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Reflections on China's Global Outreach

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Zheng Bijian, *China's Road to Peaceful Rise: Observations on Its Causes, Basis, Connotations, and Prospects*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2011.

Peter Kien-hong Yu, *International Governance and Regimes: A Chinese Perspective*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu (eds), *China's Soft Power and International Relations*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012.

A little more than a century ago, the American scholar and diplomat Paul S. Reinsch observed that the “suddenness with which the entire perspective of the political world has been changed by China is unprecedented. That country, without question, has become the focal point of international politics” (Reinsch, 1900, p. 83). It can be argued that such statements clearly illustrate the complex dynamic of continuity and change in world affairs. Thus, while the global context of Reinsch's proclamation has changed significantly from his day, the patterns of interaction to which it refers appear to show remarkable resilience. In many ways, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars, policy-makers, and publics demonstrate a mixture of fascination and consternation with the patterns and practices of China's domestic international affairs like that shown by their predecessors at the start of the twentieth century.

Positioned as the driving force behind the so-called “rise of Asia,” China has extended a variety of new roles and attitudes into world politics, resulting in a rash of attention being paid to Beijing's global outreach. The established view is that the complex interaction between the very turbulence of the post-1989 period and China's simultaneous ability to maintain consistent levels of economic growth have allowed China to demonstrate an enhanced confidence and ability to fashion international relations. These transformations appear to attest both to the transformations within and the transformative potential of Chinese foreign policy attitudes. At the same time, there is a growing interest in (as well as anxiety about) the prospective trajectories of Beijing's international interactions.

In response to this overwhelming attention, commentaries on China's growing prominence seem to be saturated by a hoard of animal allegories, within which China plays roles ranging from cuddly panda to a fire-breathing dragon, to assist with the explanation and understanding of Beijing's international outreach. The question nevertheless remains: what does this menagerie of representations tell us about the future roles and interactions of China? Do such images assist current engagements with the global “shift to the East,” or do they obfuscate the field of vision? According to the authors of the three volumes under review, the answer to such queries depends on context. For Zheng Bijian, the singularity of China's “peaceful rise” in the history of international relations demonstrates Beijing's promise and potential. To the contributors of the volume edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu, China's increasing prominence and outreach reveal the workings of a nascent “soft power” strategy. Peter Kien-hong Yu takes this

suggestion even further by arguing that China's outreach in international life in fact amounts to the emergence of new regimes of global governance.

In this respect, all three books under review share a similar fascination with the ongoing changes in the processes, practices, and trajectories of world affairs as a result of China's growing prominence. In particular, the works purposefully draw attention to Chinese interpretations of Beijing's global prominence in the form of thoughtful assessments of and cogent parallels drawn with dominant Western understandings. At the same time, the contributors to the three volumes emphasize that the growing significance of China is particularly exceptional because it is occurring in the turbulent context of widening and deepening dynamics of globalization. The following sections outline the individual take of Zheng Bijian, Peter Kien-hong Yu, and the contributors to the collection edited by Honyi Lai and Yiyi Lu on the patterns, practices, and strategies of China's international interactions.

China's "Peaceful Rise"

Perhaps the most quoted aspect of China's rise to global prominence is the emphasis on its peaceful rise – in fact, it is more often than not suggested that it is this peaceful rise that has provided China the opportunity to extend its influence in international life. Coined by Zheng Bijian, a veteran commentator and advisor to the Chinese leadership, the term quickly gained traction both in policy and scholarly circles during the presidency of Hu Jintao. It should be reiterated that Zheng Bijian's ideas about China's peaceful rise were conceived in direct response to the dominant discourse (at the time) regarding Beijing's growing significance on the international scene; such discourse typically emphasized either the "China threat" or the "China collapse," depending on the context. The volume provides a valuable collection of Zheng Bijian's own reflections and ratiocination on the conceptualization of China's rise.

Even though the notion of peaceful rise was later supplanted by an emphasis on "peaceful development," the core features of this term have remained unchanged – namely, the suggestion that unlike the existing historical record, according to which emerging powers have invariably engaged in large scale and often protracted military confrontation with the established status quo powers, China's rise has not been accompanied by a war of ascendance. Moreover, say the authors, China itself is not intent on becoming a new hegemon. Zheng Bijian suggests that to a large extent, such a pattern of relations reflects China's own historical experience and, especially, the lessons that the leadership in Beijing has drawn from that experience. Thus, according to him, the key for the explanation and understanding of Beijing's growing footprint in regional and global affairs is the practice of China acquiring "deeper understandings of [itself] as [it deepens its] knowledge of the world" (p. 16).

In this respect, it is the idiosyncrasies and intricacy of China's ancient culture and traditions that provide the sources for its peaceful rise at the start of the twenty-first century. At the same time, the peaceful rise is itself assisted by the practices of China's intentionally cooperative international behavior, which has been "open, not exclusive, and mutually beneficial rather than beneficial only to the developed countries" (p. 22). In this way, Zheng Bijian positions China's model of development as an alternative model to the tendencies established by the dominant Western international practices. He is nevertheless quite open that such framing should not be perceived as a challenge to Western practices but merely as a reflection of the increasing "multipolarization" of world affairs (p. 69). In this respect, China's rise positions Beijing as an exemplar of a particular way of doing international relations that is not underpinned by a zeal to export, proselytize, or impose by force. In fact, by emphasising the

nascent multipolarity of global politics, Zheng Bijian suggests that it is reciprocity, mutuality, and cooperation (rather than conflict) that have become the defining features of international life. He therefore insists that China's peaceful rise facilitates the emergence of a unique framework for coexistence that is premised on opportunities that "do not come on their own but have to be jointly created" in the process of international interactions (p. 253). The narrative of China's peaceful rise endorses a vision of world order and an understanding of peace distinct from Western notions of security community (as practiced by the EU, for instance). Such comparison, however, is not intended as a value judgment but aims only to acknowledge the different context(s) of China's normative power.

It is expected that many readers will likely question and challenge Zheng Bijian's framework and interpretations. For instance, the deepening conflicts in the South China Sea offer just one instance of the inconsistencies underpinning the claims made in his analysis. Others will question Zheng Bijian's commitment to the centrality of the Chinese Communist Party and its ideology as the main architects of the country's "peaceful rise." In fact, a growing number of both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars have emphasized the significance of Confucian (and other indigenous Chinese) intellectual traditions for the explanation and understanding of the country's international strategy (Yan, 2012; Kavalski, 2013). Such criticisms notwithstanding, Zheng Bijian's volume provides an unparalleled glimpse into some of the debates and discussions animating the outlook of the leadership in Beijing. In this respect, while the volume should not be taken at face value and should instead be subjected to an active and critical interrogation, it makes a valuable contribution to our understanding and explanation of the conceptual underpinnings of Chinese foreign policy-making.

China's "Soft Power"

The issue of power – especially, the kind of power that international actors exert on the world stage – has always been a cornerstone of the study and practice of international affairs. It is therefore not surprising that China's prominence in international life has attracted a heated debate on the content and processes of its power projections. The collection edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu takes the road less traveled by expounding on the "soft power" qualities of China's rise. Originally developed by Joseph Nye to explain the expanding influence of American power in the post-World War II period, the notion of soft power has been applied to a variety of Western international actors. However, China appears to be among the first non-Western actors to receive a consistent and rigorous soft power analysis. Thus, the volume edited by Lai and Li provide a primer on the current state of the art in the field. It should be noted at the outset, as Meridden Varrall reminds us in Chapter 8, that while the notion of soft power is of fairly recent provenance in Chinese foreign policy discourse, it draws on a much older Chinese tradition centered on "the concept of 'using virtue' to attract others" (p. 139).

One of the many assets of the collection is the eclectic approach to soft power that it has adopted. Thus, rather than impose a uniform (and, thereby, much limiting and constraining) definition of the term soft power and its applications to China's international outreach, the volume presents the full spectrum of diverse opinions and perspectives on these issues. For instance, in the introductory chapter, Hongyui Lai suggests that the common denominator for the different takes on China's soft power is a shared emphasis on the "ability to handle international issues through non-violent means" (p. 10). For David Scott, in Chapter 3, Chinese soft power is framed by the representational force of "the 'harmonious world' phraseology, along with other reassuring rhetoric like 'peaceful development,' 'democracy in international relations,'

‘globalization, and ‘win-win’ outcomes, [while] stressing China’s present *and* future benign intentions’” (p. 52). According to Cheng Qian, in Chapter 7, the Chinese characteristics of soft power are more practical than rhetorical and are profoundly embedded in the experience of the country’s “harmonious diplomacy,” as evidenced by the Beijing-initiated “international trade practices, overseas investments, development assistance, diplomatic initiatives, cultural influence, humanitarian aid and disaster relief, education, travel, and tourism” (pp. 129-130).

The snippet of perspectives provided by these statements should make clear that just like their Western counterparts, the Chinese notions and practices of soft power are subject to contestation and debates. And the collection edited by Lai and Li is quite upfront about existing difference of opinion – both within and outside of China – on the framework and utility of the concept of soft power. In fact, as Suisheng Zhao aptly demonstrates in Chapter 10, much of the controversy surrounding China’s soft power reflects the tension between, on the one hand, Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy injunction that Beijing should keep “a low profile” (*taoguangyanghui*) stance in international life and, on the other hand, its increased “assertiveness” as a result of “the rapid growth of China’s economic, political, and military strength in the early twenty-first century” (p. 191). In fact, it is this foreign policy tension that still marks not merely China’s soft power but the country’s very international strategy. In this respect, implicit in the volume edited by Lai and Li is the suggestion that until China reaches some kind of satisfactory and meaningful resolution of this tension between passivity and pro-activeness in its international stance, the future trajectories of Beijing’s international outlook remain uncertain.

The collection therefore provides a much-needed outline of the current state of the art on soft power research in China. At the same time, it can be argued that the volume edited by Lai and Li demonstrates that the dispute over the appropriate ramifications of the notions and practices of soft power in China are themselves a contestation over the power of different frameworks for understanding and explanation. Bearing this observation in mind, the analyses included in the collection engage soft power as simultaneously a relational and a located concept. On the one hand, the notion of China’s soft power reflects the ability to influence others—that is, its ability to affect the decision-making behavior of other actors through the capacity either to make some policy choices more attractive than others or by limiting the available policy-alternatives (regardless of whether this ability reflects a recourse to force or the threat of force). On the other hand, the practices of China’s power are themselves located within a framework of relations guided (and made possible) by history, resources, contextual understandings of social location, and the participants’ judgment of those with whom they are interacting. The volume edited by Lai and Li will therefore be welcomed by all those interested in the dynamics of China’s international interactions.

China’s International Governance

It is often overlooked that the frameworks and practices of any international actor – be it China or anybody else – are more often than not (as well as much more often than the literature on the topic would like to admit) prone to the random effects of contingency. In fact, with the deepening and widening of globalization, the complex interdependence between various international actors has tended to increase the uncertainty and unpredictability of global affairs. In this respect, by reminding us of the underlying contingency of international interactions, Peter Kien-hong Yu’s study offers a much needed and very well researched conceptual analysis of the foreign policy strategies embedded in China’s emerging international agency. It should also be acknowledged that Yu’s analysis also provides a rare, comprehensive reconsideration of

Beijing's external outlook from the point of view of the literature on global governance and international regimes.

It is the elucidation of the content, scope, and implications of China's involvement with and contribution to various international governance regimes that distinguishes Yu's prescient engagement with China's global roles. The significance accorded to the pursuit of harmonious international development in Beijing's foreign policy-making alludes not only to the underlying assumptions that shape China's consideration of itself but also to the most appropriate ways for China to engage with the international environment. Yu suggests that China's governance strategy is rooted in an underlying commitment to "Chinese ethical principles" (p. 158). In this respect, Beijing's search for recognition as a peaceful international actor reflects a foreign policy belief that "countries should consider themselves passengers in the same boat and cross the river peacefully together instead of fighting one another and trying to push one another off the boat" (p. 158). In other words, China's global outreach reflects its attempt to construct itself as a responsible and reliable international player that offers a viable alternative to existing models of global politics. At the same time, Beijing has generally resisted engaging in direct subversion of established global governance institutions and regimes and has more often than not complied with the standards of such institutions and/or sought inclusion therein through membership in organizational clubs.

This point of departure from existing literatures allows Yu to probe the complex quandaries of China's international interactions. Furthermore, the insights he brings from recent studies of Beijing's foreign policy in China offer a clear demonstration of the nuances and sophistication with which external affairs are discussed in the country. At the same time, they also help Yu to uncover the patterns and practices that underscore China's enhanced abilities to fashion interstate relations. By zooming in on these two aspects, Yu's analysis makes available an important assessment of the distinct ways in which Chinese scholars and commentators perceive their country's engagement in world affairs. Hence, the picture of China's governance strategies that emerges from Yu's account is far more variegated than initially anticipated. As he indicates, the patterns and practices of international governance have "many dimensions" in Chinese foreign policy-making (p. 7). Their uniqueness thereby emerges from the particular historical contingencies and experiences that have gone into the country's strategic culture.

Yu's contention is that implicit in China's international outreach is a complex interface between the cultural legacy of Chinese traditions and the historical experience of modern national statehood embedded in the country's international identity. His account therefore offers a wealth of solid knowledge and perceptive insights on the evolution, patterns, and practices of China's international governance strategies. At the same time, the elaboration of Beijing's diplomatic endeavors makes a thoughtful contribution to the growing literature on the international interactions practiced by non-Western actors. Thus, Yu's book makes available both a comprehensive overview and a much-needed reconsideration of the conceptual and policy outlines of Beijing's nascent global agency.

Conclusion

A number of commentators have argued that the rise of China is gradually but inevitably transforming established Western rules, norms, and institutions of international relations – and this appears to be a profoundly new condition in international life. In this respect, the growing prominence of non-Western agency – especially that of China – appears to demonstrate that non-Western actors are just as skilled and willing to engage in the global playground as are Western ones. In this setting, the three books under review offer thoughtful and contextual understanding of the motivation, practices, and ideas animating China's growing international outreach. All three books seem to share a conviction that while impacted by current contingencies, the trajectories of China's involvement in global politics will invariably be framed by attitudes based on interpretations of the past. What emerges in this context is an underlying desire to articulate China's growing significance on its own – rather than on Western – terms.

In this respect, all three books under review offer original perspectives on China's international stance. Their perceptive explorations draw an unusually vivid account of the content, practices, and frameworks of some of the narratives animating contemporary Chinese intellectual debates. All three books under review indicate clearly in their explorations that Chinese thought with respect to international relations – be it explicitly strategic or purely theoretical – has important implications for the current and future moves not only of China but also of Asia and the world. At the same time, perhaps the greatest strength of the books by Zheng Bijian, Peter Kien-hong Yu, and the volume edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu is the contributing authors' ability to draw historically-grounded and unusually erudite analyses that will be welcome by students, scholars, and policy-makers alike. Not surprisingly, therefore, all three books under review will be of immense help to all those interested in the history, intellectual traditions, and strategic culture of China's international interactions. In particular, the investigations by Zheng Bijian, Peter Kien-hong Yu, and the contributors to the volume edited by Hongyi Lai and Yiyi Lu would benefit the curriculum of advanced undergraduate students as well as the research explorations of established scholars. Readers will undoubtedly be captured by the astute combination of political theory and international relations scholarship as well as the mixture of insights from comparative politics, philosophy, history, security studies, and international law that these three books provide. In fact, these three studies will also be invaluable for the purposes of teaching and theorizing about the ongoing transformations in global life as a result of China's increasing centrality in the patterns and practices of world affairs.

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