Chapter 12

Is China Rising?
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Introduction

Is China rising? How do we know? The vast majority of today’s commentary—in the United States and China, across the policy, pundit, and academic worlds—assumes that China is rising. But the vast majority also does not provide a clear definition of “rising,” or consistent indicators of what a rising state looks like. This chapter makes a simple but often overlooked point: whether China is rising—and at what speed—depends on one’s definition and indicators. Some suggest that China is rising rapidly, while others suggest that it is not—yet. While it may seem facile to contest the rise of China—few would argue that China is not somehow “bigger” today than yesterday—we believe that injecting a note of caution into the debate is worthwhile. The reason is that different perceptions and judgments about whether, how, and how fast China is rising have profound real-world implications.

We begin by outlining some of the conceptual and empirical “pluralism” that characterizes the rising China discourse. We then show that China is currently situated in relation to the hegemon (the United States) in material power terms such that it is not yet closing the gap. But if China continues to grow at a faster rate than the United States, then the mathematics of differential growth rates mean that China will begin to close the gap—and one will legitimately be able to claim that it is rising. We next comment on the question of China’s soft power—a popular term of late—and conclude that there are reasons to be skeptical of its utility. We finish with a discussion of the implications of different measurements of China’s
“rise.” The point of all this is an obvious one—we need to be very careful about how we use the term “rising China” because it has consequences for potential Sino-U.S. conflict.

The Rising China Discourse

The term “rising China” is seen everywhere these days. For instance, articles referencing “rising China” in LexisNexis (General News) increased almost 10 times from around 65 in 1995 to over 600 in 2006. Similarly in the same period, the frequency of articles on international relations and politics in Chinese academic journal that mention either “China’s rise” (zhongguo de jueqi) and/or “rising China” (jueqi zhongguo) increased about 27 times from 35 to 940.

Despite this increasingly common description, there is little consensus in academic discourse or political rhetoric about where it leaves China vis-à-vis the United States. Hillary Clinton recently called China a “global superpower.” Bates Gill refers to China as “a rising star in the constellation of great powers” (2007:1). One pundit claims, “China is already a rival of the United States in many important areas” (Ramo 2004). Others are more restrained. One group of scholars wrote recently, “it will be a decade, if not two, before China has a world-class economy and military establishment” (Kupchan et al. 2001:4), while others place China’s surpassing of the United States, “sometime before the middle of this century” (Lemke 2003:270). Avery Goldstein refers to China as a “rising but not yet risen power” (Goldstein 2005:29), while David Kang calls it a “major regional power” (Kang 2007:3, 12).

Chinese characterizations of the country’s status or position also vary, within narrower bounds. Chinese analysts have referred to China as everything from a not-yet superpower second only to the United States (Yan 2006:10, 18; Hu and Men:23); to a “cross-regional major power” (kuadiqu de daguo); to a “regional-type major power with global influence” (you shijie yingxiang de diyu xing daguo) (Renwei 2006:22); to a “developing major power starting to have an impact on Asian regional affairs” (zai Yahzou diqu shiwu zhong kaishi fahui zuoyong de fazhanzhong daguo) (22). One PLA Air Force analyst argued that due partly to a lack of land and sea space for potential expansion, the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) only choice is to be a regional great power (diquxing daguo). Others suggest that China’s rise is severely constrained by lagging “informatization,” low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, a large and inefficient agricultural sector, income inequality, and rising social welfare costs.