

Book Review: Leadership and The Rise and Fall of Great Power by Yan Xuetong

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Xuetong, Yan. *Leadership and The Rise and Fall of Great Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xxi + 260 pages. Paperback, \$29.95.

In his book, Xuetong Yan utilizes political leadership as an independent variable to explain the rise and fall of great powers in the world. He attempts to build a theory of international relations focusing on world power struggles and dominance. Practically, he tries to explore how China as a rising state, one that has significantly less material capability, to surpass US, the current dominating state, to become the new world leader in the next decade or so. Obviously, this is a very challenging job, not only for him but also for anyone who studies international relations.

The book is divided into nine chapters. In chapter one, Yan defines some important concepts including morality, power, and authority based on what he believes he can establish as his theory of moral realism. He argues that strategic credibility is the lowest level of international morality and “high strategic credibility becomes a precondition for a leading state to establish international authority.”

After briefly discussing the role of political leadership, Yan spends most of chapter two discussing the differences between state leadership and international leadership. Based on different leaders’ attitudes and how they fulfill responsibilities, Yan places them into four categories including inactive, conservative, proactive, and aggressive. Based on some principles of action and strategic credibility, Yan categorized four type of international leaderships as humane authority, hegemony, tyranny, and anemocracy.

In chapter 3, Yan deduces four corollaries of international change based on his definitions in previous two chapters. First, improvements and decline of state leadership

lead to changes in relative capability between states and consequently change the international configuration. Second, all states in an anarchical international system pursue their own strategical interests with different foreign policies. Third, the states take actions—including the creation of international norms to pursue self-interests. Fourth, the existing international order maybe disturbed by the inherited structural contradictions between rising states and dominant states.

Chapter 4 focuses on changes in an international configuration and shifts of the world's power center. Yan points out that it is the current leaderships of both US and China contributed to the bipolarization of the world power distribution. In addition, he argues that bipolarization does not equal to but could spark a global cold war. Furthermore, he predicts the shift of the global geopolitical center from Europe to Asia in the near future.

Yan explores the relationship between leadership and international norms in Chapter 5. He argues that the leading states tend to promote certain international norms as their strategy to keep their positions in the international system. He also categorizes four international norms including moral norms, double-standard norms, realpolitik norms, and coward-bully norms. In addition, he asserts that the present international norms guided by American liberalist values will remain unchanged forever.

The key argument in chapter 6 is the possible formation of new international mainstream values which will guide new international norms. Yan hopes that the new mainstream values will combine Chinese traditional values of benevolence, righteousness, and rites with American liberalist values of equality, democracy, and freedom.

Chapter 7 addresses the transformation of the international system. Yan first illustrates the differences between component changes of the system and system change. Then, he explores conditions for system transformation. Finally, he reiterates the importance of leadership in transformation of international system.

In Chapter 8, Yan uses both ancient Chinese history and modern global cases to demonstrate the transformations of the international system. He differentiates international orders and international systems as two different entities. Again, he argues that different types of leadership could determine the direction of the transformation.

The conclusion presented in Chapter 9 not only provides a bird's-eye view of the logics of his theory, but also prediction about future relations between China and US. He advocates the leadership of humane authority which he believes can make the world more peaceful.

Needless to say, Yan's work touches upon an important issue in international relations. In addition, it is theoretically plausible to use leadership as a single variable to explain the rise and fall of world power, though the effort will be challenged by students of institutionalism. Yan is also correct that the bipolarization of power is emerging and the tension between China and US will shape the world politics in the near future.

Yet, there are some serious problems with his book; of which I can address three here due to the limited space. Firstly, regarding his theory, he needs to be careful defining important concepts based on which he develops his theory. For instance, he writes on page 16 that example that highlights the difference between power and authority is the "way in which police officers and medical practitioners change people's behavior. The former represents power, the latter authority" and "motorists obey police

officers because police power forces them to; patients take advice from physicians because of their trust in their medical knowledge.” This is simply not true because police officers do have authority, codified by laws rather than through force. Yan also uses those concepts carelessly. For instance, he writes on page 16 that “power enforces behavior through coercion.” Then, on page 24, he writes that this “book defines capability as strength and power as influence.” Coercion and influence are not the same. In addition, he writes, on page 17, that in “this book, the concept of authority bears similarity to Weber’s charismatic authority, but not to the other two types, because it is defined by followers’ confidence in the qualities of a leadership.” Again, this is simply incorrect. American people might not have confidence in President Trump’s qualities, but Trump still had the authority that is codified by the Constitution, for example. Further, on page 37, Yan writes the “change of US president from a Democrat to Republican is another type of regime change.” I don't know how many political scientists would agree with him on his definition of regime change: following his logic, then how many regime changes took place in China after 1949? What are the differences between the regime change in 1949 and ones afterwards in China? Without defining those important concepts clearly and logically, his theory is very likely to become a “Castle of Sand” (to reference the title of a Japanese movie).

Secondly, I am afraid to say that it is inappropriate to compare ancient Chinese tributary system with modern international relations. Under West Zhou Dynasty, especially during the early period of the dynasty, the relationships between the royal state and vassals is vertical, not parallel. It is totally different from the modern international relations. In fact, Yan admits on page 76 that the “Chinese tributary system and the

modern sovereignty system are two different types of international systems.”

Thirdly, I am troubled by his assertion about the current status of the international system. On page 203, Yan writes that “it is possible that the Yalta System will continue through the coming decade without any change of character, just as it did through the Cold War to the post-Cold War period.” Does the Yalta System still exist? No, it does not. It ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Clearly, the Yalta System has three interrelated characteristics including two competing leading powers with two political camps backed by two competing ideologies. Currently, all we can see is two competing leading powers.

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