

Book Review

Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe, translated by Edmund Ryden, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, 300 pp.

Yan Xuetong's piece of scholarship sheds light on China's ancient pre-Qin thinkers and makes interesting contributions to international relations theory. Not only does Yan's study make an in-depth inquiry into the pre-Qin thinkers' view on interstate relations, hegemony and global governance, he also allows for criticism and comments on his work by other scholars to be included. This enriches the book and gives it a broader scope. In the concluding section, the book responds to the commentators as well as provides a final interview that brings the reader closer to Yan through his life story.

The aim of the study is to dissect the international political philosophy of the pre-Qin thinkers in order to enhance contemporary IR-theory and to analyze the implications for China's rise. The essential line of thinking that unites the various pre-Qin thinkers and their different strands of thought is that political leadership is at the core of international relations and that morality is an integral part of that political leadership. Economic strength and military power are indeed necessary and important to understand great power relations and hegemony, yet they are secondary to the actor-centric core of the pre-Qin line of thinking. Below I discuss the insights of the study within four particular areas.

First, the philosophy of the pre-Qin masters was policy-oriented, aimed at giving advice to the feudal rulers in the later Spring and Autumn period and the following Warring States period. This is intimately connected to Yan's aspiration to do the same for present-day Chinese leaders, which connects to a view of political science where the *science* component functions to discipline the *political*. Yet much policy advice is circling around, and some recommendations will serve for guidance while others will get discarded in keeping with the purpose of the leaders. This reality stifles Yan's desire to produce objective policy advice through the scientific study of politics. Although convinced that objective policy advice is attainable, Yan's own inquiry reveals the shortcomings of objectivity by revealing historical examples where the ancient feudal rulers did not listen to the recommendations of the pre-Qin masters, thus shedding light on the limitation of intellectuals and scholars in shaping policy. The fruitless effort of the vast coalition of renowned American

professors opposing the second Iraq war presents an interesting analogy. Of course, this does not suggest that scholars should not strive to make policy advice, but to believe that it exists in an ideological and purposive vacuum is incorrect.

Second, out of curiosity and in line with the aim of letting pre-Qin thought inspire contemporary Chinese policy, it would be interesting to hear Yan's perspective on how the pre-Qin view regarding the necessity of class distinction to uphold order can be reconciled with a ruling Communist Party that formally should work towards establishing a classless society, or at least a moderately well-off, socialist, and harmonious society. According to pre-Qin thought, in a society without class distinctions people would fight over everything, standing in stark contrast to Marxist understandings of class conflict and being intrinsically incompatible with the pre-Qin notion of a hierarchical harmonious society.

Third, consistent with the actor-centric approach of the pre-Qin thinkers, Yan regards the competition for talent as not just a feature of the knowledge economy but as the essence of competition between great powers: from the king having the most excellent ministers, and the ministries having skilled bureaucrats. This is an interesting part of Yan's line of thinking with concrete impact on policy, exemplified by the Chinese government's 1000 Talents Plan designed to recruit strategic scientists and leading experts. Finding talents to ensure the rise of great powers requires a high degree of openness, which Yan relates to the hegemonic status of the United States (US) and the fact that it attracts talented and outstanding foreigners. Yet in terms of openness China is still far from the US and research shows that the 1000 Talents Plan is not yet attracting the very best and the returnees are mostly not permanent. However, the focus on competition for talent makes an original contribution to the dynamics of great power relations, which, according to Yan, will become the core dimension of Sino-US rivalry after China has reached a certain baseline for economic and military hard power. He stresses that it is important to keep officials responsible and effective and speedy removal of top officials as well as strategic selection of officials based on performance requirements should be allowed to help reducing erroneous policy-making.

Fourth, another interesting aspect that is brought to the fore by the book is regarding the views of the pre-Qin thinkers on power shifts and hegemony. It is generally believed that international power shifts are explained more by political power and ideas than material wealth and military might. For instance, Mencius puts strong emphasis on morality while downplaying the importance of power, while Xunzi recognizes the twin importance of both. Yet both differentiate between hegemonic authority and humane authority, where the former relies on power alone and the latter uses its power to implement benevolent rule and takes the lead in implementing and upholding

international norms through morally informed political leadership. Yan uses American unilateralism during the Bush regime to exemplify hegemony and stresses that the goal of China's strategy should not only be to reduce its power gap to the US but also to establish a better model for the international system than the one given by the US. To revise the US-led model of the international system China should act like a humane authority and the Chinese government should not assume that more economic power translates into power to shape international norms. Although Yan stresses that China needs to shift its heavy focus on economic development, the launch of new concepts under Xi Jinping's leadership (the new model of great power relations, the Chinese dream, etc.) can be said to depict the influence of pre-Qin thinkers such as Laozi, Mozi, Confucius and Mencius and their emphasis on the primacy of concepts and ideas. Moreover, the notion of humane authority and Xunzi's views on just war carry interesting insights into a potential future with a more globally active China. According to Xunzi, just wars should uproot evil and the armies of the benevolent circulate under heaven, which can be related to China's development of its navy and a possible future where Chinese aircraft carriers will circulate the seas around the globe. Ultimately opening up for what some scholars have called harmonious intervention and a more relaxed interpretation of China's traditional non-intervention policy where China puts down inhumanity and stops violence around the globe. Thus shedding a different light on China's involvement in Mali and its willingness to send combat troops for the first time within a United Nations mission; in essence echoing E.H. Carr: realism and morality are different sides of the same coin. And here is where the greatest strength of *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* lies; that it offers in-depth insights into the thought of the pre-Qin masters that stimulates thinking on how it might influence China's foreign policy and its future trajectory.

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