



**Harris, Eirik Lang, and Henrique Schneider, eds.,
*Adventures in Chinese Realism: Classic Philosophy Applied
to Contemporary Issues***

New York: State University of New York Press, 2022, 234 pages

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Accepted: 2 March 2023
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The book under review aims to explore the rationale of Chinese Realism and its applications in the present world. As a result, the range of the book is particularly wide: apart from those topics that one may habitually associate with Chinese Realism, it also covers business ethics (Ch. 3), the structure of the meritocratic state (Chs. 4, 5), hegemony (Ch. 6), and the self-referencing bureaucracy (Ch. 9), to give just some examples. As the editors state in the Introduction, the book is “purposefully diverse so as to provide multiple perspectives” (1). It surely serves that purpose very well.

Due to the limits of space, in this review I shall focus on the issue concerning the understanding of Chinese Realism. For those who are familiar with Chinese philosophy, the term “Chinese Realism” in the book title is not a term used by many people. The editors themselves make it clear that the label “Realists” was first applied by Arthur Waley to Legalists (*fajia* 法家) alone, not to other schools of thought in ancient China. In this sense, the concept of “Realism” used in the book is different from Waley’s, and the reason for this, one may surmise, is that the editors want to include the discussions of Daoism (in Ch. 1) and Western political Realism (most notably in Ch. 6). It would indeed be strange if Laozi 老子, Machiavelli, and John Mearsheimer appear in a book that studies Chinese Legalism.

The way Harris and Schneider define Realism is of a piece with how Confucianism and Legalism were understood in Chinese Classics (*jingxue* 經學), for instance in SIMA Tan’s 司馬談 “On the Gist of Six Schools.” As they put it, “Realist approaches rely on situations as they present themselves, and people’s characters, as they are.” Thus understood, Realists “put forward theoretical and philosophical resources to deal with reality, not to change it” (1), and they take human nature as it is (“self-interested”) and design social and political institutions in accordance with human

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nature as they understand it—not seek to change it, and certainly not to uplift it by any means. By contrast, the Idealists “aim at establishing situations that resemble a philosophical ideal, developing agents’ characters in light of ethical desiderata” (1).

According to these definitions, Legalism and Daoism can work together, jointly posing challenges to a variety of strands of Confucianism that uphold moral ideals of *li* 禮 (rituals) and *yi* 義 (righteousness). But, taking a step further from here, one then would see that the difference between Realism and Idealism goes even deeper. The difference between Realists and Idealists does not stop at how they understand human nature, nor at *what* they do about it; it also touches upon the question of *how* they handle human nature. Given that social order is something both Realists and Idealists care about, they share the need of doing *something* about human nature. The different ways in which they go about doing it sets them apart: for Realists, because the self-interestedness of human nature allows no room for the role of moral cultivation and moral exemplars, they must rely on sanctions and rewards as the only available means to maintain social order. It is in this sense that Kenneth Winston claims in Chapter 5 that Realists believe that the state should motivate people “by threatening them with sanctions or enticing them with rewards” (80), whereas for Idealists “governing does not consist of issuing orders or promulgating laws but in performing rituals and setting an example” (79). Sanctions and rewards, therefore, are considered by Realists to be the only path leading to social order. It explains why in Chinese Classics power (which is solely capable of issuing sanctions and rewards) is often pitted against ideal/virtue which, in turn, leads us to see the real disagreements between Realists and Idealists. There are, in fact, *two* forms of issues, instead of one, for them to dispute over: the optimistic versus pessimistic understanding of human nature, on one hand, and power versus ideal/virtue, on the other. Both of these formulations are implied in the editors’ definition: when they refer to seeing “people’s characters as they are,” they are alluding to the former, and when they speak of “philosophical ideal” and “ethical desiderata” they are referring to the latter.

But these twofold formulations give rise to an unexpected problem, the one that did not arise when we used the traditional labels such as Confucians and Legalists. The problem arises because there is no causal link between the first and second aspect of the formulations: it does not follow from the understanding that human nature is self-interested that one should *only* resort to sanctions and rewards; nor does it follow from the understanding that human nature is not self-interested that moral education and exemplars are desirable. Therefore, one can sincerely uphold the two aspects of the formulations without falling into any contradictions. What I have in mind is Xunzi’s 荀子 philosophy and his understanding of human nature, in particular his assertion that human nature is vicious and his insistence on the significance of the ideal of rituals. What this shows is that in Xunzi we can witness *both* the pessimistic understanding of human nature (a feature that belongs to the Realist) and the ethical desiderata (a feature that belongs to the Idealist). If we stick to the previous definitions of Realism and Idealism, we are bound to be at sea in labeling Xunzi, for he is neither a Realist nor an Idealist, according to the definitions; or, he is both.

The problem can be solved, however, if we associate Xunzi's philosophy with what Henrique Schneider in Chapter 6 calls the "hegemonic project" (123). A hegemonic project need not choose between power and ideal/virtue, for according to the project a kingdom has to become "a center of power, civilization, and—in the Confucian narrative—morality," if it is to be a hegemon (123). That is to say, it has to combine power and ideal/virtue in some manner so that power can be further empowered by ideal/virtue and the latter can be materially supported by power. When Schneider writes "the hegemon ... is better off without having to use its force" (116), he does not mean that a hegemon can exercise its power without appealing to force. Instead, what he means is that what a hegemon has at its disposal is not *only* force. When a hegemon exists, its legitimacy does not rely on sheer force, nor does it merely rely on ideal/virtue—no matter how universalizable it can be. As "might does not make right," right does not make might either. A hegemon depends, as Schneider's chapter demonstrates, on power *and* ideal/virtue for its establishment and persistence.

Viewed in this way, the hegemonic project constitutes a test for Realism and Idealism examined in the book. The test itself is realistic in nature, for it shows that the success or failure of Realism and Idealism is the only way for us to tell whether they are viable. It might be true, and I believe it is, that "motivating people by threatening them with sanctions or enticing them with rewards was a sign of political and moral failure" (80). In that case, Realism has no chance of being viable as a political doctrine that provides meaningful guidance for the governance on the ground. As Winston forcefully demonstrates, "both law [power] and virtue, suitably elaborated, are necessary for success in governing" (84). Taking the hegemonic project as a test then enables us to see why Idealism or Realism should avoid being reduced to a doctrine that advocates either pure ideal or sheer force. The two extremes are equally dangerous—while traditional realism convincingly warned us against the first, Bernard Williams's "Basic Legitimacy Demand (BLD)" invites us to see why rule by power alone can lead to a severe legitimation crisis that no power, no matter how powerful it is, can overcome.

If we read the book as a whole, we will eventually have this full picture of Chinese Realism, the one that integrates the Legalistic (and Daoist) emphasis on power and the Confucian stress of the ideal of *tian dao* 天道. This integration can indeed shed new light on "contemporary issues" and the art of governance. In an increasingly turbulent world, we all need Realism to understand reality better without indulging in too much Idealistic thinking. The editors' work, and different authors' contributions, prove to be rather timely in reminding us of this fact and in providing us with the valuable theoretical guide.

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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