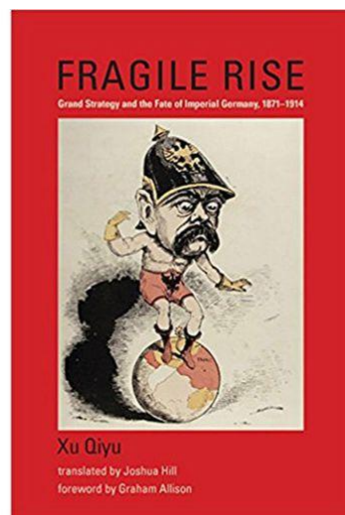


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## Book Review

“Fragile Rise: Grand Strategy and the Fate of Imperial Germany, 1871-1914”

by Xu Qiyu, translated by Joshua Hill, foreword by Graham Allison, The MIT Press, \$31, 341 pages.



# Managing risk when power shifts

by Martin Rubin

It says a lot about the development of [China](#) in the past decades that we should have this deeply learned book by the deputy director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at Beijing's National Defense University. Providing an in-depth look at Wilhelmine Germany, between the proclamation of the German Empire at Versailles following the Franco-Prussian War and the outbreak of World War I, 43 years later, it deserves to be taken at face value for its insights into a pivotal period not just of European but indeed global history.

Inevitably, though, given the current geopolitical scene and the common feeling about the threat posed by [China](#)'s extraordinary rise to the future of the United States as the world's dominant superpower, its discussion of Germany's challenge to the Pax Britannica, which had held sway for a century, will be read as a kind of allegory of today's situation.

Lest anyone miss this in [Xu](#)'s own text — and despite his suppleness as a writer few American readers will do so — the foreword by Graham Allison, a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School, makes it plain:

“Although [Xu](#) refrains from stating them explicitly, ‘Fragile Rise’ holds a number of important lessons for the rise of [China](#) in our own time. [China](#)'s rapidly growing economic and military power will inevitably create structural stress between [China](#) and the United States. Whatever the intentions of leaders of both nations, they will have to recognize and manage the risks that inevitably accompany changes in the international balance of power.

“Second, this structural stress does not mean that war is inevitable. As [Xu](#) notes, prudent diplomacy and astute statesmanship can meet this challenge, as Bismarck demonstrated. Significantly, while compromises will be needed on both sides, [Xu](#)'s emphasis on the ‘fragility’ of the rising power suggests the burden may fall disproportionately on Chinese leaders. The defining question for this generation is whether these Chinese leaders will be up to the challenge. In this regard, ‘Fragile Rise’ provides an important clue for Chinese leaders hoping to negotiate the structural stress created by their country's ascendance.”

All this is true, but I think it does “Fragile Rise” a disservice to read it solely as allegory.

And the book's translator, Joshua Hill, an assistant professor of history at Ohio University, lays it on even more plainly:

“Make no mistake — ‘Fragile Rise’ is profoundly about contemporary China As [Xu](#) Qiyu wrote on the original cover ‘When it is difficult to see clearly into the future, looking back to history, even the history of other peoples, might be the right choice.’ Although he does not repeat those words inside his book, their spirit is present throughout his text. [Xu](#)’s ‘Fragile Rise’ is implicit policy advice in the form of an extended historical analogy.”

All right, we get it. But I really do feel that to read this book only in this way is to miss a valuable contribution to the historiography of its stated subject, as Mr. Allison acknowledges when he puts it into the context of other (Western) scholarship and rightly characterizes it as “nuanced.”

The reference to Bismarck is telling, for I think it is fair to say that if “Fragile Rise” has a hero it is Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who created the German Empire and whose wise leadership and diplomatic skills took it from strength to strength under its first Emperor Wilhelm I for nearly two decades. He did not have as easy a time managing the second Wilhelm, for whom the word mercurial might have been invented, and who abruptly dismissed his mentor after only a few years, as memorably depicted in a contemporary cartoon titled “Dropping the Pilot.”

Which brings me to what I think is a crucial point: you can advocate for and urge good leadership, but always having it is subject to any number of variable factors both foreseen and not. [Xu](#) Qiyu’s discussion of Bismarck’s successors and the emperor who put them in and out shows just how uncertain and fraught with inherent disaster unwise changes can be. Of course, Wilhelmine Germany was a hereditary monarchy, albeit with some elements of democracy, but to outsiders, today’s China with its rigid party structure shares the authoritarianism which may well have — and had — inherent seeds of catastrophic choices.

There are at least as many differences and similarities between the past and present challenges to the prevailing ones. As we see in the sad end of “Fragile Rise,” the complex intertwined familial connections between the rulers of the monarchies that went to war in 1914 counted for little when push came to strategic shove. Common adversaries and different sorts of links between the United States and [China](#) may well prove to be similarly irrelevant.

No matter how apt the parallels between any two situations, the major lesson that history teaches us is the unpredictability of how one develops. Doubtless, so many factors and personalities will spring up seemingly from nowhere that it would be foolish to overstate any particular paradigm.

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