

# **China's rise and the 'Chinese Dream' in International Relations Theory**

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# China's rise and the 'Chinese Dream' in International Relations Theory

## Abstract

The rise of China/East Asia and the perceived decline of the US/West pose an emerging question about how International Relations (IR) Theory should respond to this change. Increasingly, there have been heated discussions within the Chinese IR academia over a desirable Chinese contribution to IR Theory, particularly the possibility of building a distinctive Chinese IR Theory. Inevitably, this drive towards theorizing from Chinese perspectives also creates backlash among not only Western but also other Chinese scholars as they question the 'nationalistic' if not 'hegemonic' discourse of the scholarship. Drawing on the sociology of scientific knowledge framework, this article examines the linkages between the vibrant dynamics of the Chinese theoretical debates and the actual practices of Chinese scholars in realizing their claims. It suggests that this investigation can serve as a springboard into a better appreciation of the theory-practice and power-knowledge relationships in the context of Chinese IR.

**Keywords:** Chinese School, Tsinghua approach, *Tianxia*, East Asian IR, Non-Western IR Theory, Sociology of knowledge

Although serious IR theoretical research in China only began in the late 1970s, it was as early as 1987 that Chinese scholars started to call for building ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’. Since then, there have been a number of other endeavors to map out a desirable Chinese contribution to International Relations Theory (IRT). These include the ‘indigenization’ and ‘Sinicization’ of IRT, the ‘Chinese perspective’, the ‘Chinese school of IR’, and the ‘Tsinghua approach’ to IR. Most recently, some ‘Chinese school’ proponents have gone as far as promulgating a ‘Chinese dream’ in IRT whereby the emerging Chinese IR paradigm would overcome the existing pitfalls of Western IRT and eventually replace it as the dominant school of IR Theory.<sup>1</sup> Together these different visions have formed some of the most heated debates within and beyond the Chinese IR community.<sup>2</sup>

While the existing literature has shed much light on the Chinese IRT debate *per se*, little is known as to *how this debate actually shapes the practices of involved academics*. Specifically, are there actual changes in research agendas to match these theoretical claims or are they merely ‘hollow slogans’ to fill up Chinese academic journals? This article explores the activities of scholars in bringing their theoretical claims to life. It finds that Chinese scholars have made some noticeable changes in practice to match the claims they put forward in the debate. Another finding is that the debate has been exerting impact on Chinese scholars in different ways and to different extents as manifested in the various movements towards theoretical innovation.

This led to another question: *what actually drives those changes?* Is this because of genuine commitment to theory or of other causes? Much of the literature on Chinese IRT debate takes either a history or philosophy of science framework, explaining the drive towards theoretical innovation in China through the lenses of China’s geopolitical rise and/or the nature of its authoritarian politics. This top-down approach, however, has difficulties explaining why theorizing takes various forms in China. Recently, Kristensen and Nielsen have attempted to decode the Chinese IRT debate from a bottom-up perspective - to ‘open the black-box’ of IR theorizing. Drawing on Randall Collin’s sociological theory of intellectual change (particularly his ‘law of small numbers’ thesis), these scholars argue that it is opposition and debate rather than agreement and consensus that drives Chinese IR theorizing. In this light, the Chinese IRT debate should be seen as moves by small numbers of Chinese scholars seeking attention and prominence rather than through the lenses of power transition and counter-hegemony.<sup>3</sup> While this approach is helpful in uncovering some of the inner logics that have shaped the Chinese IRT debate, it still faces a puzzle: ‘69% of Chinese IR academia agree or agree very much that building a Chinese IR theory or IR school is an important task - only 18% disagree or disagree very much.’<sup>4</sup> How can we explain this large consensus?

The aforementioned ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions of the Chinese IRT debate, I argue, would be better explained under the sociology of knowledge framework. According to this approach, while theorizing is presumably driven by scholars’ commitment to scientific objectivity, ‘external’ factors such as the social, institutional and psychological

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<sup>1</sup> Yiwei Wang and Xueqing Han, ‘Guoji Guanxi Lilun De Zhongguo Meng’, *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* 8 (2013): 21-39. I thank Prof. Wang for providing me the English version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of convenience, these academic movements are hereafter referred to collectively as the ‘Chinese IR Theory’ debate.

<sup>3</sup> Peter M. Kristensen and Ras T. Nielsen, ‘Constructing a Chinese International Relations Theory: A Sociological Approach to Intellectual Innovation’, *International Political Sociology* 7, no. 1 (2013): 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

contexts may intrude in the process of establishing knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Taking this into Chinese IR, the Chinese IRT debates and practices can be interpreted as being shaped not only by the theoretical identity of scholars but also by their engagement with the broader intellectual, political, and social environment in China. To unveil why that is the case, my analysis proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss the various theoretical claims put forward in the Chinese IRT debate and how they shape the changing practices of the Chinese IR academia. Second, I investigate the underlying factors that actually drive those changes under the sociology of knowledge framework. Lastly, I conclude by arguing that external factors, to different extents, have intruded and undermined Chinese scholars' commitment to universally applicable theory.

### **Debating Chinese IR Theory: theoretical claims and actual practices**

The Chinese IRT debate began with the 'IR Theory with Chinese characteristics' movement in 1987. This project, however, never really got off the ground given the scepticism in its ideological orientation and lack of serious theorizing efforts.<sup>6</sup> From the early 2000s the 'IR Theory with Chinese characteristics' idea became less popular within Chinese academia. Nevertheless, 'Chinese characteristics' remains a popular term in Chinese IR discourse, particularly among institutions close to the party line. There are continuing efforts by Chinese scholars to conceptualize terms like 'power', 'soft power', 'geopolitics', 'grand strategy' (and so on) with 'Chinese characteristics'. The common ground of these writings is to introduce China's unique way of understanding international politics. Arguably, the most noticeable work in this respect is Zhao Tingyang's recent attempts to provide a Chinese vision of world order by revising the concept of '*Tianxia*' (all-under-heaven).

#### ***World philosophy with 'Chinese characteristics'***

Zhao Tingyang is a political philosopher in the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). As China's largest think-tank, CASS is believed to be a 'heavily politicized and doctrinal Marxist institution' which represents the classical and conservative component of Chinese IR (*jingdian pai*).<sup>7</sup> In 2005, Zhao published his first book on the 'Tianxia system' and it quickly became popular in China and abroad. In the 'Introduction', titled 'Why is it necessary to discuss China's worldview?', Zhao posits that the problem facing the rise to great power status of the modern Chinese nation is not merely that China has not yet truly become an 'economic power' but also that it is not a 'knowledge producing power'. If it cannot become a 'knowledge producer' then no matter how sizable its economic and material power is, China remains a 'small state'.<sup>8</sup>

Zhao argues that the most important background for the emergence of Chinese thought is that China's problems today have become the world's problems. China's problems, however, cannot be explained by Western theories because they paint a wrong picture of China such as the 'China Threat' or 'China's Rise' theses.<sup>9</sup> Western thought, Zhao notes, 'can explain conflicts but only Chinese thought can fully explain harmony' because hidden in Chinese traditional thought is a completely different system of

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<sup>5</sup> Merrilee H. Salmon, ed., *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 162.

<sup>6</sup> Xinning Song, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics', *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 26 (2001): 67-8.

<sup>7</sup> David Shambaugh, 'International Relations Studies in China: History, Trends, and Prospects', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11, no. 3 (2011): 359.

<sup>8</sup> Tingyang Zhao, *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* (Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005), 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

worldview, values, and methodology.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, China can act as a ‘responsible power’ and contribute to international scholarship by providing alternative and indeed better theoretical solutions to the world’s problems. In so doing, Zhao suggests Chinese scholars should ‘rethink China’ in order to eventually ‘reconstruct China’. ‘Rethinking China’ has three components: to make Chinese knowledge an important foundation of international scholarship; to renovate Chinese thought by developing China-related thought into world-related thought; and to ultimately ‘rethink the world’.<sup>11</sup> Zhao finds a source for rethinking the world from China’s standpoint in the ancient Chinese concept of ‘*Tianxia*’ which dates back 3,000 years to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC).

Basically, Zhao’s *Tianxia* thesis posits that although we are living in the era of globalization, the world today is still a ‘non-world’, a ‘failed’ or ‘bad’ world. This is because there is no ‘truly coherent world society governed by a universally-accepted political institution’ but remains a ‘Hobbesian chaos’. Although there are international organizations such as the UN or EU, these institutions remain state-centric and are unable to prevent many international conflicts. In other words, there is no real ‘worldism’ or ‘worldness’ but only ‘internationality’.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Zhao argues that the Chinese philosophy of ‘*Tianxia*’ offers a different and better vision for world governance. In ancient Chinese thinking, the meaning of ‘*Tianxia*’ was threefold: the physical world (all the land under heaven); the psychological world (the hearts and minds of the people); and the political world (a world institution or a ‘world-as-one-family’ system). The *Tianxia* system is featured with long-lasting peace and order because, as Zhao argues, in the minds of the Kings of the all-under-heaven system, creating harmony is the utmost goal.<sup>13</sup> In addition, during the Zhou’s dynasty which was the first and only one thus far to put the all-under-heaven system into practice, the world was seen as a starting point for political thinking.<sup>14</sup> Zhao therefore suggests that *Tianxia* is a philosophy of true world-ness because it takes the world as a whole as the key philosophical issue.<sup>15</sup> At the core of Zhao’s holistic view of the world is Confucian ‘family ties’. In his view, if nation-states and *Tianxia* are built upon the spirit of family-ship, the world can evolve into one of great harmony (that minimizes economic and cultural conflicts) and inclusivity (in which nobody is excluded or pushed aside). In other words, it is a commonly agreed institution ‘of all and for all.’<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he concludes, ‘today’s chaotic world is in need of a new ‘all-under-heaven’ to establish perpetual peace.’<sup>17</sup> In intellectual circles, the world needs to divert away from ‘wrong-minded philosophy’ to employ a new philosophy of true world-ness.<sup>18</sup>

Zhao’s *Tianxia* philosophy generates heated debates domestically and internationally. Apart from admiration for the sophistication of his work, there was also a wave of criticism against his ‘over-beautiful’ if not utopian worldview. This led to several IR scholars writing to explain how his philosophy has been misunderstood.<sup>19</sup> Noting the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>12</sup> Tingyang Zhao, ‘A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)’, *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (2009): 6.

<sup>13</sup> Tingyang Zhao, ‘All-under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism: An Old Story and New World Peace’, in *Contemporary Chinese Political Thought: Debates and Perspectives*, eds. Fred Dallmayr and Tingyang Zhao (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Zhao, ‘Political World Philosophy’, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Zhao, ‘All-under-Heaven and Methodological Relationism’, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 54-5.

<sup>19</sup> Bijun Xu, ‘Is Zhao’s *Tianxia* System Misunderstood?’, *Tsinghua China Law Review* 6, no. 95 (2014); Feng Zhang, ‘The *Tianxia* System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia’, *China Heritage Quarterly*, no. 21 (2010).

shortcomings of his theorizing including the theory-practice gap and the unidentified pathways to such an ideal world institution, Zhao is currently working on a new book entitled 'Making the World into All-under-heaven (*Tianxia*)'.<sup>20</sup> Zhao's *Tianxia* thesis, although being a philosophy not IR theory, is an important starting point for the Chinese IR community as it opens a way for their theorizing – to go back to Chinese traditions and ancient thought.

### ***The 'Chinese School of IR' movement***

Since 2000, the Chinese IR debate has been dominated by the narrative of the 'Chinese school of IR' (*Zhongguo Xuepai*). Compared to its 'IR Theory with Chinese characteristics' predecessor, the 'Chinese school' project has won more support and increasingly received international attention particularly when leading Chinese theorists (Qin Yaqing, Ren Xiao, Wang Yiwei, etc.) joined the camp and played an instrumental role in developing the approach. The pursuit of China's distinctive brand in IR theory reflects the generational change in Chinese social sciences, particularly the professionalization of its IR community and their desire to 'catch up' with the global intellectual community.<sup>21</sup> The movement from think-tanks to universities by leading IR scholars has also pulled Chinese IR into the direction of more in-depth theoretical research.<sup>22</sup> As China's IR community becomes more mature, they are increasingly concerned about the risk of over-dependence on Western knowledge. As a result, many Chinese scholars began to define their own research agenda, drawing from Chinese philosophy, culture, history, and practice of international relations. This is, in the words of Prof. Ni Shixiong, a so-called 'walking on two legs' phenomenon - an indication of the growing maturity of Chinese IR scholarship.<sup>23</sup>

Given their high hopes and expectations for indigenous theorizing, how have Chinese scholars made the case for the 'Chinese school' and what has been done so far to match their desire? Over time, three fundamental issues have become the heart of the 'Chinese school' discussions: a) why is there no Chinese IR theory?; b) is a 'Chinese school' desirable and possible?; c) if yes, how can it be constructed? A number of leading scholars had attempted to address the first question.<sup>24</sup> Qin Yaqing later summed up these discussions, arguing that 'uncritical critiques, insufficient empirical studies, and unsophisticated research designs impede theory breakthroughs in China.'<sup>25</sup>

Since 2005, Chinese scholars have started to discuss the possibility of a Chinese school. Qin Yaqing argues that a Chinese school is not only justified but also possible and

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<sup>20</sup> Yaqing Qin, 'Culture and Global Thought: Chinese International Theory in the Making', *Revista CIDOB d'Affers Internacionals* no. 100 (2012): 71.

<sup>21</sup> These following Chinese IR scholars are listed as intellectuals who have affected the development of contemporary China: Yan Xuetong, Wang Yizhou, Shi Yinhong, and Wang Jisi. Zhidong Hao, *Intellectuals at a Crossroads: The Changing Politics of China's Knowledge Workers* (Albany: State University of New York State Press, 2003), 288.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Wang Yizhou, Wang Jisi and Tang Shiping moved from different institutes of CASS, Yan Xuetong and Chu Shulong from China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, and Shi Yinhong from the Center for International Strategic Studies at International Relations Academy, Nanjing.

<sup>23</sup> Ni, Interview by this author, Shanghai, August 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Yaqing Qin, 'Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?', in *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia*, eds. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 36-41; Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, eds. Daniel Bell and Zhe Sun, trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 256; Wang and Han, 'Guoji Guanxi', 38.

<sup>25</sup> Yaqing Qin, 'Development of International Relations Theory in China: Progress and Problems', in *Transformation of Foreign Affairs and International Relations in China, 1978- 2008*, ed. Yizhou Wang (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 467-8.

even inevitable because every social theory has ‘geographic and cultural birthmarks based on the experience and practice of people living there.’<sup>26</sup> Qin agrees with Zhao Tingyang that Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions are an important source for building new theory but disagrees that it should be the sole one. Even in establishing the ‘Chinese school’, Qin argues, Chinese scholars need to combine Western approaches, ideas, and concepts with a modern, contemporary reinterpretation of traditional Chinese discourses.<sup>27</sup> Qin’s approach received the support of many Chinese scholars who are united by a Coxian ontology that theory is always for someone and for some purposes. For example, Zhang Xiaoming – an English school proponent – believes that in the English school along with other major Western IR theories, it is ‘hard to escape ethnocentrism or cultural bias in their perceptions of and dealings with the non-Western countries. They are all culture-laden and value-laden. In fact, there is not a true value-free and universal IR theory in the world. Every IR theory is provincial in cultural terms.’<sup>28</sup> If all theories are cultural and provincial then claims to universality on the part of Western theory are unnecessarily exclusive. Chinese theory, in this sense, is just as provincial and thus just as valid. Another advocate of the ‘Chinese school’ Wang Yiwei argues that IR theory is both science and art in the sense that even if some features appear to be universal, it is in essence still an art with nationality.<sup>29</sup> In an article in 2007, Wang placed harsh criticism of Western IRT which, he believes, has increasingly lost its appeal.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, Wang Yiwei and his student Han Xueqing suggest that the world needs a ‘Chinese dream’ in IR theory. While most other ‘Chinese school’ proponents claim that a future Chinese theory can sit alongside as equally valid and partial approaches to IR, Wang and Han pursue a more ambitious claim – that Chinese approaches can be the integrative framework in which Western theory exists. In their ‘Chinese dream’, ‘grand theories might be replaced by meso and micro theories. Encouraged by Chinese inclusiveness of Indian Buddhism into Chinese Zen, China can also include Western universalism into a Chinese theoretical framework. As a consequence, the Chinese dream in IR will turn into reality with the full shaping of global China.’<sup>31</sup> What China has beyond Western IRT, in their view, is threefold: Chinese style cosmopolitanism (*Tianxia zhuyi*), ethical idealism (*daode lixiang*), and harmonious mentality (*hexie linian*).<sup>32</sup> The ‘Chinese Dream’ in IRT then can be realized in three ways: first, by reviving Chinese cultural traditions; second, by de-Westernizing, especially, de-Americanizing IRT while remaining ‘open and inclusive’ regarding western civilization; and third, by constructing IR theory that ‘originates in China and belongs to the world’ to ‘innovate’ the IR theory system.<sup>33</sup> The difference between a ‘Chinese Dream’ and an ‘American Dream’ in IR theory is that while Western IR theory subscribes to a universal dream, Chinese IR theory harbours a ‘harmonious but different’ (*he er bu tong*) dream. There is a strong belief that with the pacifist tradition and tolerance of diversity embedded in its culture, the future Chinese IR

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<sup>26</sup> Yaqing Qin, ‘Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory’, *Social Sciences in China* 30, no. 4 (2009): 18.

<sup>27</sup> Benjamin Creutzfeldt, ‘Qin Yaqing on Rules Vs Relations, Drinking Coffee and Tea, and a Chinese Approach to Global Governance’, *Theory Talk*, no. 45 (2011), 9.

<sup>28</sup> Xiaoming Zhang, ‘China in the Conception of International Society: The English School’s Engagements with China’, *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (2011): 785.

<sup>29</sup> Yiwei Wang, ‘Between Science and Art: Questionable International Relations Theories’, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 8, no. 2 (2007): 191-208.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>31</sup> Wang and Han, ‘Guoji Guanxi’, 38.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

theory will contribute to making both the real world and the discipline of IR 'a better place' than the ones that Western IRT offers.<sup>34</sup>

Interestingly, in making a case for the 'Chinese school', Chinese scholars increasingly refer to Western philosophy of science on how a theory comes into being. Wang Yiwei foresees a Kuhnian scientific revolution or paradigm shift between Western and Eastern/Chinese IR theory.<sup>35</sup> Qin Yaqing meanwhile borrows Cox's 'core problematic' and Lakatos' 'research program' thesis as a methodology for constructing a Chinese school. Accordingly, a Chinese school can be constructed if Chinese scholars find a new and different 'theoretical problematic' in their research program. Comparing the theoretical problematic of American IR (hegemonic maintenance) and British IR (international society), Qin argues that the successful construction of the English school is attributable to the different problematic it holds from American mainstream theories. In this light, China's peaceful integration into international society, Qin argues, is most likely to become the theoretical problematic of a 'Chinese school.'<sup>36</sup>

To date, the 'Chinese school' proponents have produced some research outcomes. Most noticeably is Qin Yaqing's development of a systematic theory on relationality (*guanxi*) and process (*guocheng*) by employing processual constructivism as the analytical framework and taking Chinese concept of 'relationality' as the theoretical hard core. In his recent publications, Qin has sketched the key elements of this theory: it focuses on process rather than structure; it takes the Chinese *yin-yang* dialectics as the meta-relationship; and it develops a model for relational governance.<sup>37</sup> Such a theory, Qin argues, has three distinctive dimensions as compared to Western mainstream theories.

First, while most existing Western theories (including constructivism) place emphasis on structures, Qin's theory focuses on process, defined as 'dynamic relations'. Process is significant, Qin argues, in that 'it shapes national interests, develops norms, nurtures collective emotion and builds shared identity through inter-subjective practice. Mainstream constructivism has done considerable studies on norms and shared identity, but missed collective emotion.'<sup>38</sup> A theory focusing on process can thus explain change. Second, the Chinese *yin* and *yang* dialectics, unlike the Hegelian dialectics, see relations between the two opposite poles as generally non-conflictual. *Yin* and *yang* indeed can be developed into a harmonious synthesis by means of *Zhongyong*, or 'the mutually inclusive way.'<sup>39</sup> The relevance of this meta-relationship to the current international politics, Qin argues, is that it provides an alternative explanation for cooperation and conflict between the actors of different cultural and civilizational backgrounds in global society.<sup>40</sup> Third, a theory on relationality can explain 'relational governance' - a feature in East Asian Confucian societies as opposed to 'rule-based governance' in Western society. The former model is based not only on cost-benefit calculations but also relationships (such as the management models in East Asian companies). Relational governance is defined as 'a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust that evolves through a shared understanding of social norms and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>35</sup> Wang, 'Between Science and Art', 207.

<sup>36</sup> Yaqing Qin, 'Theoretical Problematic of International Relationship Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School', *Social Sciences in China* 26, no. 4 (2005): 65-9.

<sup>37</sup> Yaqing Qin, *Guanxi Yu Guocheng: Zhongguo Guoji Guanxi Lilun De Wenhua Jiangou* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> Qin, 'Relationality and Processual Construction', 12.

<sup>39</sup> Qin, 'Culture and Global Thought', 81.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



human morality'.<sup>41</sup> This model, Qin argues, can also be applied for global governance. It should be noted that unlike Zhao Tingyang, Qin does not see Chinese and Western theories, such as relational and rule-based governance, as mutually exclusive but rather mutually complementary to 'create a more effective and humane approach to global governance.'<sup>42</sup> He even believes that relationality theory may also be universal because 'society must be defined in terms of relations of some kind.'<sup>43</sup>

At present, the 'China IR Theory Research' led by Qin has become one of the core research focuses of the Institute of International Relations at the China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU).<sup>44</sup> As the only higher learning institution directly under China's Foreign Ministry and responsible for the country's Track-two Diplomacy, CFAU is a highly policy-oriented institution. The perceived purpose of Qin's theorizing on relations and process is, therefore, to apply it in explaining China's peaceful integration into the international society in general and East Asian peace and cooperation in particular. In an article in 2007, Qin first talked about 'process-oriented regional integration.' He argues that the enduring of peace and economic development in East Asia in the past three decades is largely thanks to 'the regional processes that produce dynamics socializing powers and spreading norms.'<sup>45</sup> To deepen study on this aspect, Qin has formed a small group of his CFAU colleagues to work on innovating constructivism to explain Chinese foreign policy with a focus on the East Asia region. Their aim is to revise key constructivist terms such as the role of languages (the Chinese language), special social linkages such as China's informal relations with ASEAN (Track 2 and Track 3 dialogues), and how to develop new social forces.<sup>46</sup>

Other scholars are also introducing some new research topics for the 'Chinese school' discourse. These include Ren Xiao's re-examination of the history of the tributary system and the practices of East Asian 'symbiotic' order (e.g. rules, norms) for modern day application and Wang Yiwei's work on a 'Chinese Theory of New Great Power Relations' that claims to go beyond the path dependence of Western theories.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, these agendas have not been developed into sophisticated propositions in the same manner as Qin's relationality thesis. As Ren Xiao admits, theorizing is a difficult and time-consuming task that requires both independent thinking and peer collaboration.<sup>48</sup> However, thus far much of the 'Chinese school' scholarship is individual efforts or institutional-based. There has been few, if not no, cross-institutional collaboration or joint research among pro-Chinese school scholars, reflecting a certain extent of 'theoretical egoism' even among scholars who share the same goal.

### ***The 'Tsinghua approach' to IR***

Yan Xuetong, the Dean of the IR Department at Tsinghua University is known as the most vocal opponent of both the 'Chinese school' project led by Qin Yaqing and Zhao's

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>43</sup> Xin Liu, quoted in Qin, 'Relationality and Processual Construction', 18.

<sup>44</sup> CFAU's website, <http://iir.cfau.edu.cn/col/col1069/index.html>

<sup>45</sup> Creutzfeldt, 'Qin Yaqing', 3; see also Yaqing Qin and Ling Wei, 'Jiegou, Jincheng, yu Quanli de Shehui hua: Zhongguo yu Dongya Diq Hezuo', *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>46</sup> Interviews with Chinese scholars by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Yiwei Wang, 'Yi He He Gongsheng Shixian Sanchong Chaoyue – Zhongguo De Xinxing Daguo Guanxi Lilun Jishi,' *Xueshu qianyan* no. 12 (2013); Xiao Ren, 'Lun Dongya 'Gongsheng Tixi' Yuanli - Duiwai Guanxi Sixiang He Zhidu Yanjiu Zhiyi,' *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi*, no. 13 (2013).

<sup>48</sup> In my interview with Prof. Ren Xiao in August 2013, he said that he had suggested that Prof. Qin Yaqing form a hard-core group of scholars to work on the construction of the 'Chinese school' but so far this has not been realized.

*Tianxia* philosophy. As a realist, Yan does not believe in the possibility of harmony like Zhao or even Qin argues. As a proponent of Western quantitative methods, Yan believes that any theory worthy of that name should be constructed in a scientific way and be universally applicable. Yan therefore criticizes Zhao's *Tianxia* theory as unrealistic and the Qin-led 'Chinese school' project as narrowly based. Yan further criticizes the 'Chinese School' proponents for giving name to the theory before giving birth to it. In addition, he argues that it is impossible to have a single Chinese IR theory given the diversity of its traditions. Even Confucianism, he believes, cannot represent the entirety of Chinese thought.<sup>49</sup> This observation is largely shared by Yan's collaborator Xu Jin: 'China is too big and diverse. No one can represent the whole China and no theory can capture China's diversity. Hence, there can only be a 'Han Chinese approach' or a 'Tsinghua approach' but not a 'Chinese school.'<sup>50</sup>

Although criticizing the 'Chinese school' initiative and advocating universal knowledge, Yan Xuetong and his Tsinghua colleagues are actually proposing another Chinese style IR theory. This is often called the 'Tsinghua approach'<sup>51</sup> which, in Yan's words, attempts to 'create something universal, applicable not only to China, but the world.'<sup>52</sup> This has driven him to look into the diverse literature of ancient Chinese thought as an alternative source for theorizing. In fact, Yan shares many common points with the non-Western IR theory movement. As he argues, 'if we want IR theories to become truly rich and develop more universal values, we should encourage these scholars and students to take a deeper look into their own culture, knowledge, philosophy, and political theory, to enrich this field, as Amitav Acharya and others have argued, because this kind of study is severely lacking.'<sup>53</sup> In order to build new theory, Yan suggests Chinese scholars should rely on the philosophy of both Lakatos and Laudan to guide their research. That is Chinese scholars should ultimately aim for developing a new research program with a distinct hard core as Lakatos suggests. The first step towards this end, however, is to follow Laudan's suggestion that 'they focus on solving existing theoretical and empirical puzzles by wisely using traditional Chinese thought and literature.'<sup>54</sup>

Starting in 2005, Yan and his Tsinghua colleagues have deeply studied the thought of seven pre-Qin (before 221 BC) masters, namely Laozi, Mozi, Kongzi (Confucius), Mengzi (Mencius), Guanzi, Xunzi, and Hanfeizi. The outcome was a number of articles and books in Chinese which were eventually translated and gathered into an English volume titled '*Ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power*' published by Princeton University Press in 2011. In this important work, Yan first places ancient Chinese thinkers within the analytical framework of Western IR theories. He classifies pre-Qin thinkers by their epistemological ideas (conceptual determinism, dualism, and materialist determinism) and the analytical level of their thought (system, state, and individual).<sup>55</sup> He then tries to study how ancient Chinese thinkers understand international order and political power. Yan outlines three types of order/power envisaged by ancient Chinese masters: 'kingship' or 'humane authority' (*Wangquan*), hegemony (*Baquan*), and tyranny (*Qiangquan*). He rules out the relevance of tyranny, which is entirely based on military force and stratagems, to today's world. Rather he focuses on comparing the two other

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<sup>49</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, 252-9.

<sup>50</sup> Xu, Interview by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>51</sup> Feng Zhang, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012): 73-102.

<sup>52</sup> Benjamin Creutzfeldt, 'Yan Xuetong on Chinese Realism, the Tsinghua School of International Relations, and the Impossibility of Harmony', *Theory Talk*, no. 51 (2012), 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, 258.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

forms of rule: hegemony which seeks domination by means of maintaining strong force and strategic reliability (e.g. assurance through alliance) and 'Humane authority' or ruling by morality and justice.<sup>56</sup> It is humane authority that Yan thinks is a superior model because it wins the hearts and minds of the people. Yan further claims that pre-Qin understanding on morality and power may enrich existing IR theory, particularly realism, in at least two dimensions. First, hard power cannot be disregarded in realist understandings of power but morality can provide legitimacy for states to use force. Second, although classical realist writings (such as Morgenthau's) presume that morality is an important component of power, Yan suggests that 'realism should take morality as a constant and specific, not simply an abstract concept.'<sup>57</sup> Given his emphasis on the role of morality, Yan has been labelled as a 'moral realist' or 'Confucian realist'.<sup>58</sup>

The aim of Yan's revision of ancient Chinese thought, however, does not merely stay at 'enriching IR theories' for its own sake but more importantly to provide a guide for China's rise to global leadership. Yan sees the power competition between the US and China as a zero-sum game that in order for China to prevail, it needs to provide higher-quality leadership than the US. 'Humane authority', as suggested by pre-Qin thinkers, is an important pathway to that end.<sup>59</sup> Policy relevance, hence, is the utmost aim of Yan's theorizing. In fact, for the Tsinghua University which has a reputation of 'king-maker', this has become an open goal of many faculties. As an associate professor explains the mission of the Tsinghua IR Department and the foundation of their research:

We do not have the ambition to establish a grand theory. We think we are more realistic in producing some sort of middle-range theory, for example, those focusing on regional order, policy transformation as well as conducting empirical test. We always keep the balance between theoretical innovation and policy relevance. Many faculties in the department have a strong background in policy analysis and empirical research. We therefore do not want to separate theory from the practice of foreign policy.<sup>60</sup>

Apart from the pre-Qin thought project, the 'Tsinghua approach' scholars are also studying the ancient and modern practice of East Asian international relations as a source for theory building. Sun Xuefeng, for example, has been working on probing 'a quasi-anarchical regional order' (the anarchy system associated with a sub-hierarchical system) in East Asia and its impact on China's Rise.<sup>61</sup> Zhou Fangyin, meanwhile, has carried out preliminary research on China's ancient tributary system.<sup>62</sup> *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (published by Oxford University Press) of which Professor Yan is the Editor-in-chief and Sun, Zhou, and Xu Jin are editors has served as the key outlet for distributing the Tsinghua approach's research outcomes and generating debates.

### ***The Beida's ambition to shape a theory of foreign affairs***

Much of the attention on China's theoretical innovation focuses on the three aforementioned approaches. Yet the movement towards conceptualizing new dimensions of Chinese foreign policy by Beida's School of International Studies (SIS) scholars should

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 84-91.

<sup>57</sup> Creutzfeldt, 'Yan Xuetong', 5.

<sup>58</sup> Zhang, 'Tsinghua Approach', 95.

<sup>59</sup> Xuetong Yan, 'How China Can Defeat America', *New York Times*, November 20, 2011.

<sup>60</sup> Interview by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Xuefeng Sun, 'Rethinking East Asian Regional Order and China's Rise', *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 14, no. 1 (2013).

<sup>62</sup> Fangyin Zhou, 'Equilibrium Analysis of the Tributary System,' *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 4, no. 2 (2011).

not be disregarded because it hosts leading scholars including Wang Jisi (a realist), Wang Yizhou (a globalist), Zhang Xiaoming (an English school proponent), and Zhu Feng. Given the diversity of perspectives adopted by the faculty and their prudent approach in the ongoing Chinese IRT debate, there has been no Beida equivalent to the 'Tsinghua approach' despite sharing an ambition for developing 'middle-range' theories to explain and inform China's foreign policy. Two ongoing projects at Beida are worth mentioning: Wang Jisi's designing of China's grand strategy and Wang Yizhou's conceptualization of 'creative involvement'. Both these academic endeavors aim to provide a blueprint for Chinese foreign affairs in the future. This movement reflects the Chinese traditional understanding of theory which is meant to serve practical purposes rather than to explain the causality of social phenomenon.

As the scholar most exposed to policy, SIS's Dean Wang Jisi has been the leading strategist in designing a 'grand strategy' for China over the years.<sup>63</sup> Unlike Yan Xuetong's controversial vision of 'humane authority', Wang advocates a more modest, prudent, and practical strategic design.<sup>64</sup> In the context of China's rapid rise, Wang believes that the low-profile tradition of Chinese foreign policy needs to be revised yet at the same time he is also cautious of the idea of making China a competitor for global leadership.<sup>65</sup> At present, he is working on developing a new grand strategy for China (*Xin zhanlue* or *Da zhanlue* in Chinese) - the first of its kind since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This ambitious project aims to conceptualize and provide a blueprint for China's future foreign policy. It tries to entail many important areas of China's policy development including foreign policy, economics, ecological environment, social and cultural development, and demographic approaches.<sup>66</sup> Apart from this important work, Wang also serves as the chief editor of a comprehensive theoretical book series entitled '*World Politics - Views from China*'.<sup>67</sup> Prof. Wang believes that 'there are distinctive Chinese approaches to observing international politics' because IRT is always 'value-oriented'.<sup>68</sup> He nevertheless urges Chinese scholars to refrain from building a distinctive Chinese IR theory when the conditions are not ripe:

When learning from Western International Relations Theory, we can only copy some features. If we copy the entire value system, it will become completely Westernized. This is impossible and also unacceptable. At the moment, there is a phenomenon of distancing our theoretical research from Western theoretical studies at some level. That is we employ Western methodology but stay away from its core values; while we have yet managed to build up our own, it is difficult to

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<sup>63</sup> Prof. Wang has served in the government's consultancy committee on foreign affairs. He is also known as former President Hu Jintao's 'chief brains truster' for foreign policy. Mark Leonard, ed., *China 3.0* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2012), 318.

<sup>64</sup> Jisi Wang, 'China's Search for a Grand Strategy - a Rising Great Power Finds Its Way', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011; Jisi Wang, 'China's Search for Stability with America', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Jisi Wang, Interview by Yoichi Kato, 'China deserves more respect as a first-class power', *The Asahi Shimbun*, October 5, 2012.

<sup>66</sup> Interviews with SIS scholars by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Jifang Zan, 'A new series of books presents Chinese scholars' assessment of world affairs and China's role in them', *Beijing Review*, February 1, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Jisi Wang, 'International Relations Theory and the Study of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Chinese Perspective', in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice*, eds. Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 481.

succeed. Only after our mainstream value system were completely constructed could we talk about establishing a universally acceptable Chinese IR Theory.<sup>69</sup>

SIS's Associate Dean Wang Yizhou is leading another research team at Beida in conceptualizing new concepts for Chinese diplomacy. He is a critic of the former 'IR theory with Chinese characteristics' project and a prudent observer of the current 'Chinese school' movement. Yet since China is now emerging as a great nation that will help in constructing the world, Wang sees the need for Chinese scholars to provide 'abstract theoretical ideas and guidance about how to integrate China's own interests with world peace, sustainability, development, and an orientation for great-nation relations.'<sup>70</sup> Wang, therefore, strives towards building a new theory to reflect China's diplomatic concept and systematic world outlook.

To date, Wang has published two key volumes introducing the concept of 'creative involvement' (*Chuangzaoxing jieru*) which advocates China playing a more active role in international affairs to match its rapid rise. His work deals with big questions such as how China can provide public goods, how it can learn from other global powers, and how to build up China's own identity.<sup>71</sup> Like Wang Jisi, Wang Yizhou also recommends modifying Deng Xiaoping's dictum of '*Taoguang Yanghui*' (keeping a low profile) and the long-standing 'non-intervention' principle for the country to actively play a bigger role and voluntarily get involved in international affairs. In his view, China's 'creative involvement' has three core elements: first, it should operate under the international legitimacy framework; second, it must be carried out with great caution, e.g. only in cases concerning China's vital national interests; third, it stresses more on soft power (diplomacy and economic assistance) rather than military force.<sup>72</sup> As he self-describes the nature of his work:

'Creative involvement' is a new kind of thinking in China's foreign policy. It is neither a systematic ideological doctrine nor a logical assumption nor a traditional theory of international relations or diplomacy. Instead, it is a guiding thread somewhere between a metaphysical theory and an exemplified interpretation of policy.<sup>73</sup>

At present, Wang Yizhou is working on the last volume of his 'Creative Involvement' trilogy series. It focuses on further covering diplomatic innovation and related domestic political and social dimensions in the belief that 'China can influence the world by changing itself.'<sup>74</sup> His work has been praised by many scholars i.e. Wang Fan and Zhang Zhizhou who see it as a Chinese contribution to de-Westernization of international scholarship.<sup>75</sup>

### ***The Universalists' orientation towards integrating with global scholarship***

As can be seen, there are many faces of an emerging 'Chinese Dream' in IR Theory. Despite such 'different dreams', these scholars do share the 'same bed' – they all attempt

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<sup>69</sup> Jisi Wang, *Zhongguo Guoji Guanxi Lilun Yanjiu De Tedian, Wenti, he Kunnan*, (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Hung-jen Wang, *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship*, (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 23.

<sup>71</sup> Yizhou Wang, *Chuangzaoxing Jieru: Zhongguo Waijiao Xin Quxiang* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2011); Yizhou Wang, *Chuangzaoxing Jieru: Zhongguo Zhi Quanjie Juese De Shengcheng* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Ying Ding, 'New Direction for China's Diplomacy', *Beijing Review*, March 8, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Yizhou Wang, 'Creative involvement: a new direction in Chinese diplomacy' in Leonard, *China 3.0*, 109.

<sup>74</sup> Ying Ding, 'China's Evolving Global Role', *Beijing Review*, October 24, 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

to bring the Chinese perspectives into global knowledge. Yet, there is also another dream which is less vocal and provocative in manner and more sophisticated in substance - to produce qualified knowledge in Western style theorizing. Professors Zhang Ruizhuang from Nankai University and Tang Shiping from Fudan University are representatives of this approach. These scholars are not actively involved in the current Chinese IRT debate, believing it is of little value (and, indeed, a waste of time) if there is no real progress made.

Zhang Ruizhuang, as the only Chinese (PhD) student of Kenneth Waltz, has pursued his main academic interests in applying Waltz's theory to empirical studies. He does not regard the English School highly and thinks it not a qualified IR theory.<sup>76</sup> He is therefore not interested in the Chinese IRT project although he has not openly written against it. In the 2013 meeting of China's Association of International Studies, Zhang emphasizes that first and foremost Chinese scholars should not try to 'propose new theories simply from a place of impetuosity or impatience to see progress in the field.'<sup>77</sup> Zhang also built his reputation as an independent thinker and constructive critic of Chinese foreign policy. His latest book titled '*Bu Hexie de Shijie*' (the Unharmonious World) applied structural realism in explaining and predicting China's Foreign Policy amid its growing power competition with the US. It actually challenges both the party line and the dominant discourse of Chinese IR on a 'new type of great power relationship' and 'harmonious world'.<sup>78</sup>

Tang Shiping meanwhile is one of the few Chinese theorists that have published intensively theoretical work in English that transcends existing mainstream theories. After a number of publications on defensive realism, a theory of institutional change, and attribution theory, Tang recently published a sophisticated volume on 'The Social Evolution of International Politics'. Largely influenced by his prior educational background in biology (PhD), Tang borrows Darwin's theory of biological evolution into IR to explain the evolutionary system of world politics from an offensive realist world (between 1648 and 1945) to a defensive realist world (post 1945). He also suggests the course towards a more rule-based international system while ruling out the possibility and desirability of a 'world state' or 'world society' utopia.<sup>79</sup> By examining the social evolution of international politics, Tang argues that mainstream IR theories are 'time sensitive' because they emerge and best explain world politics in different historical epochs. In this light, we need to rethink the many great debates in IR, particularly that between offensive and defensive realism. Tang's work, despite its remaining shortcomings, has been praised by Barry Buzan who notes that 'quality big thinking like this does not come along often.'<sup>80</sup>

In short, the Chinese IRT debate has shaped the research practices of Chinese scholars quite clearly with a number of theorizing endeavors to realize their theoretical claims. What seems to be interesting is that the debate has impacted scholars in different ways and for different purposes. Why is that the case and what are the underlying factors that are actually driving scholars in their course towards theoretical innovation?

### **What drives changes? An interpretation from the sociology of knowledge approach**

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<sup>76</sup> I thank Peng Lu for this observation.

<sup>77</sup> Li Mao, 'China Should Speak Its Own Language, Scholars Say at IR Meeting', *Chinese Social Sciences Today*, no. 473, July 10, 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Ruizhuang Zhang, *Bu Hexie De Shijie* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2010).

<sup>79</sup> Shiping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 110-47.

<sup>80</sup> Barry Buzan, Review of *The Social Evolution of International Politics*, by Shiping Tang, *International Affairs* 89, no. 5 (2013): 1304.

Ian Johnston once argued that the turn towards Western IRT in China in the 1990s was largely thanks to three factors: the return of Western trained scholars; the growth in translations of Western IR works; and the rise to journal and book series editorship of a key group of younger IR scholars in Beijing and Shanghai.<sup>81</sup> Arguably, the current turn towards Chinese IR theory has also been facilitated by very similar factors. Whilst Western theories remain dominant in Chinese IR discourse, three causes have contributed to indigenous theorizing of Chinese IR academia: a) the socialization of returning Western trained scholars in the intellectual and political environment in China; b) the growing reliance on China's own sources as the result of the heightened awareness among Chinese academia about their identity as 'knowledge producer'; and c) the role of the 'gate-keepers' who control institutional resources and access to funding and publications in shaping research agenda. In a sense, institutional and social factors do intrude in the establishment of knowledge of Chinese scholars. This is seen in a remark by a 'Chinese school' proponent:

Those who produce any particular theory have different background (nationality/concerns/experience etc) in shaping their own research question. When they try to answer it, they incorporate their own experience into theory building. People who produce theories are social animals in a social world in the sense that their interests and concerns impact on their theorizing and theoretical efforts.<sup>82</sup>

Drawing on this logic, I will identify what these intruding factors are and reconstruct the condition under which such an intrusion is more likely in the case of Chinese IR.

#### ***Commitment to theory versus socialization of theoretical identity***

Leading Western trained scholars such as Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong, Chu Shulong, Tang Shiping, and Zhang Ruizhuang have been playing an important role in importing Western IRT and raising the awareness of scientific rigor in Chinese IR. To date, only Tang Shiping and Zhang Ruizhuang continue to strictly observe the logic of universalism and thus see no need for a Chinese IR theory to explain China's behavior. For Tang Shiping, China serves 'merely as a data point' in his theorizing.<sup>83</sup> For Zhang Ruizhuang, China's rise does not necessarily differ from other cases in history and China's foreign relations can be explained by existing realist frameworks. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that commitment to theory and scientific objectivity is the main driver of Tang and Zhang's theorizing. The Chinese IRT debate and other China-related social factors have little, if not no, impact on their work.

Yet, reading the Chinese IRT literature people may wonder why other scholars like Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong – those who were also trained in the West, well aware of what social science is, and already schooled in IR theory end up calling for 'bringing China in' albeit in different ways. I argue that these scholars' theoretical identity has been socialized with their engagement into the intellectual and social environment in China. As leading Chinese theorists and public intellectuals, they have become 'speakers' of China in the international intellectual community where solid knowledge of Western IR is deemed as necessary but no longer sufficient to speak on equal terms with Western counterparts. This sentiment is exposed in a remark by Yan Xuetong:

For Chinese scholars, if you are doing research with American style theory you cannot surpass those American scholars... because all these theories are rooted in

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<sup>81</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *The State of International Relations Research in China: Considerations for the Ford Foundation* (Beijing: Ford Foundation, 2003), 34-35.

<sup>82</sup> Xiao Ren, Interview by this author, Shanghai, August 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Tang, in discussion with this author, Shanghai, August 2013.

Western culture. So you can only follow up, you cannot surpass that. So if you want to do a real achievement, you need to do something that the Westerners cannot understand.<sup>84</sup>

Similarly, Qin Yaqing is not satisfied with the indigenization of Western IR theory e.g. a Chinese-style Realism, Liberalism, or Constructivism because ‘the result would be a localized explanation that verifies Western theories.’<sup>85</sup> A distinct Chinese IRT, in this sense, is needed for the Chinese IR community to get rid of an inferiority complex of a backward society ‘learning and borrowing from existing theories of advanced societies to explain native phenomena.’<sup>86</sup>

For Yan Xuetong, despite his opposition to the ‘Chinese school’ idea and his claim for universally applicable theory, the Chinese nationality is ironically an intruding factor in his scholarship. This is seen in Yan’s simple and straightforward explanation for his theorizing on ancient Chinese thought:

Because I’m Chinese, my Western cultural background is lacking. It is difficult for me to understand that culture, because I did not grow up with it. But I’m familiar with the Chinese culture: I know international politics today are very different than two thousand years ago, but I also find some similarities between now and then. Perhaps we can get some important resources from ancient Chinese thought, to help us to develop theory—to help us to surpass Alexander Wendt.<sup>87</sup>

Yan also admits that national identity has influenced both his choice of research questions, and the direction of his research in that he only chooses questions that are ‘highly relevant to China’ and ‘central to China’s core interests.’<sup>88</sup> In fact, Yan is often described with a dual image - a political realist and a ‘nationalist’. The purpose of his ‘moral realism’ is therefore to provide a strategy for China to defeat America in the competition for global leadership by not only reducing the power gap with it but also providing ‘a better model for society than that given by the United States’.<sup>89</sup>

While Yan Xuetong’s motivation for theorizing is somewhat driven by his ‘theoretical nationalism’, Qin Yaqing’s theoretical orientation is largely impacted by his involvement with policy and politics. In fact, as Qin himself acknowledges, it was his experience as a Track Two practitioner, not a scholar, that distanced him away from his former ‘highly positivist, highly quantitative, and highly Waltzian’ approach.<sup>90</sup> Upon his return to China in late 1990s, Qin started to doubt realist arguments as he matched the theory with the conduct of China’s foreign policy. That caused him to shift to constructivism as he believes this better captures China’s foreign relations. His intensive involvement in East Asian Track-two diplomacy further convinced him of the misfit between the major Western IR paradigms and the practice of East Asian regional integration. Even constructivism, he argues, is not dynamic because after all, like realism,

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<sup>84</sup> Kristensen and Nielsen, ‘Constructing a Chinese International Relations Theory’, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Yaqing Qin, ‘The Possibility and Inevitability of a Chinese School of International Relations Theory’, in *China Orders the World: Normative Soft Power and Foreign Policy*, eds. William A. Callahan and Elena Barabantseva (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), 50.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Creutzfeldt, ‘Yan Xuetong’.

<sup>88</sup> Wang, *Rise of China*, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, 99.

<sup>90</sup> Creutzfeldt, ‘Qin Yaqing’, 3.



it still focuses on structure while missing process without which nothing happens. This is a turning point in his theorizing on relations and process.<sup>91</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that the turn towards indigenous theorizing by some returning Western trained scholars has been affected by external factors such as national identity and/or involvement with policy and politics. Nevertheless, commitment to theory and scientific rigor still matter given their prior training and solid knowledge of Western IR. The result of this socialization process is a mobilization for de-Westernification (at least in terms of hegemony) of the discipline via the inclusion of conceptually Western but Chinese oriented work. This integrative approach differentiates these scholars from the most radical accounts of Chinese IR – those who are more obsessed with Chinese uniqueness and exceptionalism (See Figure 1). That is not to say that there is no intrinsic values in the latter’s theoretical work but it does say that other factors overshadow their scientific objectivity.

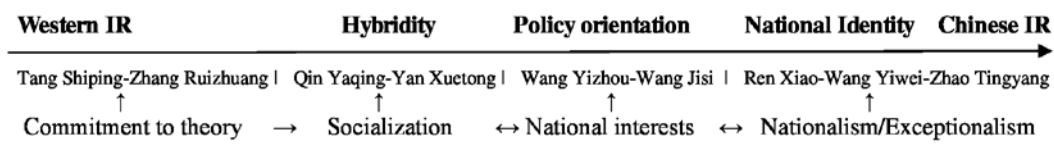


Figure 1. The underlying factors driving the Chinese IRT debates and practices

### **China’s Rise: national interests, identity, and exceptionalism**

A scholar has noted that if China were not a rising power, the Chinese IR discourse would not draw much attention.<sup>92</sup> It is true that there are some inherent causal relationship between material power and knowledge production as seen in the dominance of American IR in global scholarship. Yet apart from the power-knowledge linkages, the question of how China’s geopolitical rise actually shapes academic debates and practices is not adequately examined. My interpretation is that the rise of China has precipitated a redefinition of its national identity which in turn reshapes Chinese scholars’ personal identity into ‘knowledge producers’. The personal identity of Chinese scholars, however, not merely refers to their mentalities but also connections with society and politics.<sup>93</sup> So in order to understand the evolving identity of Chinese scholars, we need to examine the broader context in which they are living - the political environment, cultural values, and historical traditions of China. As Wang Hung-jen puts it, the attitudes, intentions, and emotions of Chinese scholars are inseparable from ‘their China’ – or their national identity and interests.<sup>94</sup>

In the course of constructing their self-identity, most Chinese theorists view China’s Foreign Policy and China’s rise in a different way than the general view of existing IRT and their Western counterparts. There has been a surge of Chinese counter-discourses on various issues of national concerns including China’s peaceful development, great power responsibility, strategic culture, soft power, public diplomacy, new type of

<sup>91</sup> Yaqing Qin, 'The Accidental (Chinese) Theorist', in *Claiming the International*, eds., Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney (London: Routledge, 2013), 161-3.

<sup>92</sup> Wang, *Rise of China*, 126.

<sup>93</sup> Yiwei Wang, 'China: Between Copying and Constructing', in *International Relations Scholarship around the World*, eds., Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Weaver (New York: Routledge, 2009), 116.

<sup>94</sup> Wang, *Rise of China*, 31.

great power relationship, etc. To an extreme, some scholars claim that China should undertake independent research because some of the questions related to the rise of China and Chinese Foreign Policy are best answered via Chinese scholarship.<sup>95</sup> This sentiment is evident in the most radical accounts – those who are portraying China not only as a different but also superior kind of great power. Obviously, there is a certain extent of ethnic nationalism and cultural exceptionalism at play here.

As a further matter, theorizing on Chinese pacifist culture and benign practice of diplomacy, whether intentionally or not, has been seen as serving the national interests of the PRC. As a recent work has noted, ‘in the 21st century, Confucianism and socialism are officially intertwined’, both for strengthening China’s soft power and lessening the repercussions of ‘China threat’ theory.<sup>96</sup> The turn towards Chinese IR Theory is also a by-product of the government’s efforts to innovate its social science system. Since the early 2000s, as a senior scholar notes, the Chinese IRT debate has become quiet and the previous critics have no longer raised their voices (although it does not mean that they were convinced) because ‘Beijing has decided that it is time for China to build up its own social science.’<sup>97</sup> In fact, many scholars based their calls for building a ‘Chinese school’ on Hu Jintao’s 2003 speech titled ‘Creating Outcomes for Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, Chinese vigour culture’ and his subsequent 2004 speech on how to make advancement in the study of philosophy and social sciences.<sup>98</sup> Following this orientation, in March 2011 the Planning Office of the National Social Science Foundation formulated the National 12th Five-Year Plan for Research in Philosophy and Social Science, which is oriented towards constructing a system for innovation in philosophy and social sciences in China.<sup>99</sup> When Xi Jinping came to power, he largely promoted the ‘Chinese Dream’ idea which is thus far vaguely defined as ‘the great rejuvenation of the China nation’ and this has already become a popular topic for Chinese academia. In 2013 the Central Propaganda Department Theory Bureau issued a notice to nation-wide research institutions to register research topics on deepening research on Marxist Theory and the Chinese Dream. The 15 suggested topics cover almost every aspect of the ‘Chinese Dream’ including its origin and contemporary background, opportunities and challenges, basic content and main characteristics, and how it is related to the current development of China.<sup>100</sup> As has been seen, these themes have generated a number of publications in IR including the ‘Chinese Dream in IR theory’ thesis.

While the government’s intellectual control have somewhat directed the orientation of Chinese IRT discourse, what seems to be encouraging is an emerging new base and a new flow in the Chinese IR system including diversified funding sources, theoretical inputs, greater academic freedom, and other social forces that helps Chinese IR

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<sup>95</sup> Xiao Ren, ‘Toward a Chinese School of International Relations?’, in *China and the New International Order*, eds. Gungwu Wang and Yongnian Zheng (London: Routledge 2008), 306; Honghua Men, ‘Huigui Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu De Zhongguo Zhongxin, Jia Qi Lilun Yu Shijian De Qiaoliang,’ *Jiaoxue yu yanjiu*, no. 11 (2005).

<sup>96</sup> Chih-yu Shih and Jiwu Yin, ‘Between Core National Interest and a Harmonious World: Reconciling Self-Role Conceptions in Chinese Foreign Policy’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 1 (2013): 68.

<sup>97</sup> Interview by this author, Shanghai, August 2013.

<sup>98</sup> Xiao Ren, ‘Zou Ziji Fazhan Zhi Lu: Zhenglun Zhong De ‘Zhongguo Xuepai’,’ *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu*, no. 2 (2009); Kejin Zhao, ‘Zhongguo Dalu Guoji Guanxi Lilun Yanjiu Sishi nian’, *Dongya Yanjiu*, no. 1 (2007).

<sup>99</sup> Ping Ren, ‘Systematic Innovation, Comprehensive Development and Going Global: Some Thoughts on the Construction of an Innovation System for Philosophy and Social Sciences in China During the ‘12th Five-Year Plan’ Period’, *Social Sciences in China* 33, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>100</sup> National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Science, <http://www.npopss-cn.gov.cn/n/2013/1024/c221360-23311531.html>

to gradually move beyond the Party-line. A distinguished professor has shared his insightful observations about the scholarly-policy linkages and the diversification of scholars' academic choices that have helped pluralized the agendas of Chinese academia:

As people who have had the chance to join government's committees, we can on the one hand clearly see the Government's intentional efforts to include some ideological traditional thinking to encourage, for example, Marxist ideological school or [other] ideological traditional agendas. However... the new development means that more and more sources, more and more initiatives come up from other directions such as from large companies, from localities, from the society, from rich millionaires, and other foundations etc. If you observe the development of Chinese IR in 1990s, you [would conclude that] the choices and the alternatives were narrower then. But now it becomes more diverse.<sup>101</sup>

The pluralization of these material and organizational resources together with scholars' growing self-confidence, mobility, and quest for independent inquiry may be the centrifugal forces that give the future of Chinese IR scholarship impetus for further development. This trend towards diversification of ideas and growing academic independence, however, entails an identity crisis and a risk of getting lost in that 'scholars are losing direction for further development, and that they are seemingly lost in establishing common language for communication and the inner energy and emotion for debate', as Prof. Wang Yizhou notes:

The situation is like we are going from a poor land to a deep forest. In the poor land you see nothing but if you go deeper and deeper into the forest you see many trees but there is no light and no right way (North or South, East or West) to go. People just talk about themselves with little interest in what others are thinking and talking about. Many people just want to pursue areas or issue-specific studies rather than doing theoretical research.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has examined the actual practices of the Chinese IRT debate, manifested in the five movements towards theoretical innovation. An interesting finding is that the Chinese IRT debate has exerted an unequal impact on the practices of scholars given their diverse training and institutional background. In fact, different approaches towards theoretical innovation in China have been shaped by very different causes. At one end of the spectrum, the 'universalist' scholars are genuinely committed to theoretical rigor and scientific objectivity. At the other end, the most radical accounts of Chinese IRT are largely driven by their ethnic identity, cultural exceptionalism, and national interests. Somewhere in between – the pro-Chinese IRT Western trained scholars – project a hybridization of Western and Chinese learning as the result of their socialization into the Chinese contexts. Intertwined with the overarching ideological and political environment in China, these factors have pulled the Chinese IRT debate in the direction of attaining a general consensus on the need to construct indigenous IR theory. Yet they differ on what pathways must be followed to achieve that end. This explains why theorizing in China has taken various and, at times, seemingly contradictory forms.

Given China's authoritarian political system, the attempt to construct Chinese IR Theory inevitably raises questions of credibility. How to balance theoretical integrity and

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<sup>101</sup> Interview by this scholar, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>102</sup> Wang, Interview by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

policy-relevance, therefore, will be a headache for Chinese academia in the future. Moreover, the fact that the Chinese IRT discourses are concentrating mainly on China's own sources but with little if not no interest in a pan-regional theory or other national paradigms (e.g. Japanese or Korean schools) suggests that this academic pursuit is quite 'nationalistic'. More worryingly, is there indeed a sense of 'chauvinism' or 'Sino-centrism' in that even an emerging pan-regional/East Asian paradigm must start with a Chinese theory or must be drawn on China's resources? As Professor Wang Yizhou has noted, during this transitional period of the Chinese IR community 'how to find your own thinking identity, how to find China's own unique contribution at the same time to learn from each other and learn from the other countries will be a challenge for Chinese IR.'<sup>103</sup>

As has been the case with Western IR, critical debates are vital for theorizing. China's IR community is currently on this trajectory, struggling between dependence on Western knowledge and endeavouring to develop its own distinct frameworks. The dynamics of the Chinese IR theory debate therefore not only lies in the diverse visions for building a Chinese IR theory but also how to harmonize the 'Chinese essence' (*ti*) and the 'Western function' (*yong*) in constructing new knowledge. As China's national identity as a great power continues to deepen with its continuing rise and the growing confidence among the Chinese IR community, it is likely that this theoretical debate will continue to dominate Chinese IR literature. The pursuit of a distinct Chinese brand in IRT has also attracted the increasing contribution of many other Sinophone and Western scholars.<sup>104</sup> There has been calls for the current 'Chinese school' (*Zhongguo xuepai*) label to be replaced by a more broadly based brand like a 'Greater China school' (*Zhonghua xuepai*) for in-depth collective 'brainstorming'.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, notwithstanding its remaining flaws, the Chinese IRT movement should be seen as an academic movement that reflects the growing self-reflexivity of a non-Western IR that to some extent would enrich the sociology of a perceived Western-centric discipline.

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<sup>103</sup> Wang, Interview by this author, Beijing, September 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Jiangli Wang and Barry Buzan, 'The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations: Comparisons and Lessons', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* (2014): 44-5.

<sup>105</sup> Yiwei Wang, Interview by this author, Beijing, September 2013.