China’s Tortuous Return to Great Power Status

Wealth and Power: China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century
By Orville Schell and John Delury
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Reviewed by Samuel S. Kim

THE RISE OF CHINA is one of the most momentous and unexpected transformations in the post-Cold War and post-Tiananmen era of globalization. Indeed, China’s rise has become a virtual cottage industry, spawning a flurry of books and articles and stirring contentious debates in the academic and policymaking communities, particularly in the United States, and too often generating more heat than light. The implications of China’s rise for the US and for peace and stability in East Asia and beyond have been debated among international relations theorists, China watchers and policy pundits of diverse political and theoretical orientations, only to result in contentious prognostications and policy prescriptions.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that national power generally comprises economic, military and normative components. Economic power is perhaps the most immediately measurable and convertible form of power, because it can purchase military hardware as well as resources for soft-power diplomacy. From 1500 to 1800, China accounted for an estimated 22-33 percent of global gross domestic product. Only from the second half of the 19th century onward did China’s share of global GDP begin to decline precipitously, tumbling to 4.5 percent by 1950. A short list of more recent economic data may suffice to spotlight China’s rise to become the world’s second largest economic power. Just 35 years ago, when Deng Xiaoping announced the policy of reform and opening up in 1978, China’s total trade value was only $20.6 billion — ranking 32nd among all trading nations and accounting for less than one percent of the world’s total. Since then, China’s investment- and export-led economy has grown more than a hundredfold, at an average annual rate of 10.1 percent. China surpassed Germany as the world’s largest exporter in 2009 and surpassed Japan as the world’s second-largest economy in 2010. Even more remarkable, in 2012 China leapfrogged the US to become the world’s biggest trading power, bringing an end to the post-War II dominance of the US in global trade. In 2012 alone, China amassed a whopping trade surplus of $231 billion with the US, accounting for 32.5 percent of the total US trade deficit. By mid-2013, China’s foreign exchange reserves reached $3.56 trillion — the highest in the world, nearly three times that of the next largest holder, Japan ($1.3 trillion), and more than 24 times US reserves ($148 billion).

And yet, China’s economy as a percentage of nominal global GDP increased from 4.5 percent in 1950 to only 11.5 percent in 2012, reflecting affecting the diffusion of economic power — the “rise of the rest” — and the proliferation of nation-states in the global system. By comparison, the US share of global GDP fell to 22.5 percent in 2012 from a peak of 32.7 percent in 1985. One important countervailing factor in the calculation of China’s GDP in social terms is mounting environmental pressures and environmental deficit financing. The economic costs of China’s air and water pollution alone, for example, have been estimated at 3-8 percent of GDP a year.

Viewed against this backdrop, Wealth and Power, written by two eminent historians, Orville Schell and John Delury, offers a refreshingly original and illuminating historical analysis of China’s protracted and tortuous march to great power status. Notwithstanding their insistence that theirs “is not another book heralding or bemoaning China’s rise,” this book stands out as one of best on China’s rise published over the past decade. Proceeding from the premise of an old Chinese adage, “Past experience, if not forgotten, is a guide for the future” (Qianshi bu wu, houshi zhi shi), Schell and Delury take a different approach to describe and explain how, after more than a century of humiliation — a recurrence of the traditional bètè noire of “internal disorder, external aggression” (neiluan wailuan) — China finally transformed itself into the economic powerhouse of the global economy.

The authors shy away from mining new archival sources, a daunting and perhaps gratuitous task given the 200-year-long scope of coverage. Instead, they rely on existing scholarship, including their own work on China, video interviews of nearly 100 scholars, officials, diplomats, businessmen, bankers, NGO leaders and journalists, as well as their first-hand experiences and insights gained from traveling, studying, living and working in China. The authors acknowledge that “this book is part of a larger project undertaken by the Center on US-China Relations at the Asia Society in New York City documenting different aspects of China’s dramatic reform move- ment and transition to modernity. It is also a follow-up — and in a sense a prequel — to our already completed China Boom Project.”

In order to understand and explain the puzzle of the “Chinese miracle,” Schell and Delury dispense with any empirical or theoretical approach — or even a conventional narrative history — in favor of focusing on 11 legendary public intellectuals and political leaders in chronological order: Wei Yuan (1794-1857), Feng Guifen (1809-1874), the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908), Liang Qichao (1873-1929), Sun Yat-Sen (1866-1925), Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), Chiang Kai-Shek (1887-1975), Mao Zedong (1893-1976), Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), Zhu Rongji (1928-) and Liu Xiaobo (1955-).

The main title of the book, Wealth and Power (fujing), is a shortened version of the ancient motto “fuqiang,” a phrase meaning “enrich the state and strengthen its military power” but more commonly translated as “rich country, strong army.” The book’s historical starting point is the first Opium War (1839-42) and the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), because this is the beginning of China’s modern history and the start of the country’s long and painful road back to “wealth and power.” As Schell and Delury put it, “According to this canonical version of modern Chinese history, 1842 is year one. Every high-school student preparing to take the intensely competitive and dreaded college entrance examination is now required to memorize the official national narrative that divides Chinese history nearly into pre-Opium War [pre-modern] and post-Opium War [modern] periods.”

Schell and Delury cover the entire period of modern Chinese history thematically and formula- cally. Fujiang is the central theme (or goal) and the book’s subtitle — China’s Long March to the Twenty-First Century — reflects variations on the theme, namely the different formulaic policy prescriptions espoused by iconic intellectuals and political leaders for regaining wealth and
power. All 11 figures except one (Liu Xiaobo) are said to be united in their common pursuit of power and plenty (fuqiang), but propose different time-specific and situation-specific ways of regaining lost fuqiang. The single-minded desire and determination with which successive generations of Chinese intellectual and political leaders pursued fuqiang ultimately proved a unique force multiplier fueling the country’s long march to great power status.

A synoptic review and appraisal of these 11 influential actors in modern China’s tortuous developmental story begins in the lead-up to the first Opium War. As China’s humiliation deepened through a succession of defeats by imperialist powers, the frantic search to find the master keys to recover China’s lost fuqiang gained an almost intolerable urgency. All three 19th-century figures — Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen and Cixi — responded with various system-maintaining reform measures. Wei Yuan was the key figure who first responded to the emergency call, invoking the ancient legalist motto fuguo qiangbing, which has remained something of a “north star” for Chinese intellectual and political leaders ever since. Wei urged China to borrow from the West and “rich nation, strong army” gained an integral part of a sacred mission to save the nation. Liang’s call for the creation of “new citizens” (“new national identity”) marked a radical departure from the system-maintaining reform prescriptions espoused by Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen and Cixi. At long last, Chinese nationalism — China’s national identity — had come of age during this period.

The stunning triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution in czarist Russia in October 1917 had immediate if not lasting appeal in China. In many respects, the coverage of this turbulent transition period, especially the succinct mini-biographies of leading intellectual and political figures, is the best part of the book. Liang and other radical activists had launched a cultural and intellectual uprising known as the New Culture Movement, calling for a wholesale repudiation of China’s Confucian past and the creation of “new citizens” (xinxin). For these system-transforming reformers, the demolition of the country’s ancient Confucian escutcheon became an integral part of a sacred mission to save the nation. Liang’s call for the creation of “new citizens” (“new national identity”) marked a radical departure from the system-maintaining reform prescriptions espoused by Wei Yuan, Feng Guifen and Cixi. At long last, Chinese nationalism — China’s national identity — had come of age during this period.

While system-maintaining reformers were still agonizing about how to maintain the old order, Sun Yat-sen was already embracing nationalism as one of the most powerful catalytic forces for recovering China’s lost fuqiang. Sun assumed office as the president of China’s first republic on Jan. 1, 1912, but found himself out of power in a mere 45 days, relinquishing the reins of government to the more powerful Yuan Shikai. Ultimately, like so many reformers late in their lives, Sun became a belated proponent of protecting China’s traditional culture.

Like Liang, Chen Duxiu would return again and again to the idea of China’s culture being “rotten and decayed” (chengfu xixuai). Because he saw so much that needed to be first demolished, “destruction before construction became one of his, and the New Culture Movement’s, watchwords, just as it had been a mantra of Liang Qichao and would later become one of Mao’s,” Schell and Delury write. If Sun’s calls for greater nationalism had focused blame for China’s problems on foreign imperialism, Chen, like Liang, called for his generation to start looking inward to China’s own traditional culture as the primary obstruction. By 1920, Chen started organizing the first Communist cells in China, becoming one of the co-founders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. But in the end, Chen retreated to the comfort of the very cultural tradition he had fought so hard to overthrow.

For Chiang Kai-shek, who had taken over leadership of the Nationalist Party in 1925, his quest for fuqiang would lead him into a complex ideological world in which nationalism, democracy, Confucianism, Leninism, Christianity, and even crypto-fascism all mingled together uncomfortably. “At one point,” write Schell and Delury, “he was even reported to have spoken of China’s need to nacuihua, or ‘Nazify’ itself.” When Chiang launched his new Russian-trained army on the Northern Expedition, it seemed at the time a stunning and unexpected triumph, but this was soon followed by a series of disasters culminating in the final indignity of being driven off the Mainland to Taiwan.

Regarding Mao, Schell and Delury delineate two different wellsprings of influence in Mao’s early years, and therefore provide two striking portraits: Mao as a self-strengthening fighter and Mao as a relentlessly self-educating learner. The first was his experience of growing up in a house-
hold presided over by a demanding, unyielding and tyrannical father. Mao as a boy once threatened to jump into a nearby pond in order to spite his bullying father. Such experiences of endless struggle seem to have had a survival-of-the-fittest Darwinian effect on him, challenging him to forge a survival mechanism.

Second was Mao’s engagement in continual self-education. The young Mao was forced to study the Confucian classics, but they only turned him off, engendering a loathing of the monotonous memorization and recitation process. Instead, as a boyish tiger-monkey, Mao prided himself on surreptitiously finding creative ways to continue his subversive reading, “devouring everything I could find, except the [Chinese] Classics,” he told Edgar Snow in 1936. What separates Mao from other iconic intellectuals and revolutionaries at the turn of the 20th century was the fact that he never went to Japan to study. Nonetheless, works of progressive intellectuals made it possible for Mao to pursue relentless self-education at home. As he put it, “I read and reread these books until I knew them by heart.”

Another defining characteristic of Mao was his neo-Darwinian instinct and power to turn weakness into strength. His first-hand experience of the peaceful peasant movement in Hunan was a critical tipping point for Mao as an incipient revolutionary leader. “What Mr. Sun Yat-sen wanted, but failed to accomplish in the 40 years he devoted to the national revolution,” wrote Mao, “the peasants have accomplished in a few months.” It was in the context of turning China’s greatest weakness (its rural poor) into its ultimate strength that Mao penned one of his most celebrated lines: “A revolution is not like inviting people to dinner.”

With the ascension of Deng Xiaoping to paramount leader at the historical Third Plenum in December 1978 came his stunning volte-face policy pronouncement: “From this day forward, we will no longer renounce class struggle as the central focus, and instead take up economic development as our appropriate security assurances, Mr. Kim said, he would be able to convince his military that the US was no longer a threat and then be in a similar position to refocus his country’s resources.”

Perhaps inevitably, a book of this nature and scope entails some errors of omission and commission. Surprisingly, Chinese foreign policy even at the level of policy pronouncements receives short shrift. The authors might object that their book has little to do with China’s foreign policy. But China’s abiding quest for “wealth and power” organically links internal and external politics as two sides of the same coin. In effect, the forces of globalization have substantially erased the traditional divide between international and domestic politics, even giving rise to a new word, “intermestic.”

The coverage of the crucial decade of the 1860s is limited to Feng Guifen’s espousal of self-strengthening reform measures. The establishment in 1861 of a proto-foreign affairs bureau known as the Tsungli Yamen (or Zongli Gengwu Shiwu Yamen, “General Bureau for Foreign Affairs”) receives a one-line, tangential reference, but without any mention of a series of major diplomatic accomplishments that took place during that period. Indeed, as Mary C. Wright argued in her classic book, The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism: The T’ung-Chih Restoration, 1862-1872, not only a dynasty but also a civilization that appeared on the cusp of collapse was revived to last for another 60 years by the extraordinary self-strengthening efforts in the 1860s.

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Despite the repeated reference to China’s abiding quest for wealth, power and respect — the three faces of power — the book has little to say about Beijing’s pursuit of military power, even under the period of the People’s Republic of China. As if military power and nuclear power were not an integral part of fuduiang, the book completely skates over the high-intensity pursuit of nuclear power and status from 1955 to 1964. As John Wilson Lewis and Xue Li-tai argued, what really energized Beijing’s nuclear program is the national consensus that in a nuclear world, China without the bomb would not count or could not really stand up. This national consensus was well reflected in Foreign Minister Chen Yi’s statement that China had to build the bomb at any cost, “even if the Chinese had to pawn their trousers.”

Even in the post-Mao era, foreign policy and pursuit of military power receive only scattered and passing references in Wealth and Power. This leaves readers directly to the unanswerable problem of argument about Mao’s role as a “creative destructionist.” What is missing here is Mao’s role as a creative grand master in a superpower geopolitical chess game bringing about Sino-American rap-proachement-cum-normalization. Nobody spotlighted Mao’s geo-strategic accomplishment as well as the late Kim Jong-il did, as recounted by Ambassador Charles Pritchard: “I am struck by what Kim Jong-il, North Korea’s leader, said to Madeleine Albright, former U.S. Secretary of State, in October 2000. He told her that in the 1970s, Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader, was able to conclude that China faced no external security threat and could accordingly refocus its resources on economic development. With the appropriate security assurances, Mr. Kim said, he would be able to convince his military that the US was no longer a threat and then be in a similar position to refocus his country’s resources.”

Deng himself said as much when he offered an unofficial verdict that Mao was 70 percent correct (on foreign policy) and 30 percent wrong (on domestic and foreign economic policy). Apparently, the authors failed to consult robust Chinese discourse and rapidly expanding scholarly literature on globalization (quangqihua) in the post-Cold War/post-Tiananmen era. By the mid-1990s, the word “globalization” had found its way clear into Chinese discourse. The notion of China as a “responsible great power” (zhongguo weixie lun) in the global community — that China’s sense of responsibility to the world is commensurate with its status as a great nation — began to dominate China’s globalization discourse, even as presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao began to pay more attention to China’s soft-power diplomacy. As one Chinese scholar put it: “The first generation [Mao Zedong] paid more attention to military power; the second generation [Deng Xiaoping] placed more emphasis on comprehensive national strength. The third generation [Jiang Zemin] in the late 1990s began to pay more attention to soft power.”

All that said, this is scholarship of a high order. It neither celebrates nor condemns China’s rise. Nor does it delineate the rise-of-China thesis with the “China threat theory” (Zhongguo weixie lun). The authors avoid the common fallacy of predicting either the “coming collapse of China” or the “emerging superpower threat.” Unlike most books on China’s rise, this volume tracks and explains all the twists and turns in China’s long and torturous march to great power status. It contains an indispensable quarry of biographical information on 11 of the most influential intellectual and political leaders involved in China’s abiding quest for fuduiang in the last two centuries. Moreover, the book is beautifully and accessibly written for wider audiences, including non-specialists, avoidance international relations jargon. It is essential reading for any concerned about the shape of China’s international life to come.

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NOTES

1 John Wilson Lewis and Xue Li-tai, China Builds the Bomb, Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 130.