

REVIEW ESSAY

China's Rise: A Review Essay

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Gill, Bates, *Rising Star: China's New Security Diplomacy* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 254 pages.

Johnston, Alastair Iain, *Social States: China in International Institutions* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 239 pages.

Shirk, Susan L., *China: Fragile Superpower* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 320 pages.

Abstract: *Given the polarized nature of the current American debate over China's rise, the 2007 publication of three excellent books on the subject is both timely and welcome. Bates Gill, Iain Johnston, and Susan Shirk are three of the most respected American experts on Chinese foreign policy, and they arrive at a common, cautiously optimistic conclusion: China is not a revisionist power and conflict with the US is not inevitable. Yet conflict remains a possibility. Gill, Shirk, and Johnston have produced timely and valuable books that should contribute to the maturation of US debate over a US China policy for the twenty-first century.*

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, American foreign policy has focused almost exclusively on the Middle East and the threat of global terrorism. Meanwhile, Americans have not paid sufficient attention to China's impressive economic, military, and diplomatic growth. China's status as the sole potential challenger to US global preeminence is now largely unquestioned. What is questioned, instead, is whether China's rise will be a stabilizing or destabilizing factor in twenty-first century world politics. Optimists and Sinophiles assert that China's rise will be peaceful. Pessimists and Sinophobes contend that China is a revisionist power out to upset the global status quo and challenge US primacy.

Given the polarized nature of the current American debate over China's rise, and the lack of sustained attention to the issue, the recent publication of three excellent books on the subject is both timely and welcome. Bates Gill, Iain Johnston, and Susan Shirk are three of the most respected American experts on Chinese foreign policy, and they bring their considerable talents to bear on their common interest in the nature of China's rise. And all three arrive at a common, cautiously optimistic conclusion:

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China is not a revisionist power and conflict with the US is not inevitable. China's leaders seek to fit into the twenty-first century international order and to resolve their numerous domestic challenges at home. Yet conflict remains a possibility. Gill and Johnston would likely agree with Shirk that while increasing "interdependence breeds caution," it "doesn't guarantee peace" (p. 34).

In *China: Fragile Superpower*, Susan Shirk has written a highly accessible introduction to contemporary Chinese domestic and foreign policy for the general reader. An academic China hand who also served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for US China policy during the Clinton administration, Shirk is well positioned to write about China's rise. The book benefits from anecdotes about her personal experiences both in and out of US government service, such as being one of the first academics invited to mainland China during US–China rapprochement in the early 1970s, and negotiating with Chinese diplomats following the Belgrade Embassy bombing of 1999. But the book is neither a personal memoir nor an academic monograph. Instead, it covers a comprehensive spectrum of issues surrounding China's rise.

Shirk's argument is in her title: China may be strong abroad, but it is fragile at home.¹ China's leaders are beset by a daunting array of massive challenges within China, such as social unrest, political corruption, and environmental degradation. They are thus fearful for their very survival, and have neither the time nor inclination to pursue an aggressive foreign policy agenda. The danger, instead, arises from the possibility of misperception or inflamed emotions driving China into a conflict with the US over Taiwan or Japan. "Unless the United States begins to understand the fears that motivate China's leaders," she argues, "we face the possibility of conflict" (p. 6).

Bates Gill's *Rising Star* is an astute and balanced appraisal of China's new security diplomacy. Gill, formerly at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC, and now directing the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in Sweden, lays out the recent evolution of Chinese diplomacy and weighs the opportunities and challenges that it presents for the US. Specifically, he explores "new security concept" (*xin anquanguan*), "responsible great power" (*fuzeren daguo*), and "peaceful rise" (*heping jueqi*) discourse and recent Chinese foreign policy behavior to argue that Chinese foreign policy is motivated by three goals. First, China seeks a peaceful environment so that it can develop domestically. Gill thus concurs with Shirk's central point that domestic challenges constitute a fundamental constraint on Chinese foreign policy. Second, China seeks to assure its neighbors about the peaceful nature of China's rise, both to counter "China threat" arguments that could lead to regional alliances seeking to balance China's growing power, and to extend China's regional influence. Third and finally, China seeks to "counter, co-opt, or circumvent" (pp. 10, 29) US influence and hegemony. Gill's ambivalence about China's US policy is revealed when he describes it as both an attempt to "avoid an overtly conflictual relationship with the United States" (p. 207), and as seeking to "softly balance against the U.S." (p. 69). The "cup half full, cup half empty" tension at the heart of *Rising Star* is even clearer in the juxtaposition of the "challenges" Gill lays out in chapter five, such as China–Taiwan–US and China–Japan–US relations, and the lengthy list of sensible policy suggestions advanced in chapter six on "Opportunities for U.S. Policy." In the end, Gill concludes with cautious optimism, advocating a US policy of "informed realism" (p. 209).

In *Social States*, Iain Johnston argues that while China's leaders may have been predisposed towards a *realpolitik* mode of thinking about international relations in the past, they have been largely socialized into liberal internationalist norms through their participation in international institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. Johnston's focus is on the "microprocesses" of socialization, "how norms get inside actors' heads to motivate actions" (p. 16), a definition he borrows from international relations (IR) theorist Alexander Wendt. Following in the sociological turn of constructivist IR, Johnston explores cases of "mimicking," "social influence," and "persuasion" in Chinese socialization into various international organizations, treaties, and protocols. Motivated by a basic "desire to survive" (p. 23), mimicking involves copying group behavioral norms, and is illustrated by China's behavior when it joined the UN Conference on Disarmament in 1980. Social influence involves behavior motivated by desires to gain social rewards and avoid social punishments, and is illustrated by China's diplomacy on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Landmines Protocols. Here Johnston is at his most forceful in arguing for the primacy of symbolic over material politics in driving Chinese behavior in international institutions: "image was more important than the economic and limited military costs to signing" (p. 131) the Landmines Protocol II. Persuasion involves "changing minds, opinions, and attitudes" (p. 155), and is illustrated by China's evolving approach to ASEAN and eventual embrace of the ASEAN way of consensus building.

Shirk, Gill, and Johnston thus all share a cautious optimism regarding China's rise, and would advocate a moderate and balanced US China policy. Shirk and Johnston would likely position themselves, as Gill explicitly does, between the "engager hedgers," who tend to downplay persistent security differences, and "China hawks," overly wedded to the inevitability of conflict (p. 18). Many hawks, however, will doubtless lump all three together as "panda huggers."

Yet there are significant differences among these three books. At the most basic level, Shirk, Gill, and Johnston write for different audiences and with different goals. Shirk and Gill write for both a general audience and for policymakers, with the goal of influencing US China policy. Johnston writes for his colleagues in political science with the goal of contributing to IR theory. Although he depicts himself as an "engineer" (p. xxi) engaged in "theoretically informed empirical work" (p. 198), Johnston's primary commitment in *Social States* is to theory and not to China itself. This can be seen in both his title, which relegates China to the subtitle, and his chapter titles, such as "Mimicking" and "Persuasion," which do not mention China at all. Although Johnston's knowledge of China is beyond question, the chapters begin not with empirical puzzles about China's participation in international institutions, but with lengthy discussions of sociological and IR theories. Johnston's decision to literally put theory first likely reflects an understandable response to the devaluation of area-specific knowledge in the discipline of political science today.

Another area of difference between the three books lies in the nature of the evidence cited and the types of argumentation employed. Writing for a broad readership, Shirk relies the most heavily on anecdotal evidence, and does not address key counterarguments. For instance, Shirk (and Gill) argue that China's leaders are too besieged by domestic challenges at home to seek trouble abroad. Yet "diversionary war" is an

obvious counterargument that remains largely unaddressed. Some argue that it is precisely because the Chinese political elite is under attack at home that they may be tempted to initiate a popular nationalist conflict abroad. A war with Japan, for instance, would both shore up the Chinese Communist Party's nationalist legitimacy and channel discontent away from the Party.

Writing for an academic audience, Johnston is rigorous in his use of evidence and argumentation. He relies on both qualitative and quantitative data, with the former being more persuasive. *Social States* includes over a dozen graphs charting both word counts of Chinese discourse, and treaty and international organization memberships across time. These charts capture changing Chinese words and deeds in the 1980s and 1990s, but are not by themselves unequivocal evidence of changing Chinese attitudes towards international norms. Diplomacy, like all strategic interaction, frequently involves deception, so words and deeds alone cannot demonstrate intent. More promising than mere word or membership counts is an innovative computer-aided content analysis of Chinese uses of terms like "multilateralism" that seeks to take into account valence: whether the term is used in a positive or negative fashion. Johnston concludes from his statistical analysis that uses of "multilateralism" were "more positive" in civilian than in military texts (pp. 175–176). However, his footnote (No. 40, p. 176) states that the statistical significance level was $p=0.06$. Given that convention sets alpha (α) at 0.05, increasing it to 0.1 to declare a statistically "significant" finding increases the probability of a Type I error. In other words, it is possible that there was no meaningful difference between the civilian and military texts in their treatment of the term "multilateralism" – a non-finding that would actually have been interesting in and of itself. In the end, what makes *Social States* an impressive contribution to constructivist IR and debates over China's rise is Johnston's rigorous qualitative argumentation. Johnston applies his sharp logic not just in advancing his own arguments about China's socialization into international norms, but also in addressing counterarguments. He both anticipates and effectively rebuts objections from potential materialist and realist critics.

A final area of similarity and difference lies in Gill, Shirk, and Johnston's treatment of human motivation. All three should be credited for taking emotion seriously as a driver of Chinese foreign policy. Bates Gill argues that China's claim to Taiwan is rooted in "raw *emotion*" stemming from feelings of "humiliation at the hands of foreign powers" (p. 140, emphasis added). He also claims that China's Japan policy is beset by "*emotionally* raw historical memories" (p. 144, emphasis added). Johnston mentions emotion but is largely grounded in mainstream sociological theory and its emphasis on cold cognition, largely bypassing the nascent sociologies and psychologies of emotion. Surprisingly, it is Susan Shirk who makes emotion the centerpiece of her argument. Fear is everywhere: "Chinese leaders are haunted by the *fear* that their days in power are numbered"; "The *fears* of the Communist autocrats make them hyper sensitive to public attitudes," etc. (pp. 7, 53, emphasis added). Although Shirk does not detail much evidence of such fears, it is both a novel and compelling argument. And it is particularly surprising given that her earlier academic work, such as *The Political Logic of Economic Reform in China* (1993), was marked by a rational choice style of argumentation that implicitly dismissed emotion as a driver of human behavior.

In his October 15, 2007 speech to the 17th Party Congress, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao highlighted China's commitment to "peaceful development," a reformulation of earlier "peaceful rise" rhetoric without the "rise" that seeks to reassure the world about China's benign intentions. He also advanced the ideas of "promoting democracy in international relations" and building a "harmonious world." These ideas can be read two ways. Optimists read them as suggesting a status quo China with a peaceful orientation. Pessimists read them as implicit criticisms of American "hegemonism" and a revisionist desire to challenge US primacy. Bates Gill is certainly right that the stakes are extremely high to "get China right" (p. 209). Shirk, Gill, and Johnston have produced timely and valuable books that should contribute to the maturation of US debate over a US China policy for the twenty-first century.

NOTE

1. Editor's note: the book carries an additional subtitle, *How China's Internal Politics Could Derail its Peaceful Rise*.

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