

## China's Identity as a Major Power

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China has a conflicted identity as a major power—but few nations have had as extensive, animated, and diverse domestic discourse about their potential and roles as a major power, as has occurred in China over the past decade. Official, semi-official, and unofficial circles in China all actively debate the roles, opportunities, dangers, risks, and responsibilities of being a major power. To be sure, there is still a segment of official opinion that *denies* that China is a major power—arguing instead that China remains a developing (socialist) country. Another significant segment of opinion *denies* that China is a global power, arguing that the PRC is a regional power at best. Another tenacious self-identity, still deeply rooted in the Chinese mindset and frequently articulated in media and specialist publications, is that of historical victimization and humiliation at the hands of other major powers. This traditional *weltanschauung* has fueled modern Chinese nationalism, and carries two distinct aspects: (1) China is an aggrieved nation that has endured a “century of shame and humiliation” and various indignities at the hands of the West and Japan; and (2) China has been a great power historically and deserves to return to that status. Deeply held and longstanding aspirations for restored pride and dignity, wealth and power, animate both beliefs. These traditional identities reflect existing insecurities about China's potential as a power—what Allen Carlson aptly describes as the “insecure goliath.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen Carlson, “China's Conflicted Olympic Moment,” *Current History*, Vol. 107, No. 701 (September 2007), pp. 252-256.

While these traditional identities continue to be articulated in official government speeches and documents, over the past decade the preponderance of domestic discourse recognizes that China *is* a major power—or at least well on the way to becoming one—and therefore the operative issues being debated today are:

- What does it mean to be a major power?
- Does China have the requisite “comprehensive strength” (*zonghe guoli*) to be considered a major power? If so, does China possess such power on only a regional or on a global basis?
- What *responsibilities* are entailed in being a major regional and/or global power?
- What *burdens* and risks are associated with being a major power?
- How is China to interact with other major powers and who are they? Is this interaction competitive or cooperative, zero sum or positive sum?
- Is it useful for the international system to have major powers—or should efforts be made to emasculate and counter such powers in order to disperse power globally and create a multipolar order?
- What can China learn from its previous four “rises” (and declines), and what aspects of traditional Chinese statecraft are potentially useful in this fifth rise in its history?
- What can China learn from the rise of other major powers in history?
- How should China present itself to the world as a rising power?

These and other questions have animated the potent domestic debates over China’s major power status in recent years. Few, if any, other major or aspiring powers engage in such self-reflective discourse. While such discussions take place primarily in the semi-official policy and academic communities, they have also extended to society at large—with the 2006 airing of the twelve-part CCTV documentary series “Rising Powers” (*Daquo Jueqi*). This popular television documentary series was watched by

hundreds of millions of Chinese. So popular, it has been rebroadcast several times. The impetus for the series was to portray the conditions that gave rise to other modern great powers in history (Portugal, Spain, Holland, France, Great Britain, Germany, Russia, the USSR, Japan, and the United States), so that China's own rise could be contextualized and informed by these historical experiences.

The CCTV series followed a series of lectures on the subject given by academics to the Chinese Communist Party Politburo during 2005-2006 (the Politburo has convened such "study sessions" during the reign of Hu Jintao on an almost monthly basis). The impetus was the same: to learn the lessons of other rising (and falling) powers, so that China could anticipate repetitive problems and manage them.

The CCTV series came to several conclusions in its final episode.<sup>2</sup> Great powers possessed the following characteristics:

- Sought territorial expansion and to create regional and global empires.
- Fought imperialist wars over spheres of influence.
- Rising powers invariably upset the existing world order because they inevitably sought to displace the existing power.
- Possessed a strong sense of national identity and purpose.
- Most had maritime traditions, a seafaring orientation, and built navies.
- They all had a sense of discovery.
- Possessed advanced science and technology.
- Experienced industrial revolutions.
- Searched for raw materials and markets abroad.
- Had small agricultural populations and experienced urbanization.
- Invested in military production and possessed military strength.
- Many had militarist "warrior spirit" and marital traditions.
- Often had radicalized youth.
- Overthrew feudalism and developed modern markets and societies.
- Possessed "comprehensive power" (*zonghe guoli*) and "concentrated power" (*tongyi liliang*).
- Had social stability and a united society.
- Had political stability.
- Possessed strong educational systems.

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<sup>2</sup> The following is a personal interpretation based on viewing the series and final episode.

- Capacity to innovate when economies stagnated.
- Usually had a “progressive ideology” (*xianjin sixiang*), abandoning “traditional ideology” (*chuantong sixiang*), but sometimes erred towards extremist ideologies (Nazi Germany and Japan) and extreme nationalism.
- Had market economies—but tended towards concentrated wealth (oligarchies), which resulted in repressed proletariat and class grievances..
- Possessed and emphasized great culture and arts.
- Had grand large-scale, imperial-style, regal architecture and buildings.
- Demographically possessed relatively young populations.
- Politically, many had monarchical systems.
- Most had constitutional systems.
- Do not need to possess a large landmass (e.g. Portugal, Holland).
- Possessed complex rail networks.

It is interesting to reflect on this list of characteristics the producers of the CCTV series in light of China’s own rise to great power status. While the program did not explicitly identify “do’s and don’ts,” a number of these characteristics are negative in nature and surely China would wish to avoid them. Thus, the CCTV series may be viewed as a kind of “early warning indicator” of pitfalls to avoid in China’s rise to great power status.

Within the broader national discourse on China as a great power (*da guo*), several sub-discourses, debates, and contentious issues have also emerged. These include:

- Do all regional powers in the world constitute a “pole” in the international system, e.g. Japan, ASEAN, India, Iran, Brazil, and possibly Nigeria and South Africa? Is the international order still moving towards multipolarity, as Chinese officials and scholars have long contended, with each of these regional powers constituting a pole? If not, why not?
- How long will the current unipolar order, dominated by the United States, last? Why doesn’t American hegemony erode and collapse (as many analysts have long—and incorrectly—predicted)? Is, in fact, unipolarity mutually exclusive with multipolarity (some analysts argue that the global structure has been simultaneously unipolar and multipolar—*yichao*, *dupqiang*—since the end of the Cold War).
- What is the relationship between multipolarism and multilateralism? There is evidence of two competing camps of theorists in China (the former rooted in realism and the latter influenced by European liberal institutionalism) and an evolution in recent years from the former to the latter in Chinese international relations discourse.

- What is the best way to describe China’s “rise” as a major power? “Peaceful rise” (*heping jueqi*) was coined by CCP theorist and leadership advisor Zheng Bijian and became the most common description in the early 2000s,<sup>3</sup> but after a heated debate in academic and leadership circles it was abandoned in favor of “peaceful development” as the official mantra (*tifa*). “Rise” was thought to be too threatening to some abroad, while others favored “revival” (*fuxing*) or “restoration” (*fuxiu*).
- How should China engage in “great power diplomacy” (*daguo waijiao*)? Which major powers should be emphasized in Chinese diplomacy—or should Beijing seek to have balanced omnidirectional diplomacy with all major powers?
- A key discourse related to China’s vision for world order since 2006 has concerned its desire to shape a “harmonious world” (*hexie shijie*). According to Chinese leader Hu Jintao, a “harmonious world” should have four principal attributes: (1) effective multilateralism with a strong role for the United Nations; (2) development of a collective security mechanism; (3) prosperity for all through mutually beneficial cooperation; (4) tolerance and enhancement of dialogue among diverse civilizations.<sup>4</sup> Like “peaceful rise” theory, “Harmonious world” theory posits that China’s rise will not be a threat or disrupt the existing global order.
- What does it mean to be a “responsible great power” (*fuzhe daguo*)? While Robert Zoellick’s 2005 speech calling on China to become a “responsible stakeholder” of the international system stimulated considerable discussion on this subject, Chinese think tankers actually began earlier to debate the increased international *expectations* of China’s *responsibility* to contribute to addressing global challenges and governance, and called on China to take a more proactive role in global and regional affairs.
- The late Deng Xiaoping and his successors, however, argued that China should “not seek leadership” (*bu dan tou*) and should “sustain a modest demeanor whatever one’s capabilities” (*taoguang yanghui*). Yet others argued that while taking an overall low profile, China could still “do some things” and make selected contributions to global governance.
- With respect to being a regional major power, beginning after the 1997 Asian financial crisis, China embarked on a sustained period of proactive and cooperative regional diplomacy under the rubric of “establish good neighborliness,

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<sup>3</sup> See *China’s Peaceful Rise: Speeches by Zheng Bijian, 1197-2004* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Hu Jintao, “Build Towards a Harmonious World of Lasting Peace and Common Prosperity,” speech at the United Nations Summit, September 15, 2005: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/zt/shnh60/t212915.htm>.

make neighbors prosperous, and make them feel secure” (*mu lin, fu lin, an lin*). China’s regional diplomacy in Asia has been extremely astute and successful.

- Another main thread of discourse was embodied in the Chinese government’s official “New Security Concept,” unveiled in the 1997-98 period, which sets out an alternative “all-around” template for interstate and multilateral relationships—particularly distinct from “Cold War type” major power relations based on alliances. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the model for such relations.
- Chinese commentators have also begun to discuss and debate the role of “soft power” (*ruan shili*) in major power diplomacy—its content, strategy, tactics, and instruments. China has become increasingly sensitive to its image abroad and has been on what one observer describes as a “charm offensive.”<sup>5</sup> While there is some recognition of the concept of “public diplomacy” (*gonggong waijiao*),<sup>6</sup> improving China’s image and soft power abroad is still defined and pursued as “external propaganda work” (*duiwai xuanchuan gongzuo*).<sup>7</sup>
- Another area of vivid discourse concerns norms in international affairs. There does exist a nascent constructivist discourse in some academic circles, and it has crept into—and been influenced by—China’s interactions with Southeast Asia (ASEAN). What norms should states follow—and do major powers have special exemptions? A particularly heated topic of late, in this respect, are the “limits to sovereignty” when considering humanitarian situations. This debate has caused some Chinese analysts to begin to reassess their long-held and cherished attachment to “non-interference in internal affairs.”
- Finally, the concept of “hegemony” remains central to the major power discourse in China. Anti-hegemony (*fan ba*) remains the *sine qua non* of the Chinese world view. As a major power, China’s single most important self-imposed distinguishing feature is that it will never act in a hegemonic (defined as coercive) manner towards other states (and expects the same in return)—but must still deal with such states, i.e. the United States.

Thus, the discourse inside China about what it means to be a major power has been both intensive and extensive. It is very lively and a good indicator of the freedom of thought and argument permitted in Chinese academic circles today. Most importantly, it

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<sup>5</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power is Transforming the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See Ingrid d’Hooghe, *The Rise of China’s Public Diplomacy* (Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See David Shambaugh, “China’s Propaganda System: Institutions, Process & Efficacy,” *The China Journal*, No. 57 (January 2007).

also reveals the multiple and sometimes conflicting identities that exist in the Chinese worldview and view of their role in the world.