

# Contemporary China in Anglo-American and Chinese Perspectives: Making Sense of a Rising China

Emre DEMİR

New York, Routledge, 2023, 173 pages, ISBN:9781032291918

Batuhan AY

M.A. Student, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara

E-Mail: batuhan.ay8@gmail.com

Orcid: 0009-0009-8515-1177

In the book *Contemporary China in Anglo-American and Chinese Perspectives: Making Sense of a Rising China*, Emre Demir aims to analyze China's rise by displaying the differences and similarities in scholarly discourse in Western and Chinese scholarship. The book examines a collection of 14 approaches from scholars of mainstream United States (U.S.), critical Western, mainstream Chinese, and critical Chinese approaches and seeks to reveal their relevant power-knowledge nexuses and region-centric characteristics in knowledge production, with a particular focus on the current power structure in knowledge production in Chinese and U.S. societies. Demir indicates that every approach occupies a position within the three-layered structure of knowledge production: core, semi-periphery, and periphery. Currently, the U.S. assumes the core (hegemonic) position within social sciences knowledge production, which enables it to dominate the means of knowledge production and direct the ways in which knowledge is produced. Therefore, the U.S. can globally reproduce its own theories, which it benefits from, under the guise of universal validity. Moreover, Demir advocates the diversification of intellectual knowledge in the social sciences, a human-centric approach instead of a region-centric one, a focus on the colonial histories of societies, and the decolonization of International Relations (IR).

The first chapter, "Mainstream U.S. Conceptions of a Rising China: Offering Lessons for the U.S. Policy-Makers," includes three mainstream U.S.-centered theories: postclassical realism (Robert Gilpin), offensive realism (John Mearsheimer), and neoliberal institutionalism (Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye). The chapter conveys their U.S.-centered assumptions on the concepts of hegemony, hegemony-building, and hegemonic transition as well as on current U.S.-China relations. For Demir, these problem-solving approaches formulate the core position of IR knowledge production, and the corresponding scholars produce knowledge for U.S. policymakers to thwart the challengers that the United States faces. Additionally, these *pro-status quo* approaches have ideologically based claims on being 'value-free' and having universal applicability, making them widely applicable. For Sino-U.S. relations, the author argues that these approaches analyze the concepts of hegemony only on material terms and

hegemonic transition through a U.S.-centered perspective, despite their different perceptions of China's rise. Even though realists, who perceive China's rise as a threat that needs to be contained, disagree with liberals, who propose China to be further integrated into the system, on substance, they both serve to the *status quo*.

The second chapter, "Critical Anglo-American Conceptions of a Rising China: Alternative Visions for a Just World Order," outlines the assumptions of World-Systems Analysis (WSA, Immanuel Wallerstein) and Historical Materialist Critical Theory (HMCT, Robert Cox) on hegemony, hegemony-building, and hegemonic-transition, which occupy a semi-peripheral position in the social sciences. While the author acknowledges their insights in overcoming region-centric knowledge production, he argues that they paradoxically contribute to Western-centric knowledge in helping "the power holders to naturalize, stabilize and eternalize the existing unjust world-system." (p. 56). He asserts that these Western-centric approaches victimize the East by viewing them as passive bearers of Western hegemonies in a capitalist world-system and neglecting their colonial histories. Furthermore, since these scholars focus only on Western powers as hegemons, overemphasize the Westphalian system, and assume that hegemons provide stability – and hence share the wisdom of hegemons' own understanding of stability – they offer Western-centric accounts for explaining the concept of hegemony and Sino-U.S. relations. While WSA and HMCT include economic, ecologic and societal variables in accounting for hegemonic transition, they still cannot overcome a Western-centric approach on China's rise.

The third chapter, "Mainstream Chinese Conceptions of a Rising China: Offering Lessons for the Party Elite," includes the mainstream Chinese approaches of *Tianxia*<sup>1</sup> (Zhao Tingyang), *Tsinghua*<sup>2</sup> or Moral Realism (Yan Xuetong), and Relational Theory (Qin Yaqing) and their conceptions of hegemony and hegemony-building. The author indicates that while Qin's and especially Yan's moral realist approach incorporate Western and Chinese ontology, Zhao rejects this and offers a Sino-centered ontology. These approaches, for Demir, occupy a peripheral position in knowledge production, but these scholars have a close relationship with the Chinese ruling elite and produce problem-solving knowledge for the Chinese state by incorporating the assumptions of mainstream U.S. approaches. The emergence of such approaches coincided with China's rise in material capabilities and need to produce homegrown IR theories. Thus, they seek to place Chinese knowledge production in the core position, transcend U.S. hegemony in knowledge production, and revert the 'China threat' label. Their assumptions of Sino-U.S. relations are Sino-centered, as they view hegemony on political power/morality terms while sidelining material power. The collective aim is to achieve national rejuvenation and establish China as a benevolent hegemon that can transcend the deficiencies of Western hegemons by proposing a grand strategy of "humane authority" and propose policies for China to break U.S. containment in Asia and place China in a leadership position in world affairs.

1 Zhao assumes that the anarchic nature of international system and should be replaced by the *Tianxia* system that promises a harmonious global order. Since this theory promotes inclusiveness, it provides a 'global' political philosophy, derived from Chinese *Tianxia* (All Under Heaven) understanding to disperse fragmentation that Westphalian state system enables.

2 *Tsinghua* embraces mainstream Western IR's epistemology and ontology but assumes that national power derives primarily from political leadership (not military or economic capabilities) and sees morality as a key to political leadership. Thereafter, the most important tool to assume hegemony is via political power.

The fourth chapter, “Critical and Neo-Conservative Chinese Conceptions of a Rising China: Alternative Visions for the Future,” conveys critical Chinese approaches of the New Left, New Right/Neoliberalism, and Neo-Confucianism/Neo-Conservatism, which are situated in the peripheries of the periphery in knowledge production. Demir indicates that these theories are not putting primacy to the hegemony-building debate. Instead, domestic issues and China’s transformation in political, societal, and economic spheres are analyzed, while criticizing the ‘universal’ mainstream explanations. They are, in other words, not producing problem-solving knowledge for Chinese government. For the author, these scholars do not neglect the Chinese public and the state, offering alternative explanations by focusing on the domestic issues that China faces.

The book provides the reader with a unique approach to Sino-U.S. relations. While many scholars attempt to understand the issue primarily on material terms with region-centric Western approaches, Demir analyzes the often neglected part of this topic of comparing the scholarly discourse with a human-centric approach. By doing so, he deciphers the current balance of power within the structure of knowledge production, who produces knowledge for whom, and who benefits from the knowledge produced at the expense of whom. He detects the Western-centricity in Western critical theories and Sino-centricity in Chinese mainstream approaches and subsequently, who benefits from these theories are well recognized.

Relatedly, the book also highlights mental production as a source of power itself and how occupying the hegemonic/core position in mental production amplifies the power for the state possessing it. U.S. mainstream intellectuals can impose their ideologically driven and region-centric approaches as universally applicable and value-free, thus enabling their approaches to be palatable worldwide. The book shows that this makes scholars from the semi-periphery and periphery accept and internalize – whether intentionally (Chinese mainstream) or unintentionally (Western critical) – these assumptions and make them reproduce U.S. hegemony in knowledge production. This is evident in the case of mainstream Chinese scholars who aim to revert to the *status quo* in knowledge production in favor of China while still utilizing the mainstream assumptions in their theories. Power itself is accordingly embedded in the scholarly debate and for the debates about a ‘rising China’. This book reveals this aspect by analyzing from which locality the knowledge for Sino-U.S. relations has emerged and for what purpose it is produced.

However, it should not be overlooked that the book aims to transcend the existing unjust power structures in knowledge production in the form of the subordinate position of homegrown IR theories in the periphery. This reveals (neo)colonial issues in world politics as well as in knowledge production structures. Demir challenges the mainstream region-centric approaches directly to the benefit of the periphery.

All in all, the author provides insights into Sino-U.S. relations and how to understand China’s rise by analyzing the scholarly debates surrounding it. The book could be recommended for those who want to investigate numerous IR theories as well as the debates on both hegemony, hegemony-building and hegemonic transition, as well as China’s rise from various Western and Chinese standpoints.