

# Preface

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Among the most reported stories in the first decade of the twenty-first century, topping the list was not the global financial crisis, the long-running Iraq War, or even the ‘September 11’ terrorist attacks—it was the rise of China.<sup>1</sup> These findings, announced by Global Language Monitor in 2011, were based on a study of global media reporting trends among 75000 print and electronic media sources. Were there a similar survey on the issues concerning the international scholarly community, China’s rise would almost certainly rank among the most closely scrutinised as well. Long gone, it seems, are the days when an American publishing company did not publish a single book on China for fifteen years.<sup>2</sup> With such extensive coverage on China’s ascendancy today, there seems hardly a need for yet another study on this subject. Existing commentaries, books, and articles must have already covered a sufficiently wide range of perspectives.

Despite or precisely because of the vast amount of literature on this issue, I feel compelled to join the chorus. However, in doing so this book does not, as do many other books, seek to examine whether China is rising or not, or what its rise means. This is not because I believe such questions are unimportant or have already been settled; I do not. Rather, I believe what China’s rise means cannot be independently assessed in isolation from what we already *mean* by China’s rise. Though tautological it might sound, the latter question draws attention to the meaning-giving subject of China watchers. It turns the spotlight on our thoughts and representations of China’s rise, which constitutes the main focus of this book.

Though it may appear that way in the eyes of some, going along this path is not a cunning attempt of finding a literary niche in an increasingly crowded field to score some cheap points all the while dodging the heavy lifting of tackling complex ‘real-world’ issues surrounding China. Nor is it to deliberately court controversy or strike an affected pose of malaise about an otherwise vibrant field of study. To me, this book is a necessary move justified on both theoretical and practical grounds. Theoretically, the book rejects the prevalent assumption about the dichotomy between reality and representation. *Contra* positivism, we cannot bypass thoughts and representations to come into direct contact with China as it is. What we see as ‘China’ cannot be detached from various discourses and representations of it. Works that purport to study China’s rise, as if it were a transparent and empirically observable phenomenon out there, are always already inextricably enmeshed

in representations. In all likelihood, those works will then become themselves part of such representations, through which still later studies will gaze at 'China'. In this sense, my focus on representation is less an expedient choice than ontological and epistemological necessity.

On practical grounds, given the inescapable immanence of representation and discourse in the social realm, a proper study of discursive representation is not a retreat from the real world but a genuine engagement with it in the full sense of the words. Perhaps with the exception of sleepwalking or unconscious twitching, no human action (let alone social action) can do without thought and representation. Constructivists are right in saying that words have consequences. But we may add that all social domains and human relationships are mediated through and constituted by thought and representation. China's relationship with the West is certainly no exception. With regional stability, prosperity and even world peace at stake, there is now an urgent, practical need to understand how the various strains of representation and discourse pervade and condition this critical and complex relationship.

For these reasons, this book turns to Western representations of China's rise. In particular, it focuses on two influential paradigms: the 'China threat' and the 'China opportunity'. Commonly held by their respective exponents as objective truth about the implications of China's rise, both paradigms, despite their seemingly contrasting views, are reflections of a certain Western self-imagination and its quest for certainty and identity in an inherently dynamic, volatile and uncertain world. While understandable, such a desire often proves elusive in the social world. With no lasting law-like certainty in sight, the desire for certainty then often comes full circle to two subsets of desire: namely, fears and fantasies. For these forms of desire can provide some emotional substitutes for the holy grail of certainty and truth. In this book, I will argue that the two China paradigms are, respectively, discursive embodiments of these two popular types of emotional substitutes. As such, they are not objective China knowledge, but are closely linked to habitual Western self-imagination and power practice. By probing into the interrelationship between knowledge, desire and power, the book aims to deconstruct contemporary Western representations of China's rise. Although it will tentatively point to some methodological openings for what one might call 'critical China watching', due to its scope and ontological stance as well as limits of space, it promises no ready-made alternative toolkit through which to better understand China as it is. Alas, the 'China as it is' simply does not exist except in our ingrained desire and conventional imagination.

Conceiving and writing this book has been a long, challenging, but ultimately stimulating and rewarding journey. Along the way, it has been made possible and enjoyable by a large number of people, to whom I have accumulated enormous intellectual and personal debts. Regrettably it would not be possible to mention all the names here, hence my apologies to anyone I may have inadvertently omitted.

Although the book does not bear resemblance to my PhD thesis completed at the Australian National University (ANU), some of its initial seeds of ideas were sown during my time in Canberra. I therefore would like to thank Jim George, a model scholar, inspiring teacher and generous friend, for his tireless guidance, numerous thought-provoking conversations and incisive critique. This book owes a profound and lasting intellectual debt to him and his uncompromising stance on quality in scholarship.

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Above all, I dedicate the book to the memory of my parents. At this moment of reflection, my overwhelming feeling is a profound and ever-aching sense of loss and regret: although I had known all along that nothing I could do would ever adequately repay their nurture and love, at least the book, I had hoped, could be such a gesture; but even this small gesture has arrived far too late. In the end, they had not quite understood what their youngest child was doing over so many years, and so far away from home. Yet, through two remarkable lives, they had taught me by example the most valuable knowledge of all: how to become a human. This knowledge I could never dream of fully grasping, but it is a privilege to know that it is always there for me to return to for guidance, inspiration, comfort and precious memory.