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**Yan Xuetong. Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power.
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Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2011.**

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Yan Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Edited by Daniel A. Bell & Sun Zhe. Translated by Edmund Ryden. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2011.

A bold attempt to introduce ancient Chinese perspectives on international relations theory, Yan Xuetong's book is a timely contribution to the literature relevant to China's rise in the international stage. The work represents a Chinese scholarly attempt to search for conceptual frameworks for China's forging its own path to great power status. As one of most prominent Chinese international relations scholars, from Tsinghua University in Beijing, Yan seeks 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 BCE.

The core of the book consists of three essays by Yan on interstate political philosophy from pre-Qin China, followed by another three essays by other Chinese scholars of note, and a final essay with Yan's responses, all translated from Chinese. In the first section, Yan discusses the philosophy of seven thinkers from the 8th to the 3rd centuries BCE in relation to interstate politics. The analyses of these thinkers are all relevant to state policies since they acted as advisors to feudal states struggling against each other. The thinkers propose different measures to bring about favorable power shifts, such as raising moral standards or employing capable ministers, but one of the most important messages they offer is that morality has a key role to play in determining interstate order. For Yan Xuetong, the most relevant imperative that modern China can glean from this ancient notion is the need to enhance China's moral influence internationally. Yan states, "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). Yan identifies Confucius' theory of benevolence and justice as being the most universal and most useful for the "harmonious world" diplomacy the Chinese government is claiming to promote. The Chinese government should aim to achieve "humane authority," a term established by the pre-Qin thinkers referring to an ideal form of authority or governance in which carefully considered and well-established regime norms were followed, to the benefit of the populace (and authority was not exercised merely to acquire hegemonic status based on power). As a realist, however, Yan does not rule out the option of using military force.

The three essays by commentators constitute a lively demonstration of debates happening within the Chinese academic community. For instance, in response to Yan's efforts to discern what the "political message" accompanying China's rise should be, Yang Qianru asks even whether the goal of China's foreign policy should be to rise in power and "lead the world" (p. 153). The several appendices in the volume provide background information for

the pre-imperial era and its thinkers, an interview with Yan Xuetong, and his essay on why a “Chinese School” of international relations theory has yet to appear. Yan holds that Chinese scholars should be less preoccupied with building a “Chinese School” of thought; instead, he believes, they should put more effort into enriching existing international relations theory with traditional Chinese thought. The ultimate goal of such a mixture would be to create a theory with not only universal relevance but also predictive powers with respect to current international politics.

Nevertheless, a number of the revelations for China pointed out by Yan are slightly unsophisticated and will need further refinement. For example, he thinks when constructing international concepts, norms have to trickle down from leaders in international society to weaker states. When considering this type of transfer of ideas, we should be reminded of China’s history of borrowing concepts from the West; the international transfer of ideas is never without deliberate distortion and appropriation. As such, the straightforward trickle down of international norms that Yan envisions is far from realistic. Also, Yan observes from *The Stratagems of the Warring States*, a compilation of ancient strategic texts, the importance of alliance-building strategies and thus concludes that “China must adapt to the times and adjust the guiding principles of its strategy of ascent.” China should not be “constrained by old principles” such as the principle of nonalignment (p.143), he asserts. However, this makes one wonder whether it requires the revisiting of an ancient text to reach this conclusion. Are there not other avenues that might be more relevant for rethinking foreign policies like nonalignment?

When considering Yan’s approach to the ideas of past thinkers, students of Chinese intellectual history will be inclined to question whether Yan has chosen the most nuanced way of interpreting ancient political thought. First, on the problem of authenticity of the thinkers’ works, Yan adopts a utilitarian stance, but this problem is less of a concern if we treat the works not as utterances of historical figures we can identify, but as texts from political traditions that have had an actual influence on Chinese statecraft. Yan criticizes the methodology of Mencius and Xunzi and the authenticity of the cases they cited, but at the same time, he suggests that it is unnecessary to be “concerned with the real meaning of the texts because there is still no consensus regarding the real meaning of pre-Qin works”. He instead seeks to follow their literal meanings to “understand the thought of the ancients from the point of view of an abstract human society” (p. 155-56). This approach is not without problems. To cite one example, according to Yan, the thinker Hanfeizi considers the core of political power to come from a sound legal system. This is an understanding derived from the literal modern meaning of the Chinese term *fa* (“law”), but *fa* actually carries a much broader connotation if we consider the context in Hanfeizi’s writings. In fact, it is more accurately

read as “method” or “institution.”¹ When commenting on Yan’s work, Yang Qianru proposes bringing in the concrete historical context of China while researching international political theory. Indeed, the diplomatic strategies and interstate order in China influenced by norms such as those explained by Yan have begun to be the focus of some enlightening studies.² Such studies will certainly add a desirable perspective to Yan’s treatment of ancient thought.

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 because Yan has not explained how the international norms he introduced in the book can be translated into foreign policy practices under the political rule of today’s China. He 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 thinkers have all stressed how crucial good political leadership and human talents are to the state. It is hoped that Yan will carry on his research on the modern implications of traditional China’s legacy in order to fill this gap between theory and policy.

Despite these limitations, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* is a much welcome study in the field of international relations theory and a pivotal starting point for introducing Chinese perspectives to a wider audience. Whether the concepts will effectively make their way into China’s foreign policymaking, I do not know; still, I am certain this book will spark scholars’ and policymakers’ interest in international political norms with non-Western origins and should be on the reading lists of international relations theory courses.

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1 This is recently reiterated in Paul Goldin, “Persistent Misconceptions about Chinese ‘Legalism’,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38.1 (2011): 91-94.

2 Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Yuan-Kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. The book by Yuan-Kang Wang is reviewed in this journal, 3.1 (2011): 123-24.