

## REVIEW ESSAY

### Thinking of China's Grand Strategy: Chinese Perspectives

Yan X, (2011) *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, trans. D. Bell, Z. Sun and E. Ryden. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wang J, (2011) 'China's search for a grand strategy: a rising great power finds its way', *Foreign Affairs*, 90(2): 68–79.

Lieberthal KG., and Wang J, (2012) *Addressing U.S.–China Strategic Distrust*. John L. Thornton China Center. Monograph Series 4. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

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The rise of China has been a major issue in American foreign policy discourse. With China's leadership handover and the US presidential elections coming up in November 2012, the question of what the rise of China means and what implications it will have increasingly intrigues scholars of international relations and world politics. The rise of China is commonly understood as the growing economic, political, and military influences of China in world affairs. Specifically, the rise of China is

manifested in, first, China's economy now becoming the second largest in the world and the potential to become the largest within decades. The rise of China is also evident in China's growing influence and engagement in world political issues. For example, China, along with Russia, is against Western intervention in the Syrian turmoil, which can be seen as a way of 'soft balancing' (Pape, 2005). The rise of China, finally, is seen in China's military growth and assertiveness in the latest territorial disputes with Japan.

However, the meaning of 'the rise of China' is contestable. Some scholars suggest that the rise of China is not accurate simply because China is not *rising* but *returning* to where it used to be in the world (Wang, 2004). Back in the fourteenth century, China's share of the world output was over 30% and China was the world's largest economy (Maddison, 2006). Along with India, the two Asian economies account for over 50% of the world share of output in the year 1300 (Maddison, 2006). Politically, China had been implementing what was called the tribute system to maintain a Sino-centric world order until about 150 years ago (Jacques, 2009). If contextualizing China in a longer historical perspective, the current discussion of the rise of China seems to be less accurate.

Despite the contestable meaning of the rise of China, the perspectives of scholars and analysts in America tend to fall into a spectrum with positive-sum view on the one end and zero-sum view on the other end (Chistensen, 2006). The positive-sum view sees China's rise as a plus to America while the zero-sum view considers China's rise as a necessary loss for America. Given that the rise (or return) of China has profound implications for the world in the next few decades, this essay selects three most recent works on China's grand strategic thinking by two leading Chinese scholars in international relations. There are several reasons for reviewing the studies of Yan (2011a) and Wang (2011; see also Lieberthal and Wang, 2012). First, the three studies under review here are the most recent Chinese scholars' perspectives particularly focusing on China's future grand strategy. Second, these three studies are available to the English-speaking audience, signifying the authors' purpose to engage and communicate with the English-speaking world. Third, Yan and Wang are each the head of the international studies programs in Tsinghua University and Peking University, respectively, both of them being the most prestigious universities in China. Both scholars are also influential public intellectuals and are frequently appearing in China's

media. On the basis of all the above reasons, this essay will start with a close review of each of the three studies and then critically synthesize the arguments conveyed in them. A conclusion comes at the end.

## 1 An alternative model

In *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Yan (2011a) contends that China should set up an alternative model for international relations in the future, surpassing the US-style hegemony model. Drawing deeply from ancient Chinese philosophers such as Guanzi, Laozi, Confucius, Xunzi, and Mencius, Yan (2011a) highlights the importance of morality of the leadership in interstate relations and proposes that the next world order should be fundamentally based upon the morality of the leadership of a predominant power, not based on the material military and economic strength, which are characteristic of the hegemony model.

By morality, Yan (2011a) refers to the ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi's idea of political morality as the core of humane authority, which is the highest form of leadership. According to Xunzi, there are three types of assuming leadership, *wang*, *ba*, and *qiang*. 'As verbs, *wang* (to be a sage king) means "to lead the world"; *ba* (to be a hegemon) means "to dominate the world," and *qiang* (to be a tyrant) means "to be stronger than other states"' (Yan, 2011a, p. 71). There is an implied hierarchy among the three types of leadership, with *wang* being the highest and *qiang* the very basic. Yan (2011a) suggests that in contemporary international relations, the United States is a hegemon that only wins over allies and the next world order should not be dominated by a hegemon; instead, China should aim for a new world order based on humane authority – a model which is different and better than the hegemon model.

In Yan's (2011a) emphasis on the idea of political morality, he adopts Xunzi's idea that political leaders' virtues are the basis of a state's political power. What Yan (2011a) argues is that political morality represents the type of soft power that can be instrumental to aid a state's rise to great power status. Yan (2007) particularly makes a distinction between political power and cultural power, arguing that the core of soft power should be political power. Yan's distinction clearly positions himself beyond the conceptual framework set by Joseph Nye (1990, 2004, 2011) in the ongoing debate of soft power in China (Li, 2008).

Yan's (2011a) reinterpretation of Xunzi's political thinking has much to do with a new perspective of what kind of grand strategy China needs as China is (re)gaining its great power status. There are two levels of implications of Yan's (2011a) reading of Xunzi. On the theoretical level, Yan's (2011a) absorption of the thinking of Xunzi and other ancient Chinese philosophers seems to be a critique of the two dominant schools of international relations theories in the West, liberalism and realism, which are based on 'material benefit and material force' (p. 61). However, Yan's reading of these ancient thoughts does not suggest that he is proposing an alternative theory building in international theories, which has been an ongoing debate among Chinese international relations scholars who are advocating for establishing the 'Chinese school' (Qin, 2006, 2007, 2009). In fact, Yan (2011b) calls himself a 'political realist'. What makes him different from Western realist perspective, as he argues, is his emphasis on political leaders' morality in leading the world. On the practical level, Yan's (2011a) adoption of humane authority with political morality at the core suggests his belief in the alternative model of world leadership to the hegemony or global dominance model as being pursued by the post-cold war America.

Although Yan (2011a) makes a strong point in advocating an alternative model for international relations, he does not address in detail the applicability of the ancient thought. The socio-economic and political context in today's world is far different from the context in ancient China. For example, when he proposes that China should become a model for others to follow, he does not specify how political morality and humane authority shall be achieved when China is known for rampant corruptions among leaders and officials. Consequently, his interpretation of soft power as political power derived from virtuous political leaders seems to be rather idealistic in the problematic reality of China. Additionally, his proposed idea of establishing international relations based on a hierarchy where 'large states and small states should have different international responsibilities' (p. 106) is also worrisome. It may remind people of China's attempt to return to a Sino-centric world order. As some scholars point out, the notion of having the rest of the world follow China as an example inevitably invites the suspicion of the rest of the world being homogenized by China (Cunningham-Cross, 2012).

Essentially, what Yan (2011a) proposes in the book is contending the contemporary world order which is led by the United States. In his

vision, China's rise means an inevitable competition between China and the United States and therefore, China's grand strategy to rise as the next world leader should be pursuing a new world order based on China's political moral leadership. However, Yan's line of thinking (2011a,b) is limited to the theoretical level, if not pure wishful thinking, given the fact that China is now facing multiple domestic issues and can hardly be seen as becoming a world model any time soon.

## 2 A pending grand strategy

Unlike Yan's (2011a) alternative thinking of China's grand strategy, which seems to be largely on the theoretical level, the two works by Wang Jisi represent a sophisticated thinking of China's grand strategy on the practical level, demonstrating the dynamics in the ongoing debate about what China should act as it rises.

In his *Foreign Affairs* essay, Wang (2011) refuses to define a clear Chinese grand strategy because China is still in search of one. Instead, Wang (2011) bases his thinking of China's search for a grand strategy on China's core interests. Regarding the definition of China's core national interests, he refers to Chinese President Hu Jintao's words 'sovereignty, security, and development' (p. 71). These core Chinese national interests were further defined by China's State Councilor for External Affairs Mr Dai Bingguo, who was quoted as saying: 'first, China's political stability, namely, the stability of the CCP leadership and of the socialist system; second, sovereign security, territorial integrity, and national unification; and third, China's sustainable economic and social development' (p. 71). As a formal articulation to announce to the outside world, the Information Office of China's State Council issued a white paper in September 2011 on China's peaceful development, which articulated that 'peaceful development is a strategic choice made by China to realize modernization' ([www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), 2011, p. 1). The white paper affirmed China's core national interests as sovereignty, security, and development and addressed concerns about China's defense capabilities by saying 'The fundamental purpose of modernizing the Chinese armed forces is to safeguard China's sovereignty, security, territorial integrity and interests of national development' ([www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), 2011, p. 3).

On the basis of China's articulation of its core national interests, what Wang (2011) argues is that a more sophisticated thinking is needed in

forming China's grand strategy to safeguard these interests. He does not agree with a blind continuation of the keeping-a-low-profile approach, which has shown limitations when China cannot keep a low profile in many aspects of world issues such as China's influence in global financial security. He also disagrees with the approach suggested by Yan (2011a), which calls for an alternative model and a zero-sum adversarial relationship with the United States. Wang's (2011) suggestion of a 'more sophisticated grand strategy' is shaped by, and based on, what he calls 'four ongoing changes' in the Chinese strategic thinking and practice (p. 74). These changes are a more complex thinking of the concept of security (which adds non-traditional aspects such as financial security to the traditional sense of security with a primarily military aspect), a more issue-based and functional Chinese diplomacy rather than a country-based diplomacy, a shift toward domestic consumption and sustainable development rather than dependency on foreign technology and export, and finally, an emerging thinking and practice of improving China's soft power and embracing shared values such as good governance and transparency (Wang, 2011). On the issue of soft power, in contrast to Yan's (2011a) understanding, which is different from the popular notion of cultural influences, Wang (2011) seems to be in line with the notion of soft power as cultural influence and shared values in the world. However, Wang (2011) suggests that China's recent effort to improve the nation's soft power is rather a defensive gesture as China is concerned about its image in the world.

The four fundamental trends that will shape the future Chinese grand strategy reveal that Wang (2011) is not seeing China as a contender of the contemporary US-led world order. He clearly rejects the idea that China should make overtaking the United States the goal of China's grand strategy. Wang's view (2011) communicates the idea that China has not changed its continuing thinking of how to ensure a favorable international environment so that China can continue its domestic development agenda.

While Wang (2011) demonstrates the latest transformative trends in Chinese grand strategic thinking based on a sophisticated understanding of China's core national interests, his analysis does contain two confusions. First, while alluding that there is inherent tension among the three-pronged core interests, namely, sovereignty, security, and development, he does not explicate what the tensions are. Second, there is an inherent

paradox in his essay when he briefly argues about China's geostrategic focus in Asia. What he essentially argues is a non-hegemony seeking China; China's grand strategy will still be domestically oriented, but he introduces the idea of China looking to the West from Afghanistan, Central Asia, and all the way to Europe. If China is not aiming toward becoming a global hegemon, how come China should eye the West, and in particular Europe where American allies concentrate? Does he imply only economic relations with Europe, as it seems to be in the current Europe debt crisis?

### 3 Antagonizing America?

If Wang's (2011) explanation of China's strategic thinking reflects a continuity of China's foreign policy with some trends in place for a more sophisticated grand strategy, his co-authored monograph, which appears 1 year later, conveys an arguably strategic shift in the Chinese leaders' perspective in regard to China's assessment of the world situation since 2008. The fundamental reason for such a shift is the 'strategic distrust' between Beijing and Washington (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012).

In *Addressing U.S.–China Strategic Distrust*, 'strategic distrust' is defined as 'a perception that the other side will seek to achieve its key long term goals at concerted cost to your own side's core prospects and interests' (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012, p. 5). Given that how Beijing and Washington perceive each other could determine what kind of engagement and interaction the two would have in regard to bilateral relations, regional, and global security and economic issues, both authors expressed serious concerns over the issue of mutual distrust and the potential danger of sliding toward antagonism and confrontation.

In Wang's (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012) part of this shared analysis (which is reviewed in this essay), he accounted a series of reasons why the Chinese leadership is thinking differently now, including the historical animosity between the two, the Taiwan issue, as well as economic tensions. On the basis of these deep-rooted distrusts China has for the United States, Wang (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012) identifies four trends in the shift of strategic calculation among the Chinese leaders. First, China views itself as 'a first-class power' and 'should be treated as such' (p. 8). This trend is different from Wang's (2011) analysis of China's strategic thinking of itself in his *Foreign Affairs* article, in which he writes

that the Chinese leaders are prudent not to take the view of the hawkish camp that considers the United States as the major external threat to China. One year later, it appears that the leadership is bold to claim what China deserves, namely respect for a great power. The three other trends are Chinese leaders' view of the narrowing gap between China and the United States, China's embracing of emerging multilateral structures such as the G20, and China's more confidence of pursuing a different model featured with economic liberalization without Western democracy.

With regard to this shift in strategic thinking, it is important to note that this more assertive perspective is that of the Chinese leaders. Wang Jisi himself has a very sophisticated thinking in regard to what grand strategy China should pursue, as he displayed in his 2011 *Foreign Affairs* essay. He may be sharing why the Chinese leadership views China should be treated and respected as a great power, but he has reservations about the view suggesting antagonizing America because of Obama's Asia pivot policy (Kato, 2012). In a most recent interview with *The Asahi Shimbun*, Wang argued that China is more concerned about its domestic issues and 'it is not doing many things in the world that are directly challenging the US hegemony. China does not' (Kato, 2012). As for the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and the Diaoyu Islands, Wang argued that China did not provoke these crises but was provoked by some neighboring countries (Kato, 2012). In his eyes, China is more defensive and even passive rather than the seemingly Western interpretation of China's recent behaviors as assertive or aggressive.

Reading Wang's co-authored piece and his interview with *The Asahi Shimbun*, one can see that he has not changed much in regard to his perspective on China's grand strategy. The 'strategic distrust' reflects more of a Beijing perception than of a Washington view (Lieberthal and Wang, 2012). This indicates that Beijing is more concerned about the role of the United States in complicating, if not blocking China's ascent to great power status. In other words, the views on the Chinese side seem to demonstrate a less accommodating attitude to tolerate America's hegemonic behaviors and attempts to complicate and contain the rise of China.

To answer the question of what China's grand strategy will be, Wang (2011; see also Lieberthal and Wang, 2012) does not believe that China wants to overtake the United States; he is worried about the strategic distrust between Beijing and Washington which would lead the two sides

toward mutual antagonizing. Unfortunately, the mutual distrust is festering in the recent flare up of the territorial disputes and the US block of business deals involving Chinese firms (Crooks, 2012).

## 4 What is China up to?

The three studies reviewed here give the English-speaking audience a peek into some of the leading Chinese strategists' view on China's grand strategy. Superficially, both the Chinese scholars address the issue of what kind of China's grand strategy should be from very different backgrounds, as Yan (2011a) bases his proposal and argument on his reading of ancient Chinese philosophies and Wang (2011; see also Lieberthal and Wang, 2012) infers from practical analyses of the evolving domestic and international situations. Essentially, synthesizing the two scholars' works generates a few underlying themes regarding China's grand strategy in the large backdrop of a gradual global structural power shift.

First, China needs to readjust its grand strategy's foreign policy arm, given that the domestic and international situations have undergone significant changes. Both Yan (2011a) and Wang (2011) allude to the fact that the traditional foreign policy of keeping a low profile needs to be reconsidered. It seems that Yan's (2011a) proposal for an alternative model based on morality in international relations represents a distinct departure from the traditional foreign policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1990s. What Yan (2011a) proposes is a rather high-profile approach – China should be building a different model for others to follow. Yan's (2011a) political thinking is oriented toward a critical reflection of the economic determinism that has been dominating China's reform era. However, the extent to which his suggestion of a return to the ancient hierarchical tribute system is relevant to today's and tomorrow's world remains debatable. His suggestion of a zero-sum picture of the United States–China relations is also problematic and reflecting a structural realist's view. In contrast, Wang (2011) argues for a gradual shift in China's grand strategy design. He does not believe in the absolute continuation of the traditional low-profile policy, but he also cautions against the idea of making China a contender for the world leadership. What Wang (2011) suggests is a reworking of the keeping-a-low-profile policy, as the traditional approach has become insufficient because situations home and abroad have changed. As explicated in his *Foreign Affairs* article,

Wang (2011) argues for a sophisticated Chinese grand strategy featuring a holistic view and calculation regarding China's core interests and external threat.

Second, China is starting to form a grand strategy contingent more on its core interests than its relations with great powers. Yan's (2011a) provocative alternative thinking is an obvious sign that China should behave like a real great power that makes decisions on self-determination, less constrained by relations with and between great powers, as the case in the cold war era. In the 1950s, China made the decision to join the Soviet-led socialist camp, antagonizing itself with the West and America, because of the ideological and geopolitical confrontation between the two superpowers then. In the 1960s, when China's relations with the Soviet soured, China joined the Non-Aligned Movement that essentially separated itself from the power struggles between the two superpowers. In the 1970s, China made another strategic decision to establish diplomatic ties with the United States because of the common threat posed by the Soviet.

Wang (2011) also reveals such a trend that China is going to define and determine on its own terms what China's core interests are and how to protect them. The fact that China should perform a sophisticated diplomacy oriented more on functional issues that concern China's core interests than on traditional state-to-state relations is an important sign of a more self-confident and self-determining posture. The increasingly self-confident posture in China's grand strategy thinking may be a marked difference from the previous foreign policy. It could be argued that for the first time in the PRC's history, China is going to make strategic thinking not so hinged upon how other great powers draw the world map.

Third, China's grand strategy incorporates two interrelated parts – China's international strategy and China's development strategy (Zhang and Wang, 2009). In other words, China's grand strategy naturally encompasses the domestic and foreign or the commonly phrased internal and external situations. Compared with American grand strategy, which is primarily concerned about American foreign policy and has less to do with America's domestic social stability, China has always been thinking of its domestic and international situations together and making national strategies accordingly.

Wang (2011) points out that a 'unique feature' of the Chinese leaders' concern, past or present, has been the interaction of 'domestic disorder'

and ‘foreign threats’ (p. 69). In the Chinese leaders’ psyche, China’s grand strategy has to respond to the domestic and foreign fronts at the same time. When addressing the issue of climate change and China’s grand strategy, Wang (Zhang and Wang, 2009) explains that climate change has both domestic and international implications. Domestically, the previous 30 years of economic growth model cannot be sustainable given the severity of environmental damage and resource depletion. Internationally, climate change has become a common concern for countries large or small. According to Wang, China’s effort to transition from an environmentally unfriendly economy to a high-tech and low-pollution economy should be and has already been a strategy for China’s development. On the international front, while opposing the West pressure for equal reduction of carbon emissions, China and the West have a great opportunity to cooperate on clean energy technologies.

Finally, although both scholars have articulated their respective perspectives on China’s future grand strategy after China’s substantial growth in its national power primarily defined by economic power, they have not seriously addressed the idea of soft power in their works. There are at least two reasons for this lack. One, soft power is still being debated in contemporary China as scholars have different views over how to understand and apply this notion in the case of China’s rise (Li, 2008). Two, an essential component of soft power, according to Nye (1990, 2004, 2011), is such values as democracy and human rights shared across the world. Given the fact that China is a one-party political system and has not seen any fundamental political change to ensure such universal values, the idea of China’s soft power inevitably raises questions of credibility.

## 5 Conclusion

The Chinese perspectives reviewed here are far from comprehensive, but the two scholars and their most recent works on China’s grand strategic thinking shed light on the latest Chinese perspectives on what the country should be oriented toward in the next few decades. Yan Xuetong’s (2011a,b) perspective may sound provocative and even aggressive to his Western counterparts and some of his Chinese colleagues, but his forward thinking of conceptualizing an alternative model based on political leaders’ morality and hierarchy in international relations is a legitimate attempt, although limited to the theoretical level. Nonetheless,

the post-WWII international political arrangement proves to be superficial when it comes to the principle of equality among sovereign states. When today's world order appears to be in need of a restructuring, the more sophisticated thinking represented by Wang Jisi (2011) seems to be the way that China should pursue. A well-designed grand strategy that incorporates and addresses challenges in both the domestic and the international fronts, with the fundamental goal of protecting China's core interests without being too much constrained by other great powers, shall be the case. The strategic distrust issue signifies that Beijing is sliding toward thinking that the only superpower of the world is not ready to accommodate a growing China which is more assertive and defensive toward protecting its core national interests.

The two Chinese scholars' works reveal some aspects of the contemporary Chinese thinking on China's grand strategy. These views are arguably representative as Chinese scholars have various views on how China should engage the world. The discussion and debate over the rise or return of China will continue to evolve. As China is going to make a grand strategy on its own terms based on its core interests, be it economic or political, that probably means, for example, the United States will have to rethink an American grand strategy in response. Although it does not necessarily mean a traditional zero-sum game for the United States, it is possible and even necessary for Washington to, for the first time since the end of the cold war, take account of and accommodate the Chinese core interests.

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