

The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations

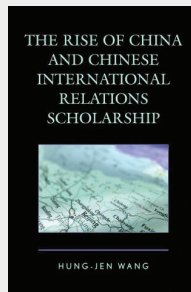
By Hung-Jen Wang

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, viii + 196 pages, ISBN 9780739178508.

Reviewed by Emilian Kavalski

THE DISCUSSION of China's growing prominence in international life has attracted the increasing attention of policy-makers, the public and scholars alike. Usually sidelined by the mainstream, such interest in China's role and position in global politics has grown exponentially in the context of the deepening concomitant economic, social and political crises across Europe and North America – which, until very recently, were considered the traditional locales of power and influence in world politics. Indicative of the emerging weight and significance of non-Western actors on the global stage, the trend set by China seems to challenge the conventional framework of the study and practice of International Relations (IR).

In this setting, most commentators suggest a nascent “Sinicization” of global politics – seemingly confirmed by China's extensive involvement not just in the developing world, but also its palpable outreach to all regions around the globe. According to a number of commentators, supporting such a drive are the perceived and actual aspirations of Beijing's external outlook. Thus, more often than not, the contention in the literature is that regardless of whether China chooses to develop a cooperative or conflictual stance, it will nevertheless have an important bearing on the patterns and practices of world affairs. Hung-Jen Wang's book goes to the heart of this conversation. It suggests that the nascent



Chinese schools of IR explain the transformative potential of a changing Chinese foreign policy through the interplay between three dominant features: identity, appropriation and adaptation.

In this respect, the emergence of “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” (p. 3) presents an intriguing intersection of the discursive memory of the past with the dynamic contexts of the present and the anticipated tasks of the future. What distinguishes Wang's analysis is reliance on Chinese-language sources, which he contextualizes within the existing Western literature on both IR and China's rise. As a result of such a perceptive parallel assessment, Wang manages to construct a thoughtful and extremely vivid picture of the complexity and diversity that marks Chinese IR scholarship. In fact, many readers would perhaps be surprised by the lack of a uniform and centralized IR discourse in China. As Wang's book deftly demonstrates, such a surprise is reflective of a particular Orientalizing way of imagining China in the West, which remain generally detached from the nuanced socio-political, historic and regional context of Chinese IR literature.

That said, Wang is quite explicit that two of the salient features underlying the emergent schools of IR in China are their subjectivity and ability to contribute to China's rise. Thus, IR scholars in China are much more forthcoming about their own personal predilec-

tions and intellectual commitments, yet they are unequivocal that their theoretical peregrinations in IR are intent on strengthening China's international status. This appears to be the key distinction from Western IR theory, where the explanation and understanding of any school is expected to conform to a particular understanding of objectivity and scientific method. Quoting the prominent Chinese IR scholar Song Xinning, Wang frames Chinese scholarship on world affairs through the idea that "China's international role and its relationship with the outside world must be correctly understood. The end purpose of IR studies in China is to safeguard China's national sovereignty, to serve its national interest, and to inherit and carry on the historical tradition of Chinese culture" (p. 126).

What emerges from this analysis is a framing of IR premised on the fusion of complex innovation and its creative contextualization within the idiosyncratic experience of China. In this respect, Wang's book makes a timely and extremely relevant contribution to the discussion of the Chinese (and, more broadly, non-Western) approach to world politics. His erudite analysis offers a perceptive emphasis on the relational nature of Chinese worldviews, by stressing that global affairs are "an open process of complex social relations in motion. Rules, regimes, and institutions are

not established to govern or restrain the behavior of individual actors in [international] society, but to harmonize relations among the members of [international] society" (p. 46). Thus, by providing a much needed contextual understanding of how China views and interprets global developments, Wang offers an extremely detailed and rigorous account of Chinese involvement in and contribution to the patterns and study of global politics.

In this way, Wang has succeeded in providing a refreshing perspective on the content, scope and implications of Chinese IR scholarship. His account provides a thoughtful reconsideration of China's global role and offers a wealth of solid knowledge and perceptive insights on the evolution, patterns and practices of China's foreign policy analyses. Thus, to experts on China's international interactions, Wang's book imparts both a comprehensive overview and a much-needed reassessment of the conceptual outlines of Beijing's nascent global agency. To beginners, it makes available an accessible, yet rigorous, analytical and empirical engagement with the discourses animating Chinese IR thinking. Wang's book will also be invaluable for the purposes of teaching and theorizing the ongoing transformations in global life as a result of China's increasing centrality in the patterns and practices of world affairs.