Jae Ho Chung (ed.): Assessing China's Power
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For the field of International Relations, studying the rise of China has become a cottage industry in the past decade. My incomplete survey finds that up to the date of writing this review, at least 100 books that contain “rise of China”, “China’s rise”, “rising China”, or “China rising” in their titles have been published in the English literature alone. Without a “careful and in-depth” examination of the reality of China’s rise itself, however, these studies would become mere conjectures. The volume *Assessing China’s Power* edited by Jae Ho Chung is a work that exactly fills that gap. As outlined by Chung in the preface of the book, each chapter tackles three themes: “(1) assessing China’s power today; (2) comparing China’s power with that of the United States; and (3) forecasting China’s power in 2025”.¹ These themes are the foundation and premise of the ongoing heated debates on a series of subjects including the rise of China, China threat, Asia century, the United States’ pivot to Asia, the South China Sea territorial disputes, etc. Thus, the collective research project that makes the book possible is important on its own right, and it is a daunting task, requiring the contributors to have in-depth knowledge of China, the United States as its counterpart, and the global and regional international systems. The value of the edited volume depends highly on what kind of contributors the editor can bring together, the perspective and research methods that these contributors employ, and the breadth and depth of their analyses. This review

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attempts to assess the book *Assessing China's Power* by examining both the volume as a whole and the included chapters individually.

The editor, Jae Ho Chung, deserves special commendation for selecting and bringing together “such a stellar group of scholars” (Hahm Chaibong’s word in the forward of the volume) to work on a timely research project. The 13 contributors come from six countries, namely the United States, South Korea, Australia, China, France, and the United Kingdom. They include both university professors and think-tank pundits, both Chinese and non-Chinese, and both easterners and westerners. Most importantly, they are all leading scholars on China and Asia. The only possible complaint is that it would be better if the editor could include a chapter written by a Japanese scholar, as Japan is probably the country that has the strongest and most distinctive feeling of the impacts of China’s growing power. Despite the various backgrounds of the contributors, the volume approaches to the task of assessing China’s power in a very concerted and systematic way, focusing on four dimensions: domestic (economic and political governance) capacity, military capabilities, external adaptability/soft power, and perceptions by others. More specifically, the volume includes two chapters on the domestic sources/constraints of China’s power, three chapters on its military power (on conventional military power, nuclear capabilities, and China’s modernization efforts and activities in the so-called global commons including outer space, cyberspace, and the Arctic), two chapters on the normative scope of China’s power including its approach to multilateral system and its soft power, two chapters on the regional repercussion of China’s power growth, and three chapters on China’s global power and its assessment from a Chinese perspective. The editor provides a systematic and inspiring introduction of the volume in Chapter 1. In my opinion, Chung’s secret weapon is to pay special attention to conceptualization by laying out the multiple dimensions of such key concepts as power, soft power, and so on. Conceptualization and categorization enable him to organize the substantive chapters in a logical way. Placing the research project of evaluating China’s power in the scholarly context of debating China’s rise as well as in light of the historical precedents of great powers’ rises and falls, Chung proposes some questions to have readers to bear in mind, particularly whether there will be an Asia-centered world, and what kind of Asia, what kind of China, and what kind of China-US relations in the future.

Without the contributors’ inside and in-depth knowledge of China, it would be impossible to achieve the goal of the volume. In this sense, the contributors have successfully vindicated their reputation. Each of Chapters 2–13 assesses a specific aspect of China’s power on the basis of solid empirical facts, horizontally in comparison to the United States and vertically in prospect of 2025. Most chapters provide detailed quantitative data from first-hand surveys, secondary statistics, or systematic compilations. In particular, Francois Godement’s chapter on China’s economic power (Chapter 2), Tony Saich’s chapter on China’s domestic governing capacity (Chapter 3), Andrew S. Erickson’s chapter on China’s conventional military power (Chapter 4), Handwon Kim’s chapter on China’s soft power (Chapter 8), David Kang’s chapter on East Asian countries’ response to China’s power growth (Chapter 9), Evelyn Goh’s chapter on China’s power in Southeast Asia (Chapter 10), and Zhimin Chen’s chapter on China’s power from a

Chinese perspective (Chapter 13) all base their cases on abundant quantitative data. While Michael S. Chase's chapter on China's nuclear capabilities (Chapter 5) and Kevin Pollpeter's chapter on China's activities on outer space, cyberspace, and the Arctic (Chapter 6) do not provide many quantitative data, they draw on numerous important reports, white papers, and other information sources. Ann Kent's chapter on China's influence on multilateral system (Chapter 7), Shaun Breslin's chapter on China's global power (Chapter 11), and Suisheng Zhao's chapter on China's self-image of its own power (Chapter 12) interpret the political meanings of China's behaviors and official discourse in a broad historical context and with references to enormous relevant literature. Most contributors not only employ sound research methods, but also adopt generally appropriate attitudes in their analyses. Whereas mass media and policy-centered magazines nowadays are fraught with sensational arguments on the rise of China, the chapters of the volume provide professional and sober analyses.

Generally speaking, Chapters 2–13 offer a mixed picture of China's power: (1) while its economic power has grown fast, and would possibly surpass the United States by 2025–2030,² it is subject to uncertainties; (2) China's military power has not yet made it a global "peer competitor" of the United States but a threat in the Near Seas and proximate airspace³; and (3) while China has global power, it is still limited as a "reformist veto power",⁴ and its soft power is also limited.⁵ To many China watchers, such a picture is not surprising at all. Yet, readers would miss the richness of the volume if they step away with just a rough conclusion as such. I argue that all the chapters deserve careful reading because the contributors have provided rich insights and distinctive ideas, which readers cannot easily find elsewhere. For example, in Chapter 2, Francois Godement describes China and the United States as "unsinkable economies", which enjoy some special advantages due to their very large scales. He argues that "the US edge lies in the ability to remain a developing economy,"⁶ whereas "[w]ithin China lies one of the world's largest and fastest-growing developed economy."⁷ He also argues that what is crucial to China's economy is not shifting from investment-driven growth to consumption-driven growth, but curbing income inequality. These novel ideas result from Godement's long-term study of China's economy. In Chapter 3, Tony Saich use his own survey data to show that while Chinese citizens are unsatisfied with local governments, they show relatively more satisfaction with the central government, which partly explains why the Chinese domestic governance system remains stable. In Chapter 4, Andrew Erickson distinguishes China's geopolitical interests into "core interests close in," "vital interests just outside the core interests," and "important interests beyond that," which are of different distances from China and treated with different policies by China. Erickson also advocates that the United

² P. 22.

³ P. 87.

⁴ Pp. 244–245.

⁵ P. 179.

⁶ P. 27.

⁷ P. 28.

States should adopt a “deterrence by denial” approach toward China. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate adequately on the approach, and it remains somewhat unclear in the chapter. Given the growing tensions in South China Sea in recent years, it is natural to recall the debate between David Kang and Amitav Acharya on whether or not China’s neighbors balance against it and why.⁸ One wonders how Kang would assess the current state in East Asia. In Chapter 9 on China’s power in the regional context, Kang uses defense spending data, 1988–2013, from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) to show that East Asian countries have not responded to the rise of China with increase in defense spending (measured by share of GDP devoted to defense). Instead, East Asian countries’ shares of GDP devoted to defense, be they US allies or not, have declined impressively in the last 25 years. After rejecting a number of alternative explanations, Kang argue that “[o]ne possible explanation for low East Asian military expenditures is that East Asian countries face low external threats and see their security environment as relatively stable.”⁹ Interestingly, relying on the same data but focusing on the absolute amount of annual military expenditure of key Southeast Asian countries, Evelyn Goh discovers in Chapter 10 that “Southeast Asian defense budgets as a whole grew by 44 % between 2003 and 2013” (in particular, Vietnam’s grew by 118 % and Indonesia’s by 105 %)¹⁰ and uses these figures as evidences of rising threat perception. It is up to the readers to decide which interpretation makes more sense. The different interpretations of the same evidences indicate the complexity of the region of East Asia. The increase in defense spending in the region can be caused by regional players’ growing economic power as well as by the growing tensions among them. It is not easy to discern the two effects. As the only contributor based in China, Zhimin Chen provides in Chapter 13 a telling review of the results of some major “comprehensive national power” studies by Chinese scholars and the influential ideas circulated in policy and scholarly communities regarding China’s power position. According to Chen’s review, Chinese international relations scholars’ humbleness before the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and their over-optimism after the outbreak of the crisis formed a stark contrast, which could partially explain the so-called “new assertiveness” of Chinese foreign policy, though whether China’s foreign policy can be described as such is still debatable.¹¹

Among all the chapters in the volume, I believe readers should give extra applause to the chapters by Andrew Erickson, Evelyn Goh, and Shaun Breslin. Erickson’s chapter gives such a comprehensive coverage of China’s conventional military power with detailed information that I would recommend the chapter to all students of China’s military force. Goh’s chapter offers a comprehensive survey of the relations between China and Southeast Asia and the former’s impacts on the latter, which is very valuable. In Chapter 11, Breslin assesses China’s economic power in three dimensions—production, market, and finance—and its global

⁸ David C. Kang (2003); Amitav Acharya (2003/2004); and David C. Kang (2003/2004).

⁹ P. 197.

¹⁰ Pp. 219–220.

¹¹ See Alastair Iain Johnston (2013); and Dingding et al. (2013/2014).

normative power in light of the impacts of the Global Financial Crisis, yielding many objective and insightful observations. In comparison, I believe the conclusion of Ann Kent's chapter on China's role in the multilateral system is somewhat questionable. Kent examines China's behaviors in international institutions since 1971 and attempts to tease out China's changing role in the system. She argues that "[w]hile, until 2008, it was still largely a compliant, if not cooperative, state, from 2008 on, it was beginning to undermine the fundamental norms and rules constituting that system so that the effectiveness of international organizations was jeopardized, their norms diluted, and their institutions increasingly tailored to the needs of states, China's in particular..."¹² First, the research covers such a long period (1971–2014) in which so many events took places that it is almost inevitable to interpret certain events in a simplistic way by disregarding the context and complexity of each event. For example, regarding China's uses of veto power with Russia on Syria, Ken completely disregards the Western powers' abuse of UN Security Council Resolution 1973 on Libya and China's insecurity as a result of the US's pivot to Asia. Second, Kent's analysis is based on a hidden assumption that international norms can only defined by western countries and are fixed. Thus, China's non-cooperation with western countries is interpreted as noncompliance of international norms, and China's efforts to push for reforms of international institutions are interpreted as assertiveness. For example, Kent views China's diplomatic efforts in establishing BRICS Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) negatively as evidence of assertion. Yet, when evaluating these behaviors, we should be fully aware of the under-representation of emerging economies in major international financial institutions, the US Congress's objections to IMF reforms at least up until December 2015, and the great demand for infrastructure investment in Asian developing countries. Generally speaking, Kent's chapter deals with not only China's power, but also its intention. Yet, we have to admit that it is much more complex to interpret China's intention than to evaluate its power.

While the edited volume has enormous value in providing substantive knowledge and information, in-depth analyses, and mostly sober judgments and predictions, it offers very little theoretical explorations. Readers who look for a profound theoretical framework to understand the rise of China and its impacts would be somewhat disappointed: none of the chapters in the volume offer a glimpse at theory. That, however, is not the job of the volume. Generally speaking, I believe the book should be on the reference shelf of scholars who study the rise of China and its implications and who are interested in the future of U.S.-China relations and the future of Asia.

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¹² P. 153.

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