

The AAG Review of Books

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrob20>

Why Nations Rise: Narratives and the Path to Great Power

Xiaofeng Liu

To cite this article: Xiaofeng Liu (2022) Why Nations Rise: Narratives and the Path to Great Power, *The AAG Review of Books*, 10:2, 9-12, DOI: [10.1080/2325548X.2022.2036542](https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2022.2036542)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2325548X.2022.2036542>



Published online: 07 Apr 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 18



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Why Nations Rise: Narratives and the Path to Great Power

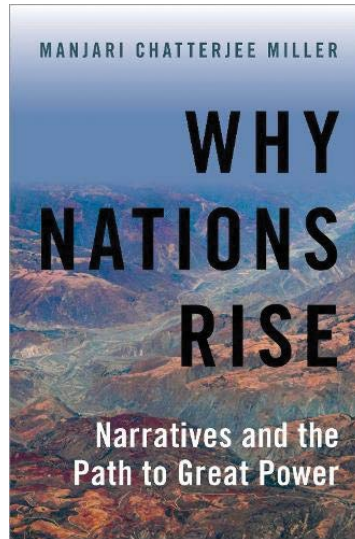
Manjari Chatterjee Miller. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. x and 189 pp., notes, index. \$99.00 cloth (ISBN 9780190639938); \$27.95 paper (ISBN 9780197558935).

Reviewed by Xiaofeng Liu ,
Department of Geography,
University of Hong Kong, Hong
Kong SAR, China.

The rise and fall of nations has long aroused (political) geographers' curiosity about the geographical foundations of powers. Classical geopolitical hotspots, such as Mackinder's heartlands and Nicholas Spykman's rimland, are regarded as where powers emerge. Prominent rising powers such as BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) also draw much attention. This leads to a number of questions, including these: How to define rising powers? Why can some nations actively rise to become great powers while others remain reticent? What are the effects of rising powers? The new book *Why Nations Rise: Narratives and the Path to Great Power* establishes its research on these core questions and provides argumentative answers.

The author, Manjari Chatterjee Miller, is an international relations scholar at Boston University specializing in foreign policies of rising powers in Asia. As an Indian native who also speaks Mandarin, Miller has studied and compared China and India for many years and was motivated to write *Why Nations Rise* out of curiosity about differences between the two countries as rising powers. Miller seeks answers from history and draws implications for the present and future with nonmaterial grounds of a nation's rise.

Although the term *rising power* is ubiquitous in the latest news and academic writing, Miller finds its definition opaque at best. Much scholarly writing presumes China, India, or Russia as rising powers without giving a clarification or explanation. *Why Nations Rise* defines the rising power as "a state that is



rising to become, in the near future, a great power" (p. 8). The book considers not only material power but also the willingness and actions to globalize its interests and gain domestic and international recognition. The definition challenges the heavy emphasis on material competency of classic power transition theory (Organski 1958), which presumes that rising powers are extant great powers' challengers with their expanding economic and military capabilities compared to others (Kennedy 1987). With the definition provided in the book, we are able to identify the differences between rising powers; to put it another way, why some (active countries) seek to become great powers and others (reticent countries) do not.

On this basis, Miller argues that countries becoming active rising powers should be equipped with three elements: acquiring economic and military power, intentionally obtaining global authority and pursuing both internal and external recognition, and following and accommodating the established world order or great power norms at the beginning in the long process of becoming a great power. Those possessing solely economic and military strengths, owing to the lack of the other pursuits and framings, remain reticent.

To support the argument, Miller draws on historical materials of several cases, supplemented with observations and interviews with government officials in India and China. Although the materials employed to explain the nations' rise or reticence are conventional, the book compares cases across time and space to offer deep insights. Miller presents three pairs of cases in chronological order across five chapters: rising America and the reticent Netherlands in the 1800s, rising Meiji Japan and reticent Cold War Japan, and rising China and reticent India in the post-Cold War era. Miller identifies similarities and differences between rising powers to illuminate the path to becoming a great power and its alternatives. Countries seeking to become rising powers actively mimic the extant great power and narratively shape their domestic belief to legitimize their global

pursuits. For instance, Meiji Japan sought to expand overseas colonies, and contemporary China has tried to participate and lead in global multilateral institutions. The reticent countries, on the contrary, do not exhibit these attempts despite acquiring sufficient material strengths. For example, the Netherlands gradually gave up some overseas colonies, and India has not shown enthusiasm in many international mechanisms.

Going beyond “rising” in material terms, the book proposes the notion of “idea advocacy” to conceptualize how “a rising power manages its own rise through its beliefs about its changing status” (p. 13). These narratives and discourses of idea advocacy are usually driven by the country’s strong leaders or elites and taken by the communities. Meiji Japan, for example, established the slogan “enrich the country, strengthen the military” (*fukoku hyohei*) and the motto of being “modernized and civilized” (*gendai bunmei*) to legitimize its imperialist expansion in Asia. Likewise, contemporary China emphasizes its peaceful rise (*heping jueqi*) as a responsible great power (*fuzeren daguo*) to justify its endorsement of multilateralism. The narratives shape perceptions of the countries’ roles as “great powers” and grant their leadership in conformity with corresponding “great power” norms.

Although established in the discipline of international relations, the book also offers theoretical contributions to debates in several fields, notably political geography and geopolitics and regional studies of Asia and China. Key topics include the definition of rising powers, the role of discourses in presenting and leading to a country’s rise, whether rising powers will challenge extant powers, and the particularity of China’s rise.

First, the book offers an ontological reflection by digging deeper into the rising power itself instead of classic studies’ emphasis on the international order within which it is situated. Focusing on the rising power itself, the approach fills in a missing link on the chain of a nation’s process of “rising.” It demonstrates how a country actively enhances beliefs in its status as a rising power and the future to be a great power.

Second, the discursive approach advances understanding of the rising process and nonmaterial dimensions of powers. Its emphasis on narratives and discourses, particularly those of politicians and elites, runs in the same groove of critical geopolitics’ interests in discourses on top of the material competition and control over land and sea, to which classical geopolitics and power transition theories attribute the rise of powers (Mamadouh 1998). Critical geopolitics regards geopolitics as how political elites and individuals imagine their place in the world, which is usually manifested

in their discourses (Dalby 1991). This book takes a further step to discuss how certain discourses and imageries contribute to the rise of a nation. Moreover, the idea also tallies with the nonmaterial approach adopted by the soft power theory, coined by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004). It stresses the wield of culture, value, and other noncoercive strengths in appealing to others and influencing their choices. Whereas soft power mostly seeks external influence, Miller’s idea advocacy emphasizes building both internal and external recognition and belief.

Third, the book suggests that rising powers do not necessarily become the challenger of extant great powers or cause military conflicts. Classical realists have two general views on the conflicts caused by rising powers. One presumes that the rising power is belligerent in its expansion, leaving the extant power no choice but confrontation. The other considers rising powers as revisionists who are reluctant to subordinate to the established power but aim to reform the current world system and rules. Likewise, political geographers’ discussion is usually situated in world-system theory, which assumes a zero-sum game in the cycle of powers (Flint and Taylor 2007). In contrast to these views, this book finds that rising powers tend to follow or imitate the current rules set by previous or existing great powers at the beginning of their rising process. The argument is understandable, as being accepted and recognized on the international stage is crucial, but whether it can smoothly transit from a rule-taker to a rule-maker is questionable.

Fourth, regarding China’s rise in particular, the book reveals its similarities with the three essential components of previous rising powers. Views of international relations studies diverge on whether China’s rise signals threat or friendship to the international order and other powers (Kang 2005, 2007; Breslin 2013). They also debate whether discourses contributing to China’s rise are unique or exceptional (Callahan 2014; Zhang 2011). Similarly, critical geopolitics studies also seek the uniqueness of China’s rise, such as Confucian geopolitics (An, Sharp, and Shaw 2020) and the use of history as Chinese exceptionalism (Woon 2018), in explaining China’s state formation and geographical imaginations as a rising power. Agnew (2010) argued that China’s rise is shaped by both West-born nationalism and the Chinese view of the world. Offering a different observation, *Why Nations Rise* indicates that even though the sources and strategies of discourses vary, China follows a similar trajectory to other rising powers to gain internal and external recognition and build the belief to become a great power. The comparative approach inspires China studies to think out of the box. For instance, many studies on China’s global engagement, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), do

not consider how it is different from previous rising powers when they were at this stage. This book motivates us to reflect on the commonness and uniqueness of China's global expansion and provides us with an understanding of China's eagerness to shape internal and external recognition.

Practically, *Why Nations Rise* is a timely reading in an era when the conflicts between China and the United States escalate. The book's conclusions mostly accord with the common understanding of the cases and general observation of China's current development. For example, recent blockbusters in China, such as the Wolf Warrior series, exemplify successful narrative construction with strong patriotism for the sake of internal recognition. Furthermore, scholars also show interest in how China, as a rising power, seizes overseas opportunities and expands its presence in key areas (Iftikhar and Zhan 2020). China is playing active roles in established multilateral mechanisms and initiating new ones, such as the BRI and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, exhibiting efforts to follow current norms and rules of powers. More efforts can be put into identifying whether and how China is shifting from a norm-taker to a norm-maker in different fields, such as environmental protection and technology.

With regard to narratives, which the book treats as the crux of rising to great powers, political geographers can further explore themes such as unpacking the states' monolith, exploring drivers of certain narratives and discourses, and the transition of national narratives across different periods.

The first issue is that the state is not a monolith, and narratives are not constant. Hidden in the state's black box, factors and actors contributing to the capacity and narratives are complicated and not always consistent. An, Sharp, and Shaw (2020) remind us that the status and narratives of rising might be rooted in the state's deep-seated culture and history, but recent social movements in Hong Kong reflect voices that are not always unified, and the culture can vary within China (Bennett 2021). Moreover, despite China's top-down administrative structure, the implementation of guidance and policies largely depends on local contexts and capacities, making the outcome vary from one place to another (Li and Wu 2012). Political geographers have the advantage of breaking the territorial trap (Agnew 1994) with spatial and scalar thinking and revealing the complexity of the state.

The second problem is that seldom do we know who, apart from political elites, is advocating for which narratives and why certain discourses can dominate and prevail, although the book mentions, in most cases, there are debates within

the countries. As the motives and drivers behind the narratives are not clearly elaborated, this book has answered more of a "how" question than a "why" question. It presents how narratives are used to establish the determination on the rise to be a great power, but it does not trace why these narratives can be successfully deployed. Geographers can connect narratives of rising powers more with geography concepts, such as territorialization and network, to explore the spatial foundations and explanations of those narratives and their variation.

Third, question marks hang over when narratives of greatness will elevate or reduce over time in one particular country. The comparison of rising Meiji Japan and reticent Cold War Japan shows the possibility of transformation from one type of rising power to another. It is not clear, however, why one country actively rises during one period while remaining silent at another time. To solve the question, further directions along this trajectory dwell in patterns and explanations of the narratives of a great power-to-be, factors contributing to the transition of narratives, as well as the match or mismatch between material power and narratives.

Why Nations Rise can be an introductory material for novice readers interested in global rising powers and it also provides inspiration for experts in several fields. For political geographers, the book offers a chance to connect rising powers' narrative building and recognition seeking with geographical foundation and explanation. For China studies scholars, the book can inspire exploration into the commonness and uniqueness of China's overseas engagement with more horizontal and vertical comparisons.

ORCID

Xiaofeng Liu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5160-0335>

References

- Agnew, J. 1994. The territorial trap: The geographical assumptions of international relations theory. *Review of International Political Economy* 1:53–80.
- Agnew, J. 2010. Emerging China and critical geopolitics: Between world politics and Chinese particularity. *Eurasian Geography & Economics* 51:569–82.
- An, N., J. Sharp, and I. Shaw. 2020. Towards a Confucian geopolitics. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11:218–35.
- Bennett, M. M. 2021. Hong Kong as special cultural zone: Confucian geopolitics in practice. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 11:236–43.

- Breslin, S. 2013. China and the global order: Signaling threat or friendship? *International Affairs* 89:615–34.
- Callahan, W. A. 2014. Chinese exceptionalism and the politics of history. In *Asian thought on China's changing international relations*, ed. N. Horesh and E. Kavalski, 17–33. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dalby, S. 1991. Critical geopolitics: Discourse, difference, and dissent. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 9:261–83.
- Flint, C., and P. J. Taylor. 2007. *Political geography: World-economy, nation-state, and locality*. 5th ed. London, UK: Pearson Education.
- Iftikhar, M., and J. V. Zhan. 2020. The geopolitics of China's overseas port investments: A comparative analysis of Greece and Pakistan. *Geopolitics*. Advance online publication.
- Kang, D. C. 2005. Why China's rise will be peaceful: Hierarchy and stability in the East Asian region. *Perspectives on Politics* 3:551–54.
- Kang, D. C. 2007. *China rising: Peace, power, and order in East Asia*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Kennedy, P. 1987. *The rise and fall of the great powers: Economic change and military conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Li, Y., and F. Wu. 2012. The transformation of regional governance in China: The rescaling of statehood. *Progress in Planning* 78:55–99.
- Mamadouh, V. D. 1998. Geopolitics in the nineties: One flag, many meanings. *GeoJournal* 46:237–53.
- Nye, J. S. 1990. Soft power. *Foreign Policy* 80:153–71.
- Nye, J. S. 2004. *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.
- Organski, A. F. 1958. *World politics*. New York, NY: Knopf.
- Woon, C. Y. 2018. China's contingencies: Critical geopolitics, Chinese exceptionalism and the uses of history. *Geopolitics* 23:67–95.
- Zhang, F. 2011. The rise of Chinese exceptionalism in international relations. *European Journal of International Relations* 19:305–28.