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BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

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## *Ancient China and India: The Story of IR Fiasco?\**

Yuri Pines

*Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft in India and China*, edited by Daniel A. Bell, Amitav Acharya, Rajeev Bhargava, and Yan Xuetong. Berkeley: University of California Press (Great Transformations Series), 2023. 334 pp. US\$34.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 9780520390980.

The rise of Asia in general, and of China and India in particular, is among the most significant geopolitical developments of the twenty-first century. This rise is obvious in the economic sphere, is increasingly observable in the fields of science and technology, and is palpable also on the level of the global political and, potentially, military balance of power. The two and a half centuries during which the West dominated the globe are coming to an end, possibly in our generation.

Yet whereas the power of China's (and, to a lesser extent India's) economic hardware is readily recognized worldwide, in terms of software, viz. their global cultural and intellectual impact, both countries are much weaker. In both the humanities and the social sciences, in particular, their contributions are rarely considered important. As Amitav Acharya, a co-editor of *Bridging Two Worlds* emphasizes in his introduction, "Western scholarship often holds up Greece and Rome as the definitive sources of concepts and approaches to political science, history, philosophy, and IR [International Relations] ... This Greco-Roman centrism is the forerunner and foundation of modern Eurocentrism ... The Greco-Roman heritage is seen as more progressive, scientific, advanced, and

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democratic and its practices and ideas as universal and applicable to all. Such assumptions serve as the bedrock for modern social sciences and humanities” (pp. 22–24). Moreover, the dominance of Western values in the academy produces what the eminent Indian historian Romila Thapar calls “the inferiority complex” of non-Western academics, who mine their traditions “in an effort to prove that non-Greek cultures have identical values as those of the Greek-dominated ones” (p. 24). This state of affairs in which non-Western experience is sidelined results not just in significant injustice to the rich cultural legacy of Chinese, Indian, or, e.g., Islamic civilizations, but also impoverishes social sciences and humanities globally and, arguably, makes them less relevant to the newly formed multipolar world.

It is against this backdrop that a group of mostly Chinese and Indian scholars convened thrice (twice in China in 2017 and 2019, and once in Thailand in 2018, after the planned Indian leg was moved from New Delhi to Bangkok “due to international tensions between India and China at the time” [Bell’s introduction, p. 5]). The multi-year project, generously supported by the Berggruen Institute, yielded a book in 14 chapters divided into seven sections or “themes” (Methodology, Political Leadership, Amoral Realism, Empire, Just War, Diplomacy, and “Balancing, Hegemony, and Mandalas”). One chapter on each theme was written by a Chinese contributor (including two Western scholars—Roger Ames and Daniel Bell—who were then, like all their Chinese colleagues, teaching in mainland China); another was penned by an Indian counterpart (invariably scholars of South Asian ancestry, some of whom teach in the U.S. and New Zealand). The avowed goal of the book is, in Acharya’s words, “to compare classical Chinese and Indian political thought, especially as it relates to ‘global’ or ‘world’ order-building” (p. 22). The book focuses on the formative periods of both civilizations (primarily the second half of the first millennium BCE, with infrequent forays into later periods). The editors aver, in Daniel Bell’s words, that “ancient schools of thought offer rich and profound ways of thinking about politics and statecraft and explicitly or implicitly shape much political debate in India and China” (p. 3). The book is aimed not just to introduce insights from early China and India to Western readers, but also to bring two ancient traditions into dialogue with each other. Bell emphasizes, “Deeper mutual understanding can form the basis for mutual appreciation and friendship, or at least help to avoid clashes based on misunderstandings” (p. 4).