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# **Polish Journal of Political Science. Working Papers**

## **Volume 2 Issue 3**

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**Maciej Michałek**

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‘Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power’, Yan Xuetong,  
Princeton University Press 2011

Yan Xuetong, one of the most prominent Chinese scholars from Tsinghua University in Beijing, has made an attempt to introduce the ancient political thought of China to the Western readers. In his book, he focuses on the pre-Qin philosophers (the Qin dynasty was established in 221 B.C.) and their perspectives on the benevolent governance, legitimacy of power, and international order. Their essays, written in the period of chaos and wars between Chinese kingdoms, became eventually a theoretical foundation of the unified Chinese Empire, and, as such, they mark the peak achievement of ancient China’s philosophical thought.

The book consists of three essays on interstate political philosophy of pre-Qin masters wrote by Yan, followed by another three essays by other Chinese scholars in form of commentaries. Finally, there is Yan’s response to them. Such structure is undoubtedly in favor of proper understanding of the book, since it reflects the debates that take place among Chinese scholars today.

At the beginning, Yan presents a comparison of political thoughts of seven Chinese philosophers, not equally recognizable among the Western audience: Guanzi, Laozi, Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Xunzi, and Hanfeizi. In effect, he manifests the diversity of Chinese political visions, which exceeds far beyond the frames of currently the most “fashionable”: Confucianism. Just to mention that the scope is indeed wide—from Laozi, considered the founder of Taoism, to Hanfeizi, the co-developer of Legalism. Yan tries to present and label the seven masters’ ways of thinking, and to achieve this, he makes use of contemporary international relations theories. As mentioned by Daniel S. Bell, “Yan aims to grasp the true picture of pre-Qin thought so as to make new discoveries in theory”.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter Yan focuses specifically on Xunzi's interstate political philosophy. The reason seems to be that Xunzi writes about hierarchical international order as the most desirable, which clearly contrasts with a modern idea of equality between sovereign states. In the anarchic world he distinguishes three models of behavior of great powers—the humane authority, hegemony, and tyranny, with clear indication of the first as the most benevolent for the people as well as for international stability. Moreover, Yan puts special emphasis on the fact that in the Xunzi's vision great powers have extra rights only insofar as extra responsibilities to secure international order. Such emphasis, supplemented by the concept of the morality of the states, differs from the ideas dominant in the West, although it is not necessarily incompatible with the Western world.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter is devoted to an analysis of *The Stratagems of the Warring States*, a historical work on political views and strategies, compiled in the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.). According to the authors (the co-author of this chapter is Huang Yuxing) this book lets us observe that apprehension of hegemonic issues has not changed since the ancient times, and can still be used to explain the phenomenon of today's great powers' struggles. The three topics analyzed in this context are the foundations of hegemony, the role of norms for hegemonies, and strategies used to gain hegemony. At the end, the authors, by basing on the text of "Stratagems...", propose several comments and advice for today's decision-makers.

Three further essays constitute comments and remarks on the Yan's introduction into pre-Qin political thought from the previous chapters. In his essay Yang Qianru suggests that Yan's proposition abstracts from proper historical context, especially when the aim is to draw conclusions of universal significance. The wide scope of thoughts considered as Confucianism is presented by Xu Jin, summoned by the Mencius's words "the benevolent has no enemies". Last but not least, Wang Rihua tries to develop the political hegemonic theory of ancient China propounded by Yan.

In general, Yan argues that it is a political leadership what defines national power most, and he considers it more influential than economy or military matters. Moreover, he indicates that morality as a core part of political sphere, and sees it as a source of stability. It is an inspiring vision, though it might be treated as idealistic, rather than based on political realism. This is perhaps the major drawback of Yan's book.

The problem with such attitude is twofold—firstly, what does morality in politics exactly mean, and is there only one morality, despite different beliefs and worldviews? And secondly, are we convinced that morality is such a core part in politics nowadays? Though this idea is alluring, it is rather hard to confirm it when analyzing either history, or the current world.

Another problematic issue is that Yan's vision is not finished yet—he rather offers a starting point for presenting Chinese perspective for further comparisons and studies. Yan himself explains his motivations by saying that he began to read pre-Qin masters due to the lack of systematic international relations theory created by the Chinese scholars. But, according to his words, his aim was not to create a Chinese school of international relations theory at all. His attempt was devoted clearly to “enrich current international relations theory, to deepen understanding of international political realities, and to draw lessons for policy today”. So these aims are undoubtedly achieved, and as such are the major contribution of Yan's book. Eventually, the incompleteness of this vision is intentional, and understandable when we take into account the number of the theoretical obstacles in making such an innovative propounding.

On the other hand, considering the wide scope of ancient Chinese political thoughts presented by Yan, it might be treated as a stance in current debate on developing the Chinese school or Chinese theory of international relations. Is such attempt to build such single school/theory justified, given the variety and full richness of the heritage of ancient Chinese masters? Yan addresses this doubt openly, and indicates several weaknesses of theoretical struggle to coin the Chinese school of IR, with the name wrongly labeled by the state in the first place. Yan's voice in this debate, vigorously conducted in today's China, should not be omitted.

The study of Yan Xuetong is without doubt much welcome, as it is one of the first attempts to present and revive Chinese rich heritage in the political sphere. For many Western readers it would be a unique chance to know the works of the greatest Chinese masters of political and international issues. Moreover, the book should be considered in the wider context of China striving for its own path to achieve a status of a great power. Such struggle includes debates on the political system most expected in China, its tendency to use force, and future relations of China with the other states overall. An insight into Chinese academic debate on how to take advantage of own philosophical heritage in these

matters is obviously of exceptional value. In this context, in the book we found different propounding which originates from Legalism as well as from Laozi. And even when thinking of Yan's vision of China as a world power struggling to achieve humane authority as an idealistic or naive, with no doubts it is fresh, thought-provoking and worth looking at.