

CHINA'S RISE IS OVER

While IR experts marvel at China's growth, the PRC's own elites take a more sober view.

by DANIEL C. LYNCH

The Rise of China is *over*.

Note, by the way, that in saying the rise of China is over, I am not saying that China is on the verge of a collapse—I am not even certain what a collapse would look like. There are many people outside of China, portentously predicting a collapse, who evidently have in mind something like the disintegration of the Soviet Union—which, given the multiethnic, empire-like nature of the PRC, one could never rule out completely. But after poring over interviews, books, “internal circulation only” (*neibu*) policy analyses, and open source journals concerning what Chinese elites think the future holds, I found no suggestion that anyone of influence in the PRC expects a collapse—they do however, express anxiety over an impending “leveling off”.

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Plateaus, while admittedly not as sensational as doomsday predictions, are nonetheless important in the case of China and its heretofore-meteoric ascension on the world stage. So great is China's economic clout and attendant global power that an end to the rise would be big enough. It would be “ginormous,” as they say in the business and economics media. And while external specialists have cleaved to the narrative of China as being on a nonstop trajectory of sensational growth and expanding influence, government and business leaders within the PRC today take a much more sober view, challenging the dominant narrative of China as the ever-rising power. According to them, the end of the rise of China may well be in sight; the most important remaining question is how all of the key players, inside and outside of China, will adapt to this awesome, world-historical change.

I often find myself amazed, when teaching, to realize that almost all of the undergraduates in my courses have only known a world in which “the rise of China” is an axiomatic reality. Bill Overholt, now of Harvard University, popularized the phrase with [his prophetic book of that title](#) in 1993. By the late 1990s, the rise of China was firmly anchored in the minds of people worldwide as the key to unlock all the complexity of the People's Republic, the inescapable megatrend that could help us interpret, understand, and predict everything of importance in China, and eventually the world.

It was exceedingly difficult to extricate oneself from the intellectual quicksand of this narrative and the dubious conclusions toward which it pointed (but which the astute Overholt never asserted): China would continue growing rapidly forever, and eventually would surpass the United States in aggregate GDP and comprehensive national power—thus shaking world order to the foundations. The zenith of excitement and conviction concerning China’s rise came in the years immediately following the global financial crisis, which wrought havoc on the global economy precisely the same year that China dazzled the world with its flawless hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics.

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To be sure, few China specialists would have ever stated explicitly that China’s rise would continue forever: not *literally* forever. And yet it was difficult even for those of us who work daily on China to transcend the excitement intrinsic in the narrative of a rise. To be a China specialist from 2000 to 2015 was exhilarating, because the number of people interested in the PRC was increasing exponentially. It was flattering that so many others—from multiple fields of endeavor—were taking us seriously and asking us to help them understand. At least in our own minds, China specialists were becoming “important” because China itself was soaring in importance. During the 2000s, I often found myself wondering whether I was developing a psychological attachment to the rise of China—no matter whether the end result would be a benign or fearsome China, or something in between. This mindset, I came to realize, made it increasingly difficult for me to question the inevitability of the rise continuing.

Yet at the same time, I never felt comfortable with the overly confident predictions that some social scientists and countless public commentators were making about China’s future. Predictions of an inevitably successful rise—for example, a rise that would lead to China one day ruling the world, or (far less common) a collapse into something like a perpetually imploding political black hole—left me uneasy. So did predictions that China’s rise would inevitably lead to the PRC’s smooth integration into international society as a responsible stakeholder—or, in contrast, a cataclysmic war with the United States as a consequence of an unmanageable power transition.

Eventually I came to realize that what was missing from these overly confident predictions was the carefully developed assessments of Chinese analysts themselves—and in particular, academics and others interlinked with the policymaking elite. Regardless of whether these analysts shape the perceptions of policymakers or reflect the policymakers’ preexisting views,

their assessments of China's trajectory—the PRC's likely versus desirable futures—could serve as uniquely valuable indicators of the different possible developmental directions China might take.

Examining these under-regarded voices formed the point of departure for *China's Futures*—which seeks to understand how people of influence within the PRC interpret their country's own future. The PRC is a kaleidoscopically complex society, so it is not surprising that I discovered a huge variety of subtly distinct views in each of the issue-areas I examined: the economy, politics, Internet culture, and international relations. Nevertheless, I mapped the range of views in each of the substantive chapters as typologies.

For the book as a whole, I came to one overarching conclusion: While the majority—the overwhelming majority—of Chinese economists and demographers have been deeply concerned about the PRC's future prospects since at least 2005, most Chinese international relations experts, especially those in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), are super-optimistic, with a surprisingly large proportion evidently entirely unaware of the economists' urgent warnings and the reasons they issue those warnings. This blissful unawareness of the majority of international relations specialists is an exceptionally worrisome fact.

To be sure, there are, in absolute terms, numerous Chinese IR scholars who *do* read and understand the economists' warnings and on that basis argue that PRC foreign policy has become far too assertive or aggressive in recent years. These minority-view IR specialists consider the foundations of the rise far too feeble at present for Beijing to be taking big risks in foreign policy. Furthermore, they are worried about the influence of their blithely optimistic colleagues. They understand that China's rise is not a cosmologically preordained fact. They realize that if the rise does stall, solving all of China's other problems—such as its environmental problems—will be far more difficult if international relations are tense owing to Chinese over-assertiveness.

This divergence in views—Chinese realities vs. almost certainly distorted beliefs—establishes the preconditions for a society-wide shock. If the economists and demographers are right and the rise of China is now over, how will the international relations specialists who consider the gloriousness of the future to be a “done deal” react? How will they handle the trauma of confronting a middle-income trap as hundreds of millions of people enter old age in one of the most polluted environments in all of human history? Will the fear of disorder drive the scholars, the nationalists, and the broader society to support Xi Jinping in his efforts to reinvigorate authoritarian rule? Or will it intensify national turmoil? The keenly insightful observations of Chinese analysts and experts can help us to think through these varying possibilities.