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CHINA IS RE-EMERGING, NOT RISING

By *Dylan Kissance*

IN LATE 1993 NICHOLAS KRISTOF argued in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* that “the rise of China, if it continues, may be the most important trend in the world for the next century”.¹ Fifteen years later two things are clear: there is no longer any reason to wonder if China’s rise will continue and the impact of this surge in the East is now clearly the most important trend in international politics this century.

Indeed, it is hard to turn one’s head these days without reading about the “rise of China” somewhere. Books like James Kyngé’s *China Shakes the World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation* and Ian Storey’s *ASEAN and the Rise of China* are just two of hundreds of recent titles that describe, explain and predict the place of the People’s Republic in

the twenty-first century.² Journalists across the globe from Australia’s *Sunday Morning Herald* to Germany’s *Der Spiegel*, the *Washington Post* to the *South China Morning Post* all file stories almost daily as the realities of a new epicentre of international power emerges in Beijing. Cable television news, talk radio and hundreds of blogs report daily on the rise of China and the impacts that this has had and will continue to have for the people of the Western world.

Yet ask Korean researcher Yong-Bin Lee of Seoul National University about the rise of China and he’ll immediately correct you.³ According to Lee, what the world is witnessing is not so much a rise as the *re-emergence* of China and, as others will attest, the difference is far from semantic.



In a 2005 address David Finklestein, the Director of Project Asia at the CNA Corporation, argued:

China as an international actor is re-emerging after a two-century hiatus from the international order. What kept China from being a full participant on the international order in the past? The implosion of the Qing Dynasty, Warlordism, civil war, the Japanese conquest, and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution all contributed. Now China is re-emerging and reengaging the world on all fronts. For a century and a half the world has known an isolationist and weak China. The end of that China creates dislocations and great uncertainty for the watcher.⁴

Finklestein adds ominously: We do not know what China will do.

Rex Li, too, does not categorise the increasing significance of China in

global geopolitics as a “rise”. He writes of a re-emergence by the PRC that is “the single most important development in the post-Cold War world” and notes that some will see the re-emergence of China as “a huge challenge to international society”.⁵ He joins a diverse group which includes analyst Robert Kaplan, Australia’s Secretary to the Treasury Ken Henry and former HSBC Chairman Sir John Bond in recognising the evolving status of China as not so much a rise but a re-emergence of a once-dominant civilisation.⁶

Why, then, does the world point to a rising China instead of a re-emerging China? Sir John Bond offered perhaps the most straightforward explanation when he said in a 2005 speech that “the majority of people are completely



unaware of China's illustrious past".⁷ As Bond explains,

It is ironic that the country with perhaps the greatest history of all, and millennia of supremacy in the sophistication of its society, should today find itself branded a developing economy by the West. Significantly, the leadership of the People's Republic and the people of China have not forgotten this long history of international success. The PRC's 2005 White Paper *China's Peaceful Development Road* was an attempt to outline the future role of China in the world yet included reference to the Ming Dynasty and China's seafaring past where "the largest fleet in the world" visited 30 countries under navigator Zheng He.⁹ Roy Bin Wong points to this long historical memory in his 1997 book *China Transformed* where he argues that present day China continues to resonate with imagery of the past [9]. He notes that the Chinese Communist Party draws its real strength from its ability to tap into a much deeper historic-

cultural memory where the cultural referents remain the same no matter whether the ideology is socialist or dynastic.¹⁰

Take this longer view of history and it becomes clear that the popularly conceived "rise of China" is nothing more than the re-emergence of a people who once dominated the globe. Professor Wang Gungwu of the National University of Singapore is even more enthusiastic calling it a 'revival' by a people that maintain "a determination never to be threatened again."¹¹

There is no longer any reason to wonder if China's rise will continue. The impact of this surge in the East is now clearly the most important trend in international politics this century.

Gungwu argues that the last century and a half of relative weakness is but an aberration in China's long his-

tory and that the re-emergence of the China following Mao's revolution will – if well managed by China's leadership – will be akin to the rise of the Han dynasty in the wake of the Qin dynasty's collapse.

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So why is it important that we distinguish between a rise and a re-emergence? Does it really make any difference?

Indeed it does. The perspectives of the leaders – who will interact with, compete with and ally with and against a twenty-first century China – matter a great deal. An ignorance of the historical greatness that the modern People's Republic emerged from will blind those leaders from understanding the motivation behind the re-emergence of China in international politics today. As well, believing that the elevation of China is a relatively recent aberration in international power politics is problematic for leaders and policymakers. Instead, those that will guide dealings with the re-emergent East must take the broader historical view that recognises that the aberration is not the twenty-first century rise but the 19th

and 20th century decline.

The difference between rise and re-emergence, then, is much more than semantic. Unless the West recognises China's 'rise' for the re-emergence and restoration that it really is then they will find themselves struggling to comprehend the significance and direction of the East Asian colossus.

The China of today is not a twenty-first century giant being born but a millennia old giant that is being woken once again.

ENDNOTES

- [1] Nicholas Kristof. 1993. 'The Rise of China'. Foreign Affairs 72(5): 59-74, p.59
- [2] James Kyrgis. 2006. China Shakes the World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation. London: Phoenix; Ian Storey. 2007. ASEAN and the Rise of China. London: Routledge.
- [3] Yong-Bin Lee. 2008. Taking Central Asia Seriously: Changing Foreign Policy of China toward the Middle East in the Post-Cold War Era. Paper presented at the 3rd Graduate Conference in Political Science in Memory of Yitzhak Rabin, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel.
- [4] David Finklestein. 2005. China: The Big Picture. [18 March 2008] <http://myurl.com/3yg2k5>.
- [5] Rex Li. 2004. Security Challenges of an Ascendant China: Great Power Emergence and International Stability. In Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior, edited by Suisheng Zhao. New York: East Gate Books, p.23; p.33.
- [6] Katie Bacon. 2005. Managing China. [17 March 2008] <http://myurl.com/35naoc>; Ken Henry. 2006. Implications of China's re-emergence for the fiscal and economic outlook. Address to the Australian Business Economists, 16 May 2006; John Bond. 2005. China: The Re-Emergence of the Middle Kingdom. Speech to the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), 19 July 2005.
- [7] Bond. 2005, p.1.
- [8] PRC. 2005. China's Peaceful Development Road. [18 March 2008] <http://myurl.com/2m2sat>.
- [9] Roy Bin Wong. 1997. China Transformed: Historical Changes and the Limits of European Experience. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- [10] Wong. 1997, pp.192-193.
- [11] Wang Gungwu. 2002. The Emergence of China. The Radio Australia Asia-Pacific Lecture, University of Melbourne.

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