



The Rise of China in Chinese Eyes

YAN XUETONG*

The rise of China will create a huge market that will eventually make substantial contributions to scientific progress. The rise of China will benefit the Chinese as well as the rest of the world. Economic globalization makes it impossible for any country to keep its scientific and technological achievements from benefiting others. Every rich country inevitably invests largely abroad and imports many products from others. During the process of economic globalization, the rise of China will inevitably stimulate world economic growth by more inventions, investment, and importation. It is natural that there will be different views about the rise of China. Despite this, everyone agrees that China will increasingly play an important role in global affairs as China's modernization has a major impact on the world.

Not long after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of China attracted international attention. After the Cold War, it was the foreign media, which first labeled China as 'a potential superpower'. Chinese leaders and citizens gradually developed the belief that China would indeed become a superpower in the visible future. This article illustrates how the Chinese see the rise of their nation.

Belief

The rise of China is granted by nature. The Chinese are very proud of their early achievements in the human history of civilization. In the last 2,000 years China has enjoyed superpower status several times, such as during the Han Dynasty, the Tang Dynasty, and the early Qing Dynasty. Even as recently as the 1820, just 20 years before the Opium War, China's GDP accounted for 30% of the world GDP.¹ This history of superpower status makes the Chinese people very proud of their country on the one hand, and on the other hand very sad about China's current international status. They believe China's decline is a historical mistake which they should correct.

* Yan Xuetong is Professor and Executive Director, Institute of International Studies, Tsinghua University. Previously, he was Director of the Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations. He is the author of *China and Asia-Pacific Security* (1999), *International Environment for China's Rise* (1998), and *Analysis of China's National Interests* (1996) as well as numerous papers and articles on international and strategic affairs. He is the member of the China Committee of the Council of Security Cooperation of Asia-Pacific (CSCAP).

1. Zhao Yining, 'The dramatic increase of China's comprehensive national power' ['Zhongguo Zonghe Guoli de Yuesheng'], *Outlook Weekly [Liaowang Xinwen Zhoukan]*, (27 September 1999), p. 18.

Since early this century, the Chinese elite, no matter whether nationalists or communists, has called upon the Chinese people to fight for national rejuvenation. The slogan of 'rejuvenation of China' [*zhenxing zhonghua*] was started by Sun Yatsen but it was continued by Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin.² The term 'rejuvenation' refers to the psychological power contained in the concept of China's rise to its former world status which can be seen in two common assertions. First, the Chinese regard their rise as regaining China's lost international status rather than as obtaining something new. This psychological feeling results in the Chinese being continuously dissatisfied with their economic achievements until China resumes its superpower status. Second, the Chinese consider the rise of China as a restoration of fairness rather than as gaining advantages over others. With this concept, the Chinese people take the rise of their nation for granted. They never concern themselves with the question of why China should be more advanced than other nations, but rather frequently ask themselves the question of why China is not the number one nation in the world.

The rise of China is a long-term historical process. Although the Chinese are unhappy with their current international status, they know there is no way for them to catch up with the United States in the near future. The disaster of the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s is deeply imbedded in both the Chinese people and their leaders. From the very beginning of China's reform and opening up in 1978, the Chinese understood that it would be a long march for them to achieve the Four Modernizations (modernization of industry, agriculture, science and technology, and defense). The Chinese Government developed not only five-year development plans but also plans for 20 years. At the 12th Party Congress of 1982, and at the 15th Party Congress of 1995, the Chinese Government suggested two, 20-year development plans.³ At the 13th Party Congress of 1987, Chinese leaders even suggested a 63-year plan for modernization.⁴

These long-term development plans illustrate both Chinese rationality and their patience about the rejuvenation of their nation. Deng Xiaoping frequently told the Chinese people to be very cautious and modest like a dog with its tail between its legs.⁵ Chinese leaders no longer expected to see China as a superpower within their lifetimes. Rather, they did their work to lay a better foundation for future generations to achieve that target. Since the rise of China is known as a long-term process, China has adopted a moderate foreign policy. Deng told Chinese leaders that it was a national policy not to be the leader of the Third World.⁶

The rise of China rests on the open policy. Among Chinese leaders or scholars, there are different theories about China's decline in modern history. Despite their

2. Jiang Zemin, *Holding Up the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory and Continue the Chinese Special Socialist Career to the 21 Century* [*Gaoju Deng Xiaoping Lilun Weida Qizhi Ba Jianshe You Zhongguo Tese Shehuizhuyi Shiye Quanmian Tuixiang 21 Shiji*] (Beijing: People Press, 1997), pp. 2–3.

3. *Important Documents Since the 12th Congress* [*Shierda Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian*] (Beijing: People Press, 1986), Vol. 1, p. 14; *Renmin Ribao*, (5 May 1995).

4. *Important Documents since the 13th Congress* [*Shisanda Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian*] (Beijing: People Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 16.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

6. *The Collected Works of Deng Xiaoping* [*Deng Xiaoping Wenxuan*] (Beijing: People Press, 1993), Vol. 3, p. 363.

differences, they all believe that isolation is the major factor explaining China's decline. Ordinary Chinese people, including politicians, may not be able to fully articulate the relationship between an open social system and economic achievements, but they are nevertheless convinced by China's differing economic achievements before and after 1978. The closed system ruled by Mao Zedong severely impeded China's growth, while the open policy adopted by Deng Xiaoping brought a long-term booming economy. Opening up has become a holy doctrine among the Chinese people, and every politician has to raise that banner to mobilize social support. Even at the meeting condemning the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Jiang Zemin said, 'We should firmly continue reform and opening up'.⁷

Although everyone agrees that opening up is a necessary condition for the rise of China, conservatives, realists, and liberals have different interpretations of what the open policy means. Conservatives regard opening up as an auxiliary instrument to implementing socialism, and they try to reduce foreign impact on Chinese society by limiting the scope of the opening up policy. Realist analysts stick to the principle of 'Chinese essence with foreign instruments' [*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*]. They suggest that China actively participate in international affairs, open itself more fully to the greater world, and enlarge international cooperation; however, all of these should be in favor of China's national interests.⁸ The liberal school of thought is also known as 'complete Westernization'. Liberal thinkers believe that China's future rests on world changes. Therefore, they suggest that China push forward with globalization and the creation of a democratic world order.⁹

The rise of China is and will be peaceful. The world economy is advancing into an information age, and knowledge is replacing resources and capital as the key element of economic growth. Colonization or territorial expansion can no longer make any country a superpower. The rise of China will be conditioned by its achievements in education and science. In 1999, the Chinese Government issued new education guidelines which encourage the development of private schools and the business management of education.¹⁰ China's population is six times larger than that of the United States. This means that the rise of China must be based on enlarging its domestic market because foreign markets can never meet the needs of an economy that is six times larger than the size of the US economy. After the world financial crises of 1997, the Chinese Government realized the importance of enlarging China's domestic market to a sustainable high growth. Soon after Zhu Rongji took power as premier in 1998, he promised to take effective measures to

7. Jiang Zemin, *Speech at the Meeting Welcoming Staff Working at Yugoslavia Federation* [*Zai Huanying Woguo Zhu Nansilafu Lianmeng Gongheguo Gongzuo Renyuan Dahui Shang De Jianghua*] (Beijing: People Press, 1999), p. 3.

8. Yan Xuetong, *Analysis of China's National Interests* [*Zhongguo Guojia Liyi Fenxi*] (Tianjin: Tianjin People Press, 1997), pp. 309–311.

9. Yu Xilai and Wu Zichen, 'New world order and historical choice of the rising power' [*'Shijie Zhixu he Xinxing Daguo de Lishi Xuanze'*], *Strategy and Management* [*Zhanlu Yu Guanli*] 2, (1998), p. 12.

10. 'Decision on further education reform and comprehensive implementation of quality education by CCP Central Committee & State Council' [*'Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan Guanyu Shenhua Jiaoyu Gaige Quanmian Tuijin Suzhi Jiaoyu de Jueding'*], *Renmin Ribao*, (17 June 1999), p. 5.

expand consumer demand, as well as capital spending, to stimulate economic growth.¹¹

Since 1992, some foreigners have been referring to the 'China threat'. This reference has increased suspicion between China and the United States as well as between China and some of its neighbors. Ordinary Chinese people cannot understand why the people of other countries are so intimidated by the rise of China. The Chinese people believe they have no motive or interest in expanding their territory or invading other nations militarily. Because the Chinese cannot see how the rise of China poses a threat to others, they regard the allegation of a 'China threat' as indicating political hostility and strategic conspiracy. They suppose that those people who speak of a 'China threat' are trying to impede the rise of China.

The rise of China is constrained by the United States. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States became the only superpower in the world. Meanwhile, the United States dramatically changed its China policy from one of cooperation to one of prevention, under the name of 'engagement'. After the Cold War, the United States undermined China's effort to host the Olympic Games, blocked the Chinese ship *Yinhehao* in international waters, condemned China's human rights record at the UN Human Rights Conference in consecutive years, increased arms sales to Taiwan, sent aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait in order to confront maneuvers of the People's Liberation Army, disagreed on China's entry into the World Trade Organization, and bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. All of these made the Chinese Government and its people believe that the United States is attempting to prevent China from growing strong so that the United States can continue to dominate the world.

Only a very few Chinese people want to challenge US hegemony. Most Chinese people merely hope that their nation can grow to be as rich as the United States and can secure proper respect in the international community. Concerning its relations with the United States, most Chinese people do not anticipate that China and the United States will be very close but do expect that they can coexist peacefully. They are not looking to share international leadership with the United States, but rather hope to see less US intervention into their domestic affairs. The Chinese understand that the United States is the most powerful state, and is able to make difficulties for China's modernization programs. For the sake of their national rejuvenation, the Chinese want to avoid confrontation with the United States. If possible, the Chinese still hope to develop cooperative relationships with the United States in many fields. If they cannot develop overtly positive cooperation with the United States, then they will try to maintain some sort of cooperation, however strained. They feel that any kind of cooperation is better than confrontation.

Impact

The rise of China will make the Asia-Pacific region more peaceful. Before the US unilateral air raids against Iraq in 1998, only students of international politics understood the theory of neo-realism, also known as structuralism. Prior to that

11. '99 Objectives to strengthen reform, opening', *China Daily*, (6 March 1999), p. 3.

event, most Chinese hoped that the rise of their nation would provide a better international environment for China's economic development. Few of them thought about the role of China's rise in terms of regional or global security. After the US air strikes against Iraq in 1998, the Chinese realized the danger of a unipolar configuration. Without Soviet constraints, the United States easily became impatient with the slow pace of diplomacy in settling conflicts with other countries and turned quickly to military solutions. The frequent use of military solutions by the United States caused the Chinese to consider the necessity for constraints on the Americans.

Because there is no common definition for responsibility, every country claims its military policy is responsible for international peace. In general, the norm of international responsibility is defined by the strong. The cases of Kosovo and East Timor have the same character but the United States adopted opposite policies toward each. It launched a war against the Yugoslavian Government but opposed military action against the Indonesian Government because of its different strategic interests in these two places. Meanwhile, the United States claimed that these different policies were both responsible. The current asymmetric system in the Asia-Pacific is dominated by the US-Japan alliance, which encourages unilateral military action by that alliance under the name of international responsibility. The rise of China will help restore a balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region and reduce the dangers embedded in the domination of just one power.

The Chinese people do not see the rise of China as an effective constraint on US military behavior in a short term, but in the long term they suppose that China's rise will play a positive role in creating a balanced international system. After the Cold War, East Asia, in contrast with Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, had no regional wars. This region could enjoy a more peaceful environment primarily because China grew stronger and stronger. The rise of China made the United States and its allies more cautious about launching military attacks against others in this region. Rather, they gave more consideration to securing cooperation with China. If China had declined like Russia, countries such as North Korea would have been faced with the same fate as Yugoslavia. In 1998, information was released that the United States had developed a plan coded 'OP-5027' to launch air strikes against North Korea.¹² Also in 1998, Nosei Norota, director-general of the Japanese Defense Agency, claimed that Japan could launch preemptive attacks on enemy targets and such moves could be justified constitutionally.¹³ In the following year, the Japanese Defense Agency started secret research on air raids against North Korea.¹⁴

The rise of China will make the world more civilized. Chinese written civilization is more than 4,000 years old, and its culture is so rich that it is admired by people all over the world. The core of Confucianism is 'benevolence' [*ren*]. This concept encourages Chinese rulers to adopt benevolent governance [*wangdao*] rather than hegemonic governance [*badao*]. In terms of foreign relations, Chinese

12. 'War in Far East Asia?', *Information Daily*, (10 February 1999).

13. 'New defense rhetoric, actions dangerous', *China Daily*, (12 March 1999).

14. 'Japanese air defense agency conducting secret research on attacking North Korea', *Tokyo China News Agency*, (13 July 1999), (in Japanese).

strategists aspire to ‘associate with benevolent gentlemen and befriend good neighbors’ [*qinren shanlin*]. In the last two centuries, Western countries took the leading role in world affairs. The strength and advance of Western countries created a political culture that emphasized power rather than morality, which has had a worldwide impact. As China rises, its economic achievement will make its political culture popular throughout the world. The Chinese concept of ‘benevolence’ will influence international norms and make international society more civilized.

Chinese philosophy stresses ‘don’t do onto others what you don’t want others to do onto you’ [*Jisuo Buyu, Wushi Yuren*]. The rise of China will expand the impact of Chinese culture, which will help in the building of new international norms. These norms can counter the power politics which prevailed globally during the period of colonialism. One of the characteristics of power politics after the Cold War is interference in domestic affairs, also known as the new interventionism. The new interventionism advocates imposing one country’s ideas on others with military force. The practice of new interventionism after the Cold War strengthened power politics and caused many military conflicts. During an interview this year, George Kennan reminded people: ‘[I]t really is in ill grace for us to be talking down to them [Chinese] and saying, by implication, that “you ought to learn to govern yourselves as we do”. ... But purely military power, even in its greatest dimensions of superiority, can produce only short-term successes ... I can say without hesitation that this planet is never going to be ruled from any single political center, whatever its military power’.¹⁵

The rise of China will bring about a booming world economy. The Chinese Government plans to make China a developed country by 2050.¹⁶ If the Chinese standard of living catches up with that of the European Union (EU), China’s economic size will be 3.2 times that of the EU’s GDP because China has a population 3.2 times larger. In the late 1990s, the GDP of the EU, the United States and Japan were, respectively, \$8,810 billion, \$7,630 billion, and \$4,060 billion.¹⁷ An economy 3.2 times that of the EU means one that is 1.4 times larger than the total GDP of the EU, the United States, and Japan combined. Therefore, it is easy to calculate how big the Chinese market will be when China implements its economic plan by mid-century.

The rise of China will not only create a huge market but will also contribute substantially to scientific progress. The rise of China will benefit the Chinese themselves, as well as the rest of the world. Economic globalization makes it impossible for any country to keep its scientific and technological achievements from benefiting others. Every rich country inevitably invests largely abroad and imports many products from others. During the process of economic globalization, the rise of China will inevitably stimulate world economic growth by more inventions, investment, and importation.

It is natural for Chinese and foreigners to have different views about the rise of

15. Richard Ullman, ‘The US and the world: an interview with George Kennan’, *The New York Review*, (12 August 1999), p. 6.

16. *Important Documents Since The 13th Congress* [*Shisanda Yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian*], (Beijing: People Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 16.

17. *World Affairs Year Book 1998/99* [*Shijie Zhishi Nianjian 1998/99*], (Beijing: World Affair Press, 1999), pp. 159, 827, 1054.

China. Despite their differences, they can agree that China will play an increasingly more important role in global affairs, and China's realization of the Four Modernizations will have a major impact on the world.