

Book Reviews

Deborah Welch Larsson & Alexei Shevchenko. *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 333. ISBN 978-03-00-023604-0. Hardback, £30.00/ \$40.00.

This is a timely volume that seeks to contribute to the burgeoning literature on rising powers. The two authors are well known for their research on status in international relations, and are rightly recognised as prominent experts for their contributions to this field of study. In this volume they bring a historical dimension to the question of status, and attempt to show, through Social Identity Theory (SIT), the way in which China and Russia's quests for status have, over time, shaped their countries' respective foreign policies.

Deborah Welch Larsson and Alexei Shevchenko describe three identity management strategies that China and Russia have, in the authors' view, deployed throughout history, starting in the Middle Ages and up to 2014: social mobility (implying the role of pupil versus teacher); social competition (tends to lead to spoiler behaviour); and social creativity. Each time such strategies have been deployed by Russia or China, it has often been in reaction to a perceived slight or humiliation by other powers.

In many ways, these categories seem self-evident, but the social creativity category is perhaps the most interesting, encompassing anything from Confucianism, to Mao's five principles of peaceful coexistence, and Gorbachev's 'New Thinking' designed to create a more positive global identity for the USSR (India's non-aligned movement is cited as a similar strategy).

The authors are keen to emphasise that they see neo-realism as an incomplete way of understanding state behaviour, while constructivism seems to be dismissed for failing to account for lack of socialization of Russia/China by the West into Western liberal norms, although the relational aspect of constructivist treatments of recognition/non-recognition could have been engaged with more robustly.

The historical sections leave one with the impression that China has had such a different relationship to the West than Russia has, that this still resonates today. For example, from the time of Kievan Rus (Russia as the Third Rome) through to the Bolsheviks, Russia has sought recognition from the West, mainly Europe. China, meanwhile, has mostly 'tried to maintain its splendid isolation, while adapting the military technology of the West in order to surpass them.' This continued in some ways under Mao, who emphasized the need for 'self-strengthening', perhaps similarly to Stalin's 'Socialism in One Country'. On the whole however, by contrast to China, it seems that Russia has so far tended to engage in more adventurist and expansionist behaviour at the expense of its domestic development.

Russia has been riven by recurrent debates between Slavophiles and Westernisers, whereby the former emphasise Russia's special civilisational identity and therefore special destiny, based on its own unique traditions, Westernisers (such as Peter the Great and Catherine) have largely used the social mobility strategy, whereby Russia is 'as a child that has to copy Western ways', and so sometimes failing. Differently to Russia, Mao Zedong adopted a kind of 'anti-historicism', noting that China's 'lack of historical traditions would make it more receptive to socialism'. (p. 78)

Lest one assume that the book is only concerned with Russia or China's status concerns regarding Western powers, the authors are keen to point out that such concerns 'prevailed also in their relations with each other' (p. 101). This was evident in China's sense that Moscow viewed Beijing as the junior partner during the Sino-Soviet alliance.

Given the widely-held expectation that China will be the dominant power of the twenty-first century, and with India steadily rising too, the volume raises the issue of whether the assumptions of the authors will still hold true in a 'multiplex world',¹ where states have to engage with a larger number of actors and with far looser alliances than hitherto. The authors do not engage with this scenario, and the book more or less ends with Crimea in 2014, which seems not to be really explained by the SIT model, although arguably the perceived humiliation by the West (Obama airbrushing Russia out as a regional power for example) could do. But in what way do annexation of Crimea and Russian action in Syria represent social creativity? Some of this is left unanswered and the authors rule out

¹ Amitav Acharya, 'After Liberal Hegemony: the Advent of a Multiplex World Order', *Ethics and International Affairs*, Vol. 31, No. 3, (Fall 2017), pp. 271-285.

domestic drivers, because they claim that already in 2007 at Munich, Russia had silenced domestic critics. Yet Crimea and the 2020 referendum on the constitution show that perhaps there was still some way to go to do this. Crimea showed the need for something more than social competition with the West for example.

Thinking about China's Belt and Road Initiative in the twenty-first century, China has of course now emerged from 'splendid isolation' (p. 22) and seeks to become a responsible global power. This is not really addressed here, although the authors do suggest that there could be a division of labour between China and Russia where they can 'specialize in particular issues or shared leadership roles' (p. 249). The success or failure of the BRI may to some extent depend on Russian cooperation with China in Central Asia, but then again Russia may also be a dispensable partner for Beijing in the longer term, as it moves to a more dominant position *vis-à-vis* both Russia and the West.

Overall, while it does not address these questions in detail, the book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of what motivates these two rising/resurgent powers, and by focusing on their long histories in combination with SIT, also moves us away from the relentless 'presentism' of much other IR scholarship.

Natasha Kuhrt
King's College, London