

US No. 1, China No. 2, or Will it Be the Other Way Round?

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Ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power / Yan Xuetong ; edited by Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe ; translated by Edmund Ryden. - Princeton ; Woodstock : Princeton University Press, c2011. - viii, 300 p. : ill. - (The Princeton–China series). - ISBN 978-0-691-14826-7 ; 978-1-4008-3836-3 (ebk)

A contest for supremacy : China, America, and the struggle for mastery in Asia / Aaron L. Friedberg. - New York, London : W. W. Norton & Co., 2011. - xvi, 360 p. - ISBN 978-0-393-06828-3

America's challenge : engaging a rising China in the twenty-first century / Michael D. Swaine. - Washington : Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011. - xiv, 673 p. - ISBN 978-0-87003-258-5 ; 978-0-87003-257-8 (pbk)

Here are three very different books about China's rise and its relations with the world. The first two tend to give the shivers while the third, much more nuanced and balanced, is somewhat reassuring – up to a point. However, the three authors

highlight the challenges that China's apparently irresistible re-emergence represent for the world. They also all share a focus on, if not an obsession with the United States which, in spite of its supposed decline, clearly remains in their eyes the ultimate benchmark of leadership and success, neglecting to various degrees other and less classical forces structuring and constraining China's rise, such as the European Union, globalisation, multipolarity and the social media.

Let's briefly look at each one separately.

Known for his realist approach to international relations and his hawkish view of the US and the West, professor at Beijing's Tsinghua University, Yan Xuetong may surprise some of his readers with this new volume. Here, he argues that political leadership is the "core" of national power, and morality is an essential part of political leadership. Finding his inspiration in pre-Qin political philosophy (or before China's unification by Qin Shihuang in 221 BC), he thinks that while military and economic might are important components of national power, they are secondary to the moral norms that should lead the conduct

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of political leaders. In other words, the moral authority of China's leadership and policies is the main driver of the country's success and accession to prominence.

Prefaced and supported by the Canadian neo-Confucian Daniel Bell, Yan does not want to demonstrate only that the Ancient Chinese mastered, more than two millennia before Joseph Nye, the notion of "soft power". He also wishes to convince us that a hierarchical world is more conducive to maintaining peace than equality among nations (104-5) and that, because it was based on "humane authority" (the chosen translation of "sage king", *wang*), the hegemony (*ba*) practised by the Ancient Chinese was much more benign and stabilising than America's "hypocritical hegemony" (220).

From this reinterpretation of some of the Warring States' key thinkers (among them Laozi, Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi and Hanfeizi), Yan draws a series of lessons for today and tomorrow. On the one hand, he remains both a realist and a revisionist: 1) "China should mainly rely on its own military construction to maintain its own peaceful environment" and 2) "press for the establishment of an international security system and norms and promote the realization of universal world peace" (63-4). On the other hand, he remains an ambitious Chinese nationalist and supremacist: "Only when the international community believes that China is a more responsible state than the United States will China be able to replace the United States as the world's leading state" (65).

In order to achieve these goals and in particular increase his country's "comprehensive national power", Yan makes a number of proposals of which two are quite striking, if not particularly new: 1) "adopt internally a meritocratic system that attracts talented persons" and 2) "move China out of nonalignment, and

develop an alliance building strategy" (143).

Fishing around in China's long history for concepts and ideas that can contribute to moving forward international relations theory is an interesting project, in particular for someone like Yan, who does not believe that his country should craft its own school of IR theory (Appendix 3). However, the lessons that he draws are quite problematic and probably too neo-traditional and out of step with some of the major trends today to be accepted uncritically.

Indeed, in the same volume, some of the other Chinese scholars invited to comment on Yan's view develop such criticism. For instance, Yang Qianru, from Renmin University in Beijing, asks whether China's goal should be "to replace the US as the world's leading state". She rather believes that China's objective should be to "guarantee our own survival, development and security, not to head the world". And borrowing from Laozi, her reasonable advice is to "seek harmony and balance" as well as "actively join the existing international organization, and work to raise our international status and influence" (152-4). Similarly, Xu Jin, from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, agrees that China must "win people's admiration and respect", but quoting Mencius – "the benevolent has no enemies" – he thinks that only in stressing cooperation and multilateralism can these objectives be achieved (180).

In his reply, Yan acknowledges some of the limitations of the Chinese historical experience; contrary to some of his colleagues, he clearly judges that "the tribute system is obsolete" (204). And he does not reject Western notions of democracy ("even states that support one-party rule must have an electoral process for choosing the leader of the state"), but he cryptically adds that

the “modern concept of democracy and the ancient Chinese concept of humane authority are alike” (218).

More importantly, Yan’s ambition for China is clearly, in doing better than the US, to dethrone it from the position as number one that it has enjoyed for too long. His objective is also to persuade us that we should not worry because, inspired by its past golden practice, China’s future hegemony will be much gentler than that of the United States.

Will the world be in better shape if China takes the lead? Aaron L. Friedberg, former National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney and now professor at Princeton University, would obviously say no. As its title indicates, *A Contest for Supremacy* highlights the “struggle for mastery in Asia” taking place between Beijing and Washington. In a sense, Yan’s views echo and justify Friedberg’s realist approach to Sino-American relations. For him, this relationship is dominated by a rivalry which is “rooted in deep ideological differences and in the stubborn realities of power politics”. And “if China’s power continues to grow while its regime remains essentially unchanged, the competitive aspects of the Sino-American relationship will increase in importance and intensity. Cooperation may persist, but it is likely to become more limited and more difficult, while the relationship as a whole becomes increasingly brittle” (57).

Friedberg puts forward a number of well known arguments to demonstrate that, if the American government does not measure correctly the danger that a rising, authoritarian and nationalist China represents, the US will be pushed to the margins of Asia, its Asian allies (Japan, South Korea and Australia in particular) will be in jeopardy and democracy and freedom will be challenged.

Ironically, Friedberg concludes that, if the right assessment and policy choices are made, America can keep its balance in Asia. Noting that since Tiananmen and the end of the Cold War, the successive US administrations have not had any other option than to adopt a *de facto* “congame” China policy (mixture of containment and engagement), he underscores the limited success of this policy, especially since Obama entered office in 2009, in taming an ever more assertive China. In his view, too many American analysts and diplomats emphasize the cooperative side of Beijing and underestimate its competitive and challenging facets. For China, the US is the main threat to its own authoritarian polity and ideology, as well as to its foreign policy and security interests (133). As a result, Beijing’s objectives are to regain world supremacy and regional preponderance, to gradually move the US out of East Asia, to weaken its alliance system in the region, and to boost its own economic, trade and soft power around the world, but above all in its own neighbourhood. Inspired by Sun Zi’s principles, “to win without fighting” is China’s favourite strategy. Friedberg is aware of the economic, financial and military challenges that the US faces in East Asia in maintaining power and influence there capable of balancing China and reassuring its own allies. In final analysis, however, Friedberg optimistically estimates that it is a question of political leadership and will.

While Friedberg rightly highlights the linkage between China’s domestic authoritarian polity and nationalist ideology, on the one hand, and its security objectives and international ambitions, on the other hand, he focuses excessively on China’s intentions (and particularly the intentions of some of its noisiest experts and intellectuals) and not enough on its capabilities

and constraints. He emphasizes the military dimension of Sino-American competition but also, paradoxically, expects too much from a democratisation of the Beijing regime. Economic, trade and people-to-people interdependencies between China and the US as well as the rest of the world are neglected, as are the increasing number of shared global issues that the planet's major stakeholders have to tackle together and the rapidly changing nature of Chinese society and elites. Some of the comments on Yan Xuetong's views found in his own book illustrate the increasingly diversified views of the Chinese on their country's future place and role in the world. And while Friedberg is justified to ask the US government to keep pressure on Beijing for its human rights situation and to abide by universal values, China's democratisation, if, when, and however (messily) it happens, will not put an end to every American concern. If today's Russia can be of any use, it should be to send a message of caution to the optimists.

By contrast, Michael Swaine's *America's Challenge* adopts a much more balanced approach, clearly privileging engagement over containment, as the subtitle (*Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century*) indicates, and probably also over hedging (although this is less clear). Authored by a well-known China specialist at Washington DC's Carnegie Endowment, this volume is the richest, the most comprehensive and the most useful of the three. However, its very density and length make it a rather hard read for the non-specialist (230 pages of endnotes!). Or, to be more accurate and fair, newcomers can approach it like an encyclopaedia, consulting the particular feature of Sino-American relations they are most interested in. In any case, in this new study, Swaine has aimed not only at analysing the major policy areas

structuring the relations between Beijing and Washington since the beginning of the 21st century, but also at assessing the successive US administrations' "effectiveness" in pursuing their policies toward China.

The book is nicely organised: seven of its ten chapters look into the important policy areas that the author has identified: 1) relations among key Asian powers; 2) bilateral and multilateral political and security structures and forums; 3) US and China military modernisation programs and military-to-military activities; 4) economic development and assistance activities; 5) counter-terrorism and counter-proliferation challenges; 6) non-traditional security threats; and 7) efforts to promote human rights and democracy. The first chapter presents both the US's and China's interests, goals and strategies, while the penultimate one focuses on the US policymaking process and its weaknesses. Finally, Swaine makes a number of recommendations to his government and his compatriots.

As each chapter includes both a description and an evaluation of the respective policies adopted, Swaine's study is very analytical and discusses the views of the key participants in the debates that have surrounded each decision or political choice. More importantly perhaps, *America's Challenge* highlights the growing depth and complexity of the Sino-American relationship. The reader quickly gets the strong impression that both players have limited options and are compelled to cooperate on most issues. This is a strong argument indeed in view of the unprecedented level of economic and financial interdependence reached by these two countries as well as by most members of the G20. It is also convincing if we consider the increasing interests that both Beijing and Washington share in terms of security

threats, ranging all the way from terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, to climate change, pandemics or food security (although this last issue is unfortunately not mentioned).

One wonders, however, whether Swaine is not, for the sake of common interests and accommodation – reasons opposite to those of Friedberg – exaggerating China’s growing power and underestimating its “fragility” (to use Susan Shirk’s expression), as well as its own domestic and international challenges. It is true that the US must adapt to a rapidly changing reality – a rising China – that it can influence but cannot really control. But what about China? In other words, Swaine is more pessimistic than Friedberg and conveys a sense of determinism in China’s authoritarian path towards predominance, while the US gradually weakens and its policy choices in East Asia narrow. He argues that the US will not be able to maintain its military superiority “in specific, key areas” in the region for more than a decade (343); is likely to be forced to accept a less favourable *modus vivendi* on Taiwan; and will have to face the delicate task of reassuring its allies while keeping them balancing against rather than bandwagoning with China and, at the same time, convince them to reach out to China and integrate it into their security dialogues and, possibly, architectures. Mission impossible! the French would say.

In this respect, Swaine’s book is asymmetrical and focuses more on everyday interactions and negotiations than on the forces and trends that have caught Friedberg’s attention: China’s exceptionalist discourse, supremacist intentions and revisionist objectives.

True, Swaine acknowledges that the Beijing authorities are partially “revisionist” (346) and recognises their growing assertiveness in the last few years, especially

in the South China Sea and the East China Sea. But his assessment is almost exclusively based on official statements and actions, and he refrains from attempting to explain the nationalist and anti-US hyperbole of the Communist Party’s domestic discourse or the more aggressive objectives set by some of China’s propagandists, experts, intellectuals and generals. For instance, far from integrating China more into the international community, quite to the contrary, the 2008 Olympics boosted the former’s nationalism, sense of exceptionalism, foreign policy assertiveness and quest for international supremacy. It is clear that Beijing’s foreign and security policy and actions are genuinely more cautious than these narratives may infer. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore them, much less their constant instrumentalisation by the Chinese leaders. In other words, Swaine somewhat overlooks China’s domestic stage and changes and assumes that democratisation is unlikely in the foreseeable future (“during at least the current decade and probably for years beyond”, 304).

Mainly preoccupied with and by the difficulties of everyday interactions with China, Swaine may ask for too much prudence, in so doing weakening the US government’s hand in negotiations. For example, why should Washington be so obsessed with Beijing’s “face”, say on human rights or Taiwan, when China does not seem obsessed with the US’s (or West’s) “face”? Why should the US (or any other democracy) hide the fact that its final strategic objective is China’s democratisation when the Beijing authorities are fully aware of it? Similarly, although he advises his government to utilise the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanisms more systematically (373), Swaine appears too cautious on commercial issues: for example, while discussing the dangers of growing protectionism

(261-2), he does not mention China's well known protectionist practices, such as non-trade barriers to access to its market and large subsidies to its exports and state-owned enterprises operating both within and outside of the country.

Some of Friedberg's and Swaine's policy recommendations are similar: the US should put its house in order, redeploy its military to what Obama now calls the "pivot" of American foreign policy, close ranks with its allies, as well as both engage with and hedge against China. However, the latter is clearly more concerned about the longer term, considering minimal China's chances to move closer to the West ideologically, politically and perhaps also strategically, as well as dismissing the US's ability to maintain a credible military balance in East Asia with the help of its allies.

As the three authors presented here come from the US and China, they are

particularly sensitive to what they all tend to perceive as a power transition from the former to the latter. Yet, what the world is currently witnessing is rather a "power diffusion", certainly to the detriment of the US, but to the benefit not only of China, but also of the other emerging nations, and hopefully the European Union.¹ A "power diffusion" also to the benefit of non-state actors, including companies, banks, NGOs, religious organisations and social networks. In every duel, the duellists tend to forget the environment in which they are fighting. But the US-China rivalry is not only a duel, it is a competitive but also cooperative feature of a changing global environment that is conversely structuring their relationship. It is a shame that all three books are so obsessed with their subject – their country's challenger – that they tend to underestimate the impact of the rest of the world, and the rest of the West.

¹R. L. Schweller and Xiaoyu P., "After Unipolarity: China's Visions of International Order in an Era of U.S. Decline", *International Security* 36, no. 1 (Summer 2011), 64–8.