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# AL-SHAJARAH

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Sri Lankan context from the perspectives inspired by the global debates of contemporary political philosophy.

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**Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-imagining International Relations: World Orders in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilizations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 196 pp. ISBN 9781009074919**

*Reviewer:* Yusmadi Yusoff, a lawyer and former Member of Parliament, Malaysia (Ahli Dewan Rakyat and Ahli Dewan Negara). He was also an Adjunct Professor of ISTAC (Pro Bono) 2019-2020. Email: yusmadi.yusoff@gmail.com

*Re-imagining International Relations'* slenderness relative to other tomes of international relations (IR), belies the breadth of its ambitions. In its own words, this book seeks to uncover “what IR theory might look like had it been developed within civilisations other than the West.”

The bulk of the book is a narrative of the comparative history, sociology and belief systems of ancient China and India and the Islamic world. This culminates in an analysis of six aspects of international relations - *hierarchy, power politics, peaceful co-existence, international political economy, territoriality and modes of thinking* – as they would have emerged from each civilisation, had the West not assumed its dominance of the field.

To be sure, the authors are not naïve about the challenges of such an enterprise. They anticipate the difficulty of both “forward” and “backward” projection. The former is that of extrapolating IR theory from classical ancient thinking, with particular emphasis on the difficulties of equating empires and modern nation-states. The latter is that of analysing ancient thought through the lens of modern, i.e., Western, IR concepts.

Here, the authors take a cautious but pluralist approach, insisting that their aim is not to “dump these (Western) concepts entirely and deploy a whole new vocabulary”. Instead, they suggest “Western scholars should develop an understanding of non-Western concepts just as they expect non-Western scholars to be well-versed in Western ideas”.

Thus, this book assumes its place in the Global IR project, promulgated first by the same authors in 2017. Described by the authors as a “prequel” to their other work *The Making of Global International Relations* (2019), this book is perhaps better described as a companion piece. It draws on the now vast literature, alongside more specialist volumes such as Hendrik Spruyt’s *The World Imagined* (2020) and works of the “Chinese School” of IR.

One fundamental criticism of Global IR is whether it truly adds new insight to existing theories of international relations. John Mearsheimer puts it succinctly, “there is not a lot of room for new theories or even major twists on existing theories”. As he explains, “If this were 1945, the situation would be markedly different.” In other words, the critical challenge for Global IR is to articulate truly *autonomous* ideas, instead of simply realism or institutionalism or constructivism redux.

Closely allied to this critique is a deeper materialist claim that common structural, security or material factors in the international system result in international relations being a “realm of recurrence and repetition”. Mearsheimer refers to this in terms of the “basic realities of international politics” which mean he often speaks “the same language” (conceptually) with Chinese realist scholars and policymakers, despite differences in culture and worldview. Per this view, culture does not matter much. The common need for self-preservation and material well-being results in states behaving in broadly similar ways sufficiently explained by Western IR.

These critiques may be setting the bar too high, however, Global IR never aimed to “supplant existing theories and methods”, only to “subsume” them in a wider, more inclusive conversation. Mearsheimer himself admits room for “middle-range theories” and refinements of existing theories. More critically, Karen Smith argues that “reinterpretations or modifications of existing frameworks...can

assist us in not only better understanding international relations in a particular part of the world, but can in fact provide greater insights into the field as a whole.”

By this standard, this book acquits itself well. Far from a volume of dry theory, it seamlessly integrates socio-historical observations with abstract concepts used by the ancient civilisations. While it does not claim to be an exegesis of new IR theory (“our analysis cannot pretend to be definitive”), it poses sufficiently provocative questions to serve as an introduction to Global IR.

There are, however, three blemishes to its brilliance:

Firstly, normative questions, as opposed to descriptive analysis, are rather muted in this book. Its stated aim is broadly descriptive, that is, to analyse how “world order and international relations have been thought about and practised across time and space”. Amidst the observations in the final synthesising chapter of the book, there are relatively few about what the ancients considered a good, desirable or ethical world order. While this is forgivable given the breadth of thought encompassed in this book, addressing such normative questions would have reinforced its profound insights. For example, the Chinese *Tianxia* or Ashoka’s *Dharma* do not merely explain how ancient Chinese and Indians viewed the world to be, but also connote, to them, how the world *ought to be*. Engagement between these ideas with the Western international political theory (IPT) canon such as Rawls’ *The Law of Peoples* or Michael Walzer’s *Just and Unjust Wars* is sorely needed. Indeed, I would suggest as agenda for further comparative study, two aspects of international relations in addition to the six in this book, *international justice/ethics* and *human dignity* (broader than Western notions of *human rights*).

Secondly, among the six aspects of international relations examined in this book, *international political economy* is under-theorised. While the authors cite many interesting facts about, among other things, the Mongol trade network, they under-explore the possibility of abstracting from these facts, concepts that may have shaped how these ancient civilisations thought about trade. In other words, there are many words on practice, but fewer on the thinking. This naturally leads to the book’s rather too quick conclusion that

“trade in much of the classical world was essentially mercantilist in attitude”. This generalisation runs too close to the warning the authors themselves acknowledged about “backward” projecting modern concepts to ancient practice. The Chinese tribute system seems sufficiently unique a concept to deserve deeper contrast with Western mercantilist-colonialist practices. Islamic and Indian civilisation may have adopted a more (crudely put) *laissez-faire* approach and therefore lack conceptions of how the state should engage with international trade. But this only suggests an opportunity to study other under-appreciated aspects of international political economy such as international development and international finance, the latter for which Islam would certainly have more stringent proscriptions.

Thirdly, treatment of the Islamic world and its thought in this book is uneven compared to that of the Chinese and Indian civilisations. While the concepts of *Ummah*, *Dār al-Islām* and *Dār al-Ḥarb* are examined in depth in relation to *hierarchy*, *power politics*, *peaceful co-existence* and *territoriality*, the section on Islamic *modes of thinking* are relatively short by comparison. In particular, Islamic epistemology and ontology receives relatively brief treatment, which is surprising given the depth and sophistication of this domain of knowledge. This can be juxtaposed with Chinese relationalism and *zhongyong* dialectics, which are addressed in this book not just as a matter of alternative theory but also in terms of their application to actual Chinese foreign policy. This lacuna is understandable given that the implications of Islamic epistemology and ontology for IR theory are under-researched. There has not emerged an “Islamic School” of international relations, for example, as compared to the Chinese School consisting of the likes of Qin Yaqing. In this regard, works such as Professor Osman Bakar’s *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World* may serve as impetus for further research.

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