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## Book Review: *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power*

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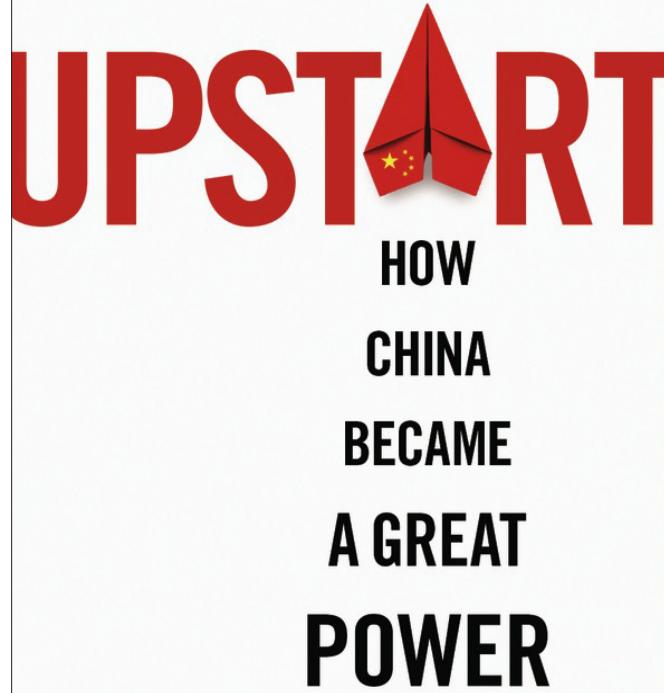
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UPSTART  
HOW  
CHINA  
BECAME  
A GREAT  
POWER

Oriana Skylar Mastro

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“The nature of a nation’s rise is to surpass the strongest nation in the world, and the strongest nation in the world can only be its barrier and not supporter.”

Yan Xuetong (24)

The book *Upstart: How China Became a Great Power* by Oriana Skylar Mastro, is an academic investigation about how China developed from a minor regional player in the mid-1990s into a global power, challenging the United States with every major instrument of power without instigating a major conflict thus far. Using a unique model interpreting rising power success, Mastro developed the Upstart Strategy following conversations with organizational and business leaders. The model is grounded in business competition theories about how small businesses rise and innovative startups succeed. Her Mastro three Es—emulation, exploitation, and entrepreneurship—provide a useful perspective regarding China’s effectiveness and efficiency in gaining parity with the United States in merely three decades. This model is useful for considering China’s decision-making process and provides predictive modeling for political and military leaders to anticipate China’s future directions (34).

The book is broken into three sections focusing on the emulation, exploitation, and entrepreneurship, approaches used by China in political, military, and economic spheres. Within each section, she analyzes where and why China used or considered a particular element of the Upstart Strategy. She supports the analyses with existing data, newly created data sets in previously unexplored areas, and Chinese leaders' and strategists' documents, speeches, and conversations.

Emulation is a common and historical tool in international politics where convergent, mimetic, or normative behaviors see the rising power engaging in known successful activities. While effective, it is incomplete and often costly. That is not to say China does not emulate the United States, on the contrary, there are specific areas where China sees the benefit of the US approach and follows it. Some emulation areas include international organization membership, robust homeland defense, global peacekeeping missions, free-trade agreements, and arms control. Mastro expands on the limitations of emulation alone, particularly for China, which leads to the other elements of the Upstart Strategy—exploitation and entrepreneurship.

Exploitation helps the rising power compete by focusing on areas where the hegemon fails to engage or suboptimally engages. For China, this means investing in regions America ignores or discounts, such as Africa or parts of Asia, to gain influence and strategic advantage. Since there is no direct competition (or an inability for the United States to compete), China's activities are less overtly threatening and, in some cases, China's interventions create a stabilizing effect without the inconvenience of US conditionality. China relies on exploiting gaps in arms sales, anti-access / area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, informaticized warfare, and informal economic sanctions to defend, coerce toward, and advance its interests.

Not all cases of exploitation and emulation have been successful, and Mastro discusses areas where China's leaders made choices inconsistent with the Upstart Strategy (such as building aircraft carriers) but at great economic or political cost. In the areas where exploitation and emulation proved unsuccessful, or China assessed futility in trying, it resorted to entrepreneurship.

Innovation, with new actions and ways of acting to capitalize on market gaps or inefficiencies, is key to any upstart. For China, entrepreneurship activities, like the Belt and Road Initiative and infrastructure investments in developing countries, demonstrated a new way to gain influence without competing with US investments in medical and government initiatives. China uses an entrepreneurial approach with strategic partnerships; foreign internal security; surveillance technology; China's "three warfares: public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare;" dual-use commercial logistics networks; domestic industrial policy; and developing technology (117).

A key feature of this book is the data-driven approach, which uses analysis from six original data sets and other existing data sets about Chinese activities. The author capitalizes on Chinese perceptions of their own behaviors and strategies using native language sources, adding weight to the primary analysis. Mastro also addresses counterpoints to many of her assertions throughout the book, which is a notable investment that provides additional evidence and support. The concluding chapter offers specific and actionable policy recommendations for the United States and its allies to protect their interests over the next 10 years. The exhaustive reference list is valuable to researchers interested in Chinese strategic policy. Finally, *Upstart*'s writing and tone are accessible to lay readers

less familiar with China while maintaining a high level of scholarship desired for academia. The book offers insight and considerations for strategic and operational leaders.

Oxford University Press, 2024 • 336 pages • \$29.99

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**Keywords:** instruments of power, China, grand strategy, foreign policy, great-power competition

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