate orientation on foreign policy compared to the military, the MFA bears the risk of being domestically criticized for a submissive approach. In fact, military personnel have been known to refer to the MFA with the disparaging name of the Ministry of Traitors or the Ministry of Compradors (卖国部) as the PLA regarded the foreign ministry as being too soft on territorial disputes with neighboring countries in the 1990s (Christensen, 2012, pp. 29–30).

Granted the harsh circumstances of Deng Xiaoping's retirement, increasing external tension, the necessity for a new foreign policy, and domestic pressure, the MFA in particular needed to establish a favorable vision for their foreign policy after the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. Based on the story so far, it would be a logical explanation that the

MFA started to emphasize TGYH in 1996 as a means of justifying and gaining broader domestic understanding of their diplomacy, as discussed further below.

By declaring that TGYH was proposed by and succeeded as a result of Deng Xiaoping, a charismatic supreme leader and respected by the PLA, MFA officials could divert domestic hardliners like military personnel from challenging their policy orientation.

### **The Crafted Legitimacy of TGYH**

The careful consideration and refined thinking by the MFA are found in the ambiguity of TGYH as a foreign policy guideline.

In China, ruling circles of the CCP deliberately announce vague slogans or principles when setting broad courses of policy. The incentive to notify obscure directives is to encourage each organization to compete with each other and to allow careful leaders to excuse and avoid responsibility even if deficiencies arise as a result of policy implementation. Accordingly, even if leaders proclaim unclear principles, they do not determine what sort of specific policies or measures should actually be practiced (Jacobson and Manuel, 2016, p. 109).

Confined in this composition, TGYH is nothing more than a political slogan and does not dictate a concrete policy. Reasoning from the rhetorical ambiguity of TGYH, the MFA can justify any diplomatic styles by claiming that they practice diplomacy in line with TGYH and are obeying the teachings of Deng Xiaoping, no matter what policy is actually being carried out by Chinese diplomats. The existence of TGYH would be expected to widen the range of options for external behavior, reduce domestic costs of making compromises in diplomatic negotiations with other countries, and facilitate China to join a multilateral organization.

Another notable example of a discourse that emerged in this period is the “New Security Concept (新安全觀: NSC)”<sup>7</sup> that appeared around the same time as TGYH. The NSC is a concept that was first proposed by Foreign Minister Qian Qichen at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in July 1996. While the NSC is generally deemed as an emphasis on multilateralism and a criticism of Washington’s alliance strategy, the proposal was also designed to restrain the hardline faction in China who asserted a strong external policy during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. One of the objectives for announcing the NSC was to persuade Chinese domestic audiences that military power alone cannot enhance China’s security [Okabe, 2002, pp. 226–229]. Similar to the NSC, it appears that the MFA started to propagate TGYH for the purpose of checking domestic hardliners in parallel efforts by their claim that they inherited the diplomatic principle from Deng Xiaoping.

A proper opportunity to symbolically embrace the significance of TGYH was the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in December 1995, which Jiang Zemin also attended, and the publication of the *Essay Collection of Deng Xiaoping’s Thoughts on Diplomacy* in 1996 by the World Affairs Press, a publishing company that is closely affiliated with the MFA. In this trend, Qian Qichen, and the MFA undertook a campaign for repeating TGYH as a slogan derived from the principles of Deng Xiaoping.

China’s diplomatic approach has indeed changed since 1996. From that year onward, Beijing launched a charm offensive toward regional states, laying aside its prominent aggressive attitude seen during the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. This change was embodied

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<sup>7</sup> Zheng Bijian was also a proponent of the NSC. He envisioned that the NSC should be the basis for China’s interactions with regional states to reassure those who were concerned about China’s ascent [Glaser and Medeiros, 2007, pp. 295–296].

in China's active participation in regional cooperation such as the ARF, its neighborhood diplomacy in East Asia to dispel the China threat theory, and its proactivity in propelling partnership diplomacy that prioritized economic and pragmatic cooperation with foreign countries (Goldstein, 2001).

In summary, TGYH became an indispensable catchphrase for the MFA as the guarantee of domestic legitimacy to reshape the direction of Chinese diplomacy in its favor after 1996.

### **TGYH as the Core of Deng Xiaoping's Diplomatic Thoughts**

As the purpose of this article is to unravel the origin and evolution of the TGYH's adoption to Chinese diplomacy, it is also important to ascertain why TGYH was selected as the slogan regarding foreign policy among many of Deng Xiaoping's discourses. The answer appears to be that TGYH can accommodate Deng's diplomatic thoughts in just one phrase.

TGYH is a phrase that includes nuances such as "keep a low profile" (Dai, 2010). The reason why TGYH suddenly emerged as a slogan in 1996 is likely because the phrase is the closest to the main idea of MFA's policy orientation compared to the other words listed in the "20 character" strategy. The point is that if a Chinese person hears one word of TGYH, which means waiting for and seeking a chance by concealing one's own abilities and accumulating power, they could imagine that Chinese diplomacy would be passive for a while, and that China would not spearhead the world for the time being, patiently dealing with its relations with other countries and refraining from an assertive or intimidating foreign policy. Namely, TGYH has a unique aspect that can mean a tolerant stance that Deng Xiaoping himself prefers.

Moreover, the same goes for why TGYH was collocated with YSZW and came to be expressed as “TGYH, YSZW.” The latter is translated by the Chinese government as meaning to “make due contributions” (Dai, 2010). As explained previously, although Deng Xiaoping did not reportedly use TGYH and YSZW in combination, it is assumed that Deng himself proposed the separate terms as a synthesized aphorism. It is taken for granted that Deng was unlikely to mention a couple of the keywords, so “TGYH and YSZW” seems to be an artificial slogan that was invented by someone other than Deng.

The database of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) indicates that “TGYH and YSZW” was first mentioned in an academic paper issued in 1994 by Qu Xing, professor at the China Foreign Affairs University (Qu, 1994, p. 16). Qu has a career working as a diplomat who served as Ambassador to Belgium and the Director of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), a think tank that is directly administered by the MFA; he is identified as one of the first persons to mention the phrase “TGYH, YSZW” [Kawashima, 2011, p. 20].

As for the bonds between TGYH and YSZW, former Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing points out a dialectical interaction between the two phrases and the inappropriateness of emphasizing one over the other (Li, Z. 2014, pp. 295–296). Li’s explanation denotes that TGYH and YSZW are inseparable, and that the essence of the idiom cannot be grasped unless they are integrated as “TGYH, YSZW.” Li’s thinking hints that the two terms complement each other; hence, they should be placed together as an aphorism, even if Deng mentioned TGYH and YSZW separately.

At the Conference on the Foreign Policy Ideas of Deng Xiaoping in 1995, Qian Qichen said that “we have to keep a low profile, bury oneself in work, but not to raise and to brandish a big flag, not to speak excessively, and not to do anything excessively [...]

China is not insignificant on the international stage, rather it has enough capability and necessity to make due contributions” (Qian, 1996a, p. 3; Qian, 1996b, p. 7). This discourse by Qian is consistent with the idea of “TGYH, YSZW,” the true nature of which was stressed by Li Zhaoxing. Judging from their opinions, TGYH and YSZW are well matched since they have opposite characteristics: passiveness and activeness.

If only TGYH is brought to the forefront as a diplomatic principle, the catchphrase would lay itself open to criticism as a symbol of weakness and capitulation in China<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, it is reasonable to consider that TGYH was intentionally unified with YSZW, which Deng also advocated. By combining them into one formula “TGYH, YSZW,” the slogan can parallelly accentuate contradictory aspects of a foreign policy, that is, being generally passive, but sometimes proactive.

Thus, in China, an emerging perception that the pivotal part of Qian Qichen’s speech in December 1995 was not only TGYH but also the collocation of “TGYH, YSZW” began to spread. The combination of TGYH and YSZW is a very convenient watchword that relies on Deng Xiaoping for its legitimacy, and it is remarkable that the dictums can simplify the ideal foreign policy for the MFA.

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<sup>8</sup> In this regard, a subtle allusion of dissatisfaction expressed by former Vice-Foreign Minister Yang Wenchang, who held various high ranked posts at the ministry during Qian Qichen’s authority, is suggestive of controversies over TGYH. Yang wrote a column on TGYH in a Chinese newspaper in 2011. In his observation, since Hu Jintao introduced the need for the “uphold keeping a low profile, actively make due contributions” course in 2009, some Chinese comrades have stressed the latter part by insisting on the end of the TGYH era because of China’s established status as a great power and ignoring the former part for the same reason. Yang argued against this school of thought by asserting that their understandings of TGYH and YSZW are inaccurate, and they should appreciate the inseparability of the two locutions properly (Yang, 2011, p.8). Yang’s explanation mirrors the domestic debates over and the unfavorable opinion of TGYH among the Chinese people.

## **The Potential Risk of Public Reference to TGYH**

The reexamination of TGYH in this article reveals that comprehensive consensus on the diplomatic line has not necessarily existed among all the actors involved in the foreign policymaking process in China. As previously noted, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao referred to TGYH or “TGYH, YSZW” at conferences attended by many diplomats. The motivation for their reference to the slogan appears to be that, as top leaders, they sought to show empathy toward the MFA in terms of foreign policy. On the other hand, TGYH is not written in official documents or statements by the party and government at plenaries such as the National People’s Congress or the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. This implies that not all those concerned with foreign policy advocated TGYH as guidance.

In addition, according to the facts unearthed by the author’s investigation, TGYH has not once been specified even in the formal annual reports (*China’s Foreign Affairs*) issued by the MFA from 1987 to 2019. The reason is probably that the MFA has not set TGYH as an official foreign policy for the sake of avoiding repulsion from domestic hawks who loathe soft policies.

Based on the analysis in this study, how can it be explained that both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao mentioned TGYH and YSZW at several political conferences, despite the fact that TGYH has not been instituted as an official foreign policy guidance?

Bonnie S. Glaser reveals that although Hu Jintao mentioned TGYH and YSZW during the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in 2006, the reference was not disclosed after the assembly (Glaser, 2007). Likewise, albeit that Hu said, “Uphold keeping a low profile, actively make due contributions” at the 11th Conference of Chinese Ambassadors in 2009, the remarks were removed in relevant reports by media in

accordance with the case of the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference in 2006 (Glaser, 2009). The implication is that the full text of Hu's statements at the gatherings had not been publicized until the publication of the *Selected Works of Hu Jintao* in 2016.

In respect of this concealment, both international and domestic factors worked interchangeably. Externally, for the nuanced disposition of TGYH that ordinary foreigners cannot understand, Chinese officials and cadres were apprehensive that the disclosure of the slogan would grow and deepen a sense of wariness toward China in other countries. Accordingly, the idioms native to China were not released to outside parties except to those persons concerned. Internally, the message of continuing with TGYH could be interpreted as the contentious token of passive diplomacy by the Chinese public. Domestic nationalism is mounting in association with the rise of China, and public opinions are inclined to call for more aggressive postures on regional and global stages, indicating a conceptual mismatch with TGYH. Hence, the reference to TGYH by the Chinese supreme leader was classified because of a fear of being condemned by hawkish voices. The latter view is supported by some Chinese experts who explain that TGYH was deleted from press releases to mitigate pressure on the leadership (Glaser, 2009).

The avoidance of the information disclosure suggests that mentioning TGYH was a political risk, even for the supreme leader Hu Jintao. In the same way, the MFA is no exception to this kind of jeopardy. If the MFA were to decide on TGYH as an official foreign policy, the political position of the governmental organization would be endangered, placing itself in a risky situation. It can be assumed that the potential pitfalls have made the MFA reluctant to formally prescribe TGYH.

Nevertheless, Hu's references to TGYH appear to imply his agreement on the foreign policy of dovish factions such as Chinese diplomats. Even though a public announcement

of TGYH is fraught with risks, Hu was likely to hold the belief that TGYH, which is seen to originate from Deng Xiaoping, is a desirable attitude for China to follow. Hu's articulation to TGYH is possibly to affirm the importance of the guideline for the MFA. Furthermore, the fact that the *Selected Works of Hu Jintao* first unveiled the statements of TGYH might indicate the sensitivity of Deng's dictums in China. In short, although having anticipated the possible danger of mentioning TGYH, Hu's retirement from office in 2013 permitted the CCP to open all the manuscripts of his past speeches, including TGYH or "TGYH, YSZW" to the public for the first time.

In conclusion, TGYH is a delicate key term that has been managed with the utmost care and attention within the CCP and the government where power struggles are always unfolding. Chinese supreme leaders are by no means immune from the political tide.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined TGYH, which has been commonly regarded as the basic principle of China's diplomacy after the Cold War. The conventional wisdom is that Beijing has engaged in diplomacy according to TGYH after Deng Xiaoping proposed the guidance. Contrary to popular belief, this research finds no clear evidence that Deng established TGYH as a formal policy. Rather, the author argues that TGYH is a slogan that the MFA and Zheng Bijian began to harness since 1996 in order to counter hawkish hardliners, especially the PLA. This study also implies how even a top leader of the CCP needs to carefully manage references to TGYH by considering the demands of assertive stances from hawkish forces in Chinese politics.

Close scrutiny by this article demonstrates that, after all, the significance of TGYH does not lie in diplomacy, but domestic politics. Considering that, in the past, TGYH has

never officially been included in formal documents at the politically most important plenaries for the CCP and the government, the author concurs with the insistence of some Chinese researchers that TGYH has not been an official guideline of Chinese diplomacy since the 1990s (Chu and Guo, 2008, pp. 7–8). Instead, TGYH should be understood as a slogan that arose as a product of bargaining processes over foreign policy within China.

Finally, what is the implication of the argument of this article for the current Chinese diplomacy, especially in relation to the ongoing U.S.–China strategic competition which began in the late 2010s?

It can be concluded that TGYH is symbolic of challenges in keeping a flexible foreign policy in China. The idiom justified by Deng Xiaoping’s personal authority is merely a verbal slogan without any coercive or enforceable measures to restrain domestic hardliners such as the PLA. If once hawkish opinions gained firm momentum in the policy circle, it would not be easy for a dovish force to curb the wrathful mood by hoisting the flag of the TGYH orientation. It appears that TGYH is no longer supported as an appropriate or legitimate principle that should lead Chinese diplomacy, so Beijing’s stances toward other countries are heading on a more assertive and belligerent course, which might escalate to a military clash with some, particularly with Washington.

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