

**Yan Xuetong. *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN: 798-06-91-19008-2. Pp. xvi, 206. Hb: £24.00.**

Yan Xuetong's *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* makes ambitious promises. Looking to fill a gap in the literature that he believes does not address states' rise, Yan proposes a moral realist theory to apply to China in particular. Embedding ancient Chinese concepts into an often Western-oriented field, Yan brings a novel perspective riddled with problematic assumptions that unfortunately falls short of plugging the literary gap.

The book splits into two key parts: definitions and the consequences of states' rise. First, attempting to define with some success the major terms at hand, Yan makes clear his focus on government-level morality, which he explains as adhering to basic, universally accepted codes of behaviour. Morality levels help categorise (somewhat arbitrarily) the types of political state leadership from active to inactive, and international leaderships from humane authority to tyranny. Yan attributes both the rise and fall of states, and the possibility of world peace to active and humane leadership but does not elaborate much beyond this. Here lies the crux of Yan's argument: a state's political leadership is the determining factor at both the domestic and international level, ensuring capability-building and strategic credibility, both crucial to 'win the competition' with an established dominant state. Interestingly, Yan does not hesitate to softly critique China's foreign policy. Most prominently, and against the commonly accepted wisdom in China, he denigrates the country's nonalignment policy, claiming that it undermines the PRC's strategic credibility. However, this is not well supported with evidence.

Before having fully established the mechanisms for the causes of states' rise, Yan moves on to the second part of the book, the consequences of such a rise in the international system. Yan explores what he believes to be an intricately woven relationship between international leadership types and international norms. The former, Yan explains, determine the sort of universal norms states will adopt, while strategic credibility (also informed by leadership types) determines whether states will adopt said norms. More broadly, these two factors, along with changes in power configuration, may transform the

international system altogether. However, the international leadership type remains the common denominator, dictating both the degree of power redistribution and the direction of changes in international norms.

According to Yan, the world today faces a possible transformation of the international system, primarily due to the decline of liberalism and concurrent lack of alternatives. Seeking to remediate this, and appearing surprisingly humble about China's soft power capabilities, Yan suggests the marrying of traditional Chinese values such as rites with such oft-cherished Western values as freedom. Although not necessarily novel in practice, the articulation of these ideas provides perhaps a more formal framework of reference for international policymakers. Yan concludes that the zero-sum nature of the international system does not make dominant states safe from decline; however, neither does that power redistribution necessarily transform said system. Yan predicts that global leadership will likely disappear due to the absence of vigorous U.S.-China cooperation, which will weaken overall cooperation efforts and increase military conflicts created by both powers' refusal to take charge in regions with severe power vacuums. A weaker international leadership, Yan continues, will create pockets of bipolar conflicts between religions, ideologies, and economies. Ultimately, and despite forceful allegations to the contrary, Yan retains the bipolar framework popularized during the Cold War and offers a somewhat pessimistic view of an uncertain future.

Yan showcases an excellent command of relevant works and offers the novice reader pithy summaries of several key authors in the international relations literature. He occasionally supplements this with somewhat more nuanced definitions than are usually offered. His differentiation between power and authority is particularly strong, highlighting the influence of Chinese concepts on his thesis beyond a repetitively anecdotal usage. It is not always clear why Yan cherry-picks case-studies such as the Western Zhou Dynasty or post-First World War Europe, aside from the fact these fit his theories. This is where Yan would benefit from more in-depth explanations for his choice of examples.

To fulfil his promise of incorporating ancient Chinese thought into his vision, Yan peppers his work with often out-of-place and outdated examples that contradict his original claim that his argument could only be fully applied in the current historical context. Although

interesting, the state of Qi seems unsuited to bolster the theoretical categories that Yan attempts to explain, considering its removed time period and Yan's insistence on the modern application of his theories. Many points are weakened as a result. To argue that democracy and its legitimised policies often give unjust results, Yan cites the United Nations and its five-member Security Council leadership as an example. However, to showcase the virtue of his proposed remedy to unjust democracy (essentially a merger of democracy and righteousness), Yan hails the UN sanctions on apartheid South Africa, which was also a product of the system Yan condemns. Finally, stating that political reforms are crucial for winning the strategic US-China competition, Yan stops short of explaining what these reforms might be or why they are necessary.

Despite certain compelling definitions, the theory suffers from a lack of nuance. Most problematic are Yan's criteria for state morality. His three levels of morality (individual, governmental, universal) and sub-sections for governmental morality (divided between 'basic' and 'harder'), do not address the nuances that state leaders today may expect to face. For Yan, 'basic morality' incorporates little more than responsibility for national interests and repaying debts to neighbours. The complex moral challenges of providing healthcare to non-nationals or funding foreign aid programmes are deemed outside the scope of his definition when these are in fact the more pressing moral dilemmas of today. Repaying foreign debt has already been established as a basic strategic choice to protect not only a country's good world standing but also potentially its safety against either armed or financial attack. Foreign aid requires another, more complex kind of moral code that would have merited further exploration to lift Yan's argument beyond the confines of simpler realist theory. Although Yan defines morality and uses it to shape his theory, the concept of morality makes despairingly few appearances in this book. In fact, a lack of nuance in Yan's argument echoes throughout his discussion. Noticeably, Yan makes small but repeated, biased statements, including blaming Indian PM Narendra Modi categorically for the Sino-Indian border conflict of recent years rather than taking a more nuanced approach of examining both Chinese and Indian leadership.

Yan also makes two further key assumptions that undermine his thesis. First, that the US and China are playing a zero-sum game. Not only does this uncritically contradict Xi Jinping's claims that China

seeks a 'win-win' situation, but also does not allow for any other possibility. Viewing the world as a zero-sum game is not as straightforward as Yan insists, with scholars such as David Sobek and Richard Cobden suggesting that foreign trade, investment, and the international *status quo* are a non-zero-sum game. Second, Yan emphasizes the rise of one-man decision-making, bolstering his argument that rests on assuming increasingly unstable political leadership. However, he again selects examples rather subjectively, focusing primarily on US President Donald Trump who, although somewhat unpredictable, is an unlikely candidate for a one-man decision-maker considering America's congressional system. In fact, Yan seems to conflate one-man decision-making with populism. The latter tends to highlight individual leaders and tight-knit administrations but does not necessarily equate with concentrated power, particularly in countries with some degree of checks on presidential powers.

The Sino-American conflict is not ideological but material, Yan argues. Engaged in a struggle over status rather than regime survival, he suggests there is room for conciliation, and does not foresee a war erupting in the next decade. While China and the US are arguably too entangled in international organisations and too economically intertwined for armed conflict to come between them, it is less clear that their conflict does not or will not extend to survival questions. To some extent, Washington's sense of statehood is still tied to being a 'shining city on a hill' with dream-worthy economic prospects. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party's legitimacy is practically chained to China's economic wellbeing. The propensity for devastating economic conflict to turn into a struggle for survival is high, yet this element is overlooked in this book.

Ultimately, Yan offers a fresh insight for current Chinese academic circles on the Sino-US situation, supplementing the traditional literature with unusual case-studies and some more nuanced definitions. However, the book lacks a convincing theoretical framework for why states rise. By the end, it remains unclear whether the book sought to fill the literary gap on the mechanisms for states' rise, analyse the current Sino-American relationship, or offer examples of ancient Chinese dynasties. While assumptions of an anarchical and zero-sum world are not well-defended, Yan's proposed merging of

Chinese and Western values offers a promising framework for international policy making.

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