

**ANCIENT CHINESE THOUGHT,  
MODERN CHINESE POWER**

**Edited by Daniel A. Bell & Sun Zhe. Translated by Edmund Ryden.**

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A bold attempt to introduce ancient Chinese perspectives on international relations theory, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* is the latest publication to come from Yan Xuetong's ongoing research project that explores the interstate political philosophy of China's pre-Qin era. The book is translated from Yan's recent research on pre-Qin international political philosophy and its implications for the rise of China. As professor and director of Institute for International Relations of Tsinghua University in Beijing and one of the most influential Chinese scholars on international relations, Yan seeks to reestablish ancient Chinese thought as a significant asset for China's rise to a modern power and to enrich the current study of international relations theory by drawing intellectual resources from the era before China was unified by the Qin state in 221 BC.

The core of the book consists of three essays by Yan on interstate political philosophy from pre-Qin China, followed by critical commentaries by three brilliant Chinese scholars, and then Yan's response, all translated from Chinese. Appended to the chapters and three useful appendixes giving background information on Yan's research. In the first part of the book, Yan began his research into the philosophies of pre-Qin China in 2005 alongside his colleague and contributor to this volume, Xu Jin. Their first publication in 2008 takes the view that Chinese texts prior to 221 BC are of special importance to scholars today, because interstate relations during that era could "share many similarities with contemporary international politics" (Yan and Xu, 2008: 3). One year later, the second edited volume of Yan and Xu, *Thoughts on World Leadership and Their Implications* (Yan and Xu, 2009) brings together their commentaries on a wide array of pre-Qin works. The second book deserves special attention because each of Yan's chapters in this current volume (Chapters 1-3) is a translation from his edited volume *Thoughts on World Leadership*. The following three commentaries and Yan's response (Chapters 4-6 and 7) are translated from a 2009 special issue of a journal that Yan edits, the *Guoji zhengzhi kexue* (Quarterly Journal of International Politics).

In part one of the book, Yan starts the first chapter by comparing various

outlooks of seven thinkers from the 8th to the 3rd centuries BC on interstate politics through an examination from four different angles: “ways of thinking, views on interstate order, views on interstate leadership, and views on transfer of hegemonic power” (p.21). For Yan, the ideas of the ancient Chinese thinkers have vivid implications for China’s rise: “Should China increase its material power without at the same time increasing its political power, China will have difficulty being accepted by the international community as a major power that is more responsible than the United States” (p. 65-66). The next chapter concentrates on the work of Xunzi to illustrate how morality, hard power, strategic reliability, force, stratagems and norms can together shape interstate order. Adopting Xunzi’s discussion on these different types of power, humane authority (*wang*), hegemony (*ba*), and tyranny (*qiang*), Yan pinpoints the importance of moral standings as the main difference between a humane superpower and a hegemonic superpower. Chapter 3 surveys the normative and individual bases for hegemony, which can be viewed as the main theme of the book *The Stratagems of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce*) compiled at least 1,900 years ago to record the history of the Warring States Period. Recognizing that “contending for hegemony was a key theme of interstate politics” during this era, Yan and Huang note that a proper appreciation of *The Stratagems of the Warring States* can aid “a deeper understanding of the real state of international politics today” (p. 137) and then insist that this will bring useful messages for research into national power, international system research, as well as China’s strategy for ascent.

Part two of the book contains reactions and critical commentaries by Yang Qianru, Xu Jin, and Wang Rihua. The three essays constitute a lively demonstration of debates happening within the Chinese academic community. For instance, following Yan and Huang’s examination of the hegemonic philosophy of *The Stratagems of the Warring States*, Wang acknowledges their argumentations and further advocates that ancient China’s theory of political hegemony emphasized political power rather than military, economic, and military-economic power found in the Western theories and becomes the core element of Chinese version of hegemony (p.194-195). In general, their respective chapters argue for better contextualization in the reading of pre-Qin texts, insisting on benevolence and justice in pre-Qin concepts of interstate leadership.

Yan’s rejoinder opens part three of the book. Pointing to how ancient Chinese political thought may enhance the theoretical and empirical study of international relations, Yan calls for careful learning from “the distinction between humane authority and hegemony in pre-Qin times” (p. 219). Yan’s commitment to Realist understandings of IR, which he passionately defends in his interview with Lu Xin, shape his views about the purpose of studying pre-Qin thought as well as his selection of materials to include in the research. Together with Yan’s essay, these two pieces underscore Yan’s longstanding interest in marrying the study of international relations with China’s early political traditions.

Encountering terms like “Confucianism,” “Moism,” “Legalism”, some may ask why Yan does not mention *religion* at all in his work. In his narration of interpreting ancient Chinese political thoughts for modern context, Yan mentioned various pre-Qin philosophical schools, which are often labelled as “Chinese religions” by some cultural historians on China. In this book, it seems that Yan deliberately avoids to use the word “religion” to describe those schools. Certainly, this cannot be understood as Yan’s purpose to bring unnecessary mistiness or confusion. Probably in this way, he is apparently joining religious scholars such as Thomas David DuBois who advocates that “the modern concept of religion is Western in origin” (DuBois, 2011: 4). Indeed, if someone looks up the word *religion* in a Chinese dictionary, he will find it translated as *zongjiao*, a word rendered from Japanese *shūkyō*, and neither of them are native to Asia.<sup>1</sup> For most Chinese readers, the word religion instinctively calls to mind an ecclesiastic institution - a church, in particular a church of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> The distinction between religion and philosophy, somewhat arbitrary even in Western thought, makes even less sense in China. Many, if not all, Chinese “religions” are either agnostic or even atheistic, at least in their orthodox, scriptural form. The original texts of what would later become Daoism say nothing about who lives in the spirit realm. It is then not confusing anymore that Yan, a native Chinese who he received his PhD in UC Berkeley, primarily employs terms such as “political thoughts” to represent what might be described as “religious advocations” in Western sense.

One of the main contributions of Yan’s book is his in-depth interpretation of pre-Qin thinkers’ understanding of the role of morality in interstate politics and how it is linked to state power and international stability. Contrary to Western theories of international relations, Chinese pre-Qin philosophy distinguishes between different types of leading state in international politics and argues that the moral level of state leadership determines the state political power (p.101-102). The logic behind that is that tyrannic state leaders who rely solely on “hard power” will eventually lose the support of the people, whilst leaders with high morality will adopt prudent policies and the accumulated effects of these policies will lead in the long term to the increase in the comprehensive power of the state. Thus, “the humane authority has the role of taking the lead in implementing and upholding international norms, whereas hegemony lacks this” (p. 214). As for the reason why Yan writes this book, it is well summarized in his own words: “If we can rediscover more interstate political ideas of ancient Chinese philosophers and use them to enrich contemporary international relations theory, this will provide the guideline for a strategy for China’s rise” (p. 106).

1 “Zongjiao” did exist previously in ancient Chinese texts, but it had a more narrow meaning; see Yu, *State and Religion in China*, p. 5-25.

2 The Chinese term for “church” is “jiaotang”, literally meaning “hall of religion”, while Buddhist temples or Daoist monasteries all have specific names containing other words rather than “jiao”. For a detailed study on definitions of “religion” in the Chinese context and their historical transformation, see Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, esp. ch. 10 and 11.

Although Yan's discussions on international norms and interstate policies are insightful, there are some problems in his approaches. For instance, readers should not be too surprised to see that one of the volume's editors, Daniel A. Bell, has tellingly commented that Yan's vision seems to be "quite far removed from the current reality" (p. 17-18). This is mainly because Yan has not explained how the international norms he introduces in the book can be translated into foreign policy practices under the political rule of today's China. Indeed, Yan admits that pre-Qin theorists have recognized the impact of domestic factors on international politics, and he reiterates the need for China to promote democracy if it is to uphold political morality abroad. Yet he does not lay out how he envisages Chinese state leaders carrying out this kind of moral leadership or "humane authority," even though the ancient philosophers have all highlighted how crucial good political leadership and human talents are to the state.

Despite these limitations, Yan Xuetong's *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* is a path-breaking project that integrates ancient Chinese philosophy, Pre-Qin history, and contemporary international relations theory. Both for those who welcome a China that is increasingly active at the global level, as well as for those who do not, it seems the time is right to thoroughly engage with the ideas and proposals of prominent Chinese thinkers today like Yan Xuetong. Although there may still be unsettled disagreements among scholars about his book, no one can dismiss or ignore the scholarship and theoretical contributions Yan has brought to the field of international relations. World historians and researchers on political theory will benefit tremendously from finally having access to an expert and enjoyable survey of Chinese ancient political philosophies and their relationships to contemporary political discourses in the English language.

**Hang Lin<sup>3</sup>**

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3 Institute for Cultural Studies of East and South Asia – Sinology, University of Würzburg, Germany; E-Mail: hang.lin@uni-wuerzburg.de

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