China’s Peaceful Rise
Reviewed by Chung-in Moon

The notion of a peaceful rise refers to the need for systematic efforts to bring about a better, richer and more decent life for China’s people in an atmosphere of external peace and internal harmony.

By Zheng Bijian

Lun Zhongguo Hepingjueqifazhan Xindaolu [Peaceful Rise: China’s New Road to Development]
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Zhenguide Lishijiyi he Lilungongxian [Valuable Historical Memory and Theoretical Contribution: Beijing and Shanghai Area Experts’ Discussion of Zheng Bijian’s Collection]
Guangming Ribao, editor

China This Year is Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The streets of Beijing are filled with pride, excitement and high hopes. Judging by the success of the country's miraculous economic transformation in recent decades, the mood seems more than justifiable. China's success is unprecedented in human history. Even the feats accomplished by Japan and South Korea cannot match those of this country of 1.3 billion people. China has undergone a long march of turmoil, hardship, and setbacks that darkened its future at different times — the Civil War, mass starvation during the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and political uncertainty in the mid-1970s. But the opening and reform launched by Deng Xiao-ping in 1979 produced profound changes. His dream to “become rich first (xianfuqilai)” now appears reachable, and is evolving into a new slogan: “Let’s become a strong nation (jiangqilai).” Newfound wealth and strength are a powerful testimonial to China’s peaceful rise.

The three books under review are about the notion of China’s “peaceful rise” (hepingjiuqi). The first is a collection of articles on its origins, foundation and prospects by Zheng Bijian, who as chairman of the China Reform Forum was the principal architect of that phrase. The second is a compilation of Zheng’s original works on the peaceful rise and its implications for Asia, the US and the world. The third is a collection of comments and discussion on Zheng’s theory by contemporary Chinese scholars in Beijing and Shanghai. The second book, Lun Zhongguo Hepingjueqifazhan Xindaolu (Peaceful Rise: China’s New Road to Development), contains the original Chinese text along with an English translation, so I focus most of my comments on this book because it is accessible to English readers.

Zheng is a leading contemporary Chinese thinker who has had a colorful career. Born in Sichuan in 1932, he joined the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1952. Following graduate studies at the People’s University in 1954,
he worked in the areas of theory, propaganda and policy for the CCP. Zheng drafted Deng’s famous speech during his southern tour (nanxunjianghua) in 1992, in which Deng vigorously promoted his economic reform policy. Zheng also served as an assistant to Hu Yaobang, CCP Secretary General, and later became the first vice principal of the CCP Central School when President Hu Jintao was its principal. Zheng is highly respected at home and abroad for his contribution to the theoretical development of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

Since the days of Deng, peace and development have been two major buzzwords for China’s leaders and policymakers. Zheng introduced the concept of a “peaceful rise” to further elaborate the peace and development thesis during a keynote speech at the Boao Forum in April 2003. It was a calculated and proactive move to counter the “China threat” and “China collapse” schools of thought then prevailing in the West. The CCP’s leadership endorsed the concept. Subsequently, during Premier Wen Jiabao’s visit to the US in October 2003, he reassured his American audience in a speech that China was strongly committed to a peaceful rise; domestically, President Hu also underscored the importance of China’s peaceful rise and an independent foreign policy line at a CCP politburo meeting.

Zheng’s theory of a peaceful rise is deeply anchored in Chinese realities. For starters, he is less than satisfied with China’s current economic development, calling it insufficiently comprehensive, unbalanced and only at an early stage. For him, there is still a long way to go before China can free itself from underdevelopment. China remains a developing country that faces enormous problems. The notion of a peaceful rise refers to the need for systematic efforts to bring about a better, richer and more decent life for China’s people in an atmosphere of external peace and internal harmony. The peaceful rise is thus a continuation of the past 25 years of China’s development experience framed around opening and reform. Zheng argues that China has made progress toward a peaceful rise by “independently building socialism with Chinese characteristics, while participating in, rather than detaching from, economic globalization.” He strongly believes that a peaceful rise will eventually bring about a renaissance of Chinese civilization.

Zheng acknowledges that a peaceful rise will not be achieved quickly, and it could take several decades — most likely until around 2050 — before China can graduate from being a developing country. Both challenges and opportunities lie ahead. There are at least three formidable challenges. The first is a severe shortage of natural resources, especially energy. As China has become the factory for the world, its consumption of energy and other resources has soared, posing a major challenge to a peaceful rise. The second challenge is the drastic degradation of the ecosystem. Rapid industrialization has seriously com-
resources, social stability, improving infrastructure, greater industrial competitiveness and a tradition of frugality that has led to high savings rates. In addition, deepening institutional reform of the economic system, improved legal accountability and strong government commitment are seen as opportunities. Zheng argues there are many reasons to be optimistic about China’s economic future, including the dynamism of the coastal cities and certain urban clusters in the central and western regions, as well as a large untapped reservoir of rural labor. He contends that China’s reform and open policy, coupled with widespread innovation, is producing a new synergistic vitality of labor, knowledge, technology, management and capital.

How to handle these challenges and opportunities? Zheng suggests three strategies. The first is to seek a new style of industrialization characterized by “high technology input, economic efficiency, low consumption of resources, low pollution to the environment and full play of [China’s] human resources advantage.” The second is to reject Cold War-style confrontation and rivalry, while actively participating in economic globalization, learning and benefiting from the fruits of human civilization, and independently building Chinese-style socialism. The third strategy is to transcend outdated social management modes and continue to build a harmonious socialist society by improving governance and social management.

Zheng’s intention is clear. He wishes to allay Western and Japanese concerns over China’s rise. He repeatedly emphasizes that China’s peaceful rise is based on the principle of “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” He believes this will be mutually beneficial not only because it will open new market opportunities, but also because it can serve as a model for peaceful coexistence and common prosperity in the region. Noteworthy is his subtle critique of the US, Europe and the former Soviet Union. China will not repeat three failed dreams of the West, he writes. It will not repeat the failed American dream of excessive energy consumption; or the European dream of colonial expansion and subsequent massive emigration; or the Soviet Union’s dream of an arms build-up, expansionism and hegemony.

He also sends a clear message to the United States, in particular. China is more than willing to cooperate with the US in all areas, but he warns the US not to make the strategic misjudgment of equating China’s rise with a new threat. According to Zheng, China does not have the intention, will or capability to seek hegemony and challenge the US’s dominant position. He says China is ready to promote mutual cooperation in economic matters, non-traditional security issues, and common efforts to create and sustain a new international order — as well as engage in dialogue and exchanges in other areas of cooperation. However, Zheng urges the US to discard its Cold War thinking, abandon its sense of cultural superiority — using US values as the yardstick for judging what is right or wrong — and overcome its groundless fear of strategic uncertainty due to China’s rise. Zheng insists that China will avoid the so-called tragedy of great powers, because it will continue to seek world peace.

The thrust of his argument is clear and convincing. The theory of a peaceful rise is all about domestic economic development, and that is the priority of China’s leadership. At the moment,
the idea that China would have hegemonic ambitions seems far-fetched. I wonder, then, why and how the idea of China’s peaceful rise has become the primary source of the “China threat” thesis. Of course, the literal meaning of the term “rise” (jueqi) refers to the sudden rising of a mountain from a plain or an uprising of the people. Thus, the term could be interpreted as carrying threatening semantics. But the way it has been pursued and articulated by China’s leadership, a peaceful rise is nothing but a commitment to steer economic development in an atmosphere of internal harmony and external peace, and to manage its negative consequences.

Zheng’s work is particularly impressive on two accounts. One is his obsession with the realization of a decent life for Chinese people, and the other is his candid acknowledgement of the paradoxical consequences of China’s opening, reform and participation in economic globalization — such as severe energy and resource shortages, environmental degradation and the economic, social, and regional polarization that has resulted from globalization and modernization. It is not easy for any socialist leadership to confess openly to such pressing social and economic problems and to seek ways to manage them. His theoretical efforts to combine socialism with Chinese characteristics with participation in economic globalization are also noteworthy.

Zheng’s theory of a peaceful rise continues the tradition of tauguang yanghui (conceal talent and wait for the right timing) framed by Deng Xiao-ping. But China has already risen. The passive and defensive tone evident in Zheng’s work might, therefore, no longer be appropriate. Otherwise, his book could be seen as being disingenuous. Whether China wants it or not, its status has climbed to such a rank that many now refer to it as being part of the so-called Group of 2 (G-2) with the US. The sheer size of China, its economic Vitality, impressive military build-up and the world economy’s increasing dependence on it have made China itself suspicious of its own intentions and will. In future works, this issue needs to be properly addressed. It would also have been much better if the Zheng gave us more concrete ideas on how China can contribute to the world. His work sometimes comes across as too defensive, leaving readers with the impression that China is still a self-centered developing country. Also, these three books fail to touch on issues pertaining to Tibet, Xinjiang, and other ethnic problems — an important omission.

Despite these shortcomings, these three books provide readers with new and valuable insights into the cognitive map of the Chinese leadership on peace and development. They should be required reading for those who are interested in contemporary China.

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