

# Development of International Relations theory in China: progress through debates

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## Abstract

The development of International Relations theory (IRT) in China has been framed by three debates since 1979. The first was about China's opening up to the outside world. It started with the question of whether the world was characterized by 'war and revolution' or 'peace and development' between orthodox and reformist scholars and continued to focus on China's interest between orthodox scholars and the newly rising Chinese realists. It resulted in a wide acceptance of the reformist argument that peace and development characterized our era and of the realist view that China was a normal nation-state and should have its own legitimate national interest. The second started in the early 1990s and centered on the better way of realizing China's national interest. It was between Chinese realists and liberals. While the former emphasized national power, the latter proposed the alternative approach of international institutions. The third debate was on China's peaceful rise. It evolved at the turn of the century, when all the three major American IRTs, realism, liberalism, and constructivism, had been

introduced into China and therefore the debate was more a tripartite contention. Realists believed that it was impossible for any major power to rise peacefully, while liberals and constructivists both supported the peaceful-rise argument. Liberals stressed more the tangible benefits derived from international institutions and constructivists explored more China's identity in its increasing interaction with international society. Although it was Chinese constructivists who explicitly discussed the identity issue, all the three debates and all the debating sides have reflected this century puzzle since the Opium War – China's identity vis-à-vis international society. These debates have helped push forward the IRT development in China and at the same time established Western IRT as the dominant discourse. A new round of debate seems likely to occur and may center on the question of the world order. This time it may help the newly burgeoning but highly dynamic Chinese IRT to develop and contribute to the enrichment of IRT as knowledge of human life.

## 1 Introduction

The development of International Relations theory (IRT) in China has been framed first of all by the challenging questions China has faced in its International Relations since 1978 when the reform was initiated. Should it open up to the rest of the world, how should it realize its national interest and can it rise peacefully and how? – these are the questions that have challenged China in the past three decades. Underlying all these specific questions is a more fundamental puzzle: the relationship between China, on the one hand, and the international system and international society, on the other. It is, in fact, a century puzzle for the Chinese nation since the Opium War in 1840. Who is the Chinese nation, what is China vis-à-vis the Western-dominated international system and how can China achieve its national goals of becoming a powerful and prosperous nation? These are the fundamental questions and major concerns of the Chinese International Relations (IR) community. It is the effort to find answers to them that constructs the Chinese IR discourse and provides the driving force for IR to develop in China.

The search for answers to the puzzle has been accompanied by a process of keen learning from Western IRT. The academic development of IR in China is usually divided into two phases since 1949 when the

People's Republic of China was founded: the first phase from 1949 to 1979, and the second from 1979 to the present. During the first 30 years, there was little academic debating because IR did not stand as an academic discipline and had little sense of contending schools of thought. Most of the thinking related to IR was about strategies and foreign policies put forward by political leaders, such as the united front strategy, the leaning-to-one-side policy and the three-world theory.<sup>1</sup> IR as an academic discipline in China did not begin to develop until 1978 when China adopted the reform and opening-up policy and Chinese IR scholars began to see the disciplinary developments in other countries. The second 30 years have witnessed a rapid professionalization of IR in China, facilitated by a tenacious effort to introduce IRT from abroad (Qin, 2007). As a result, the Chinese IR community has heavily drawn on Western IRTs, especially those imported from the United States. At the same time, Chinese society has become increasingly pluralistic. Open debates have been unfolding among scholars of different views and understandings of the international politics. It is better therefore to focus the discussion of IRT development on the debates during the second 30 years, that is, from 1979 to the present.

The combination of these two factors – the century puzzle and the Western IRT influence – has thus resulted in a peculiar pattern of the IR discourse in China. It is mainly the employment of Western IRT for the explanation of questions China faces in its International Relations. There have been three debates among Chinese IR scholars. The first concerns whether China should continue to stand in isolation, or open up and enter the international community. It started in the early 1980s between orthodox scholars and reformist intellectuals, went on mainly through the 1980s, and continued into the 1990s between orthodox scholars and the then newly rising realists. It focused first on what characterized our era as well as International Relations and then on whether China's interest was ideologically or nationally determined. The second one is about how to better realize China's national interest and the contention was carried out between realists and liberals. Material power and international institutions constituted the two alternative approaches. It was

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the major topic during the 1990s, reached the climax around the century, and has continued well into the twenty-first century. The third one is around the theme of ‘peaceful rise’: whether China can rise peacefully and how it will not repeat the violent road of previous rising powers and avoid their mistakes in history. By the first few years of the twenty-first century, a tripartite configuration had been formed in the Chinese IR community, roughly corresponding to the three mainstream IRTs of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the United States. Chinese liberals and constructivists have argued for the possibility and desirability of China’s peaceful rise, while realists have expressed their belief in the impossibility of such a rise for any major power in the anarchic international system. It started actually in the late 1990s, overlapping with the second debate, but became a focal point in the early 2000s. It is still going on.

These debates of the IR community have been closely related to the 30 years’ development of China itself, reflecting different ideas about how China should realize its national and international goals. Since these debates have been providing the driving force for the growth of IR as a discipline in China, I will discuss them in more detail in the following sections. I also argue that these debates are essentially related to the fundamental question: China’s identity vis-à-vis international society, which shapes China’s definition of its interest as well as its international behavior.

## 2 The first debate: a proletarian revolutionary or a normal nation-state

The first debate concentrated on the question of whether China should continue to be a proletarian revolutionary or should become a normal nation-state in the international system. It coincided with the strategic choice China was making at the time (Zhang, 2002). Before the reform, China was more a revolutionary, proclaiming to engage in international proletarian struggle against global capitalism and imperialism. In 1978, China decided that economic development should be the priority of the nation as well as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP emphasized economic growth and made it clear that beginning from 1979 ‘the priority of the whole party should be shifted to socialist modernization’ (Documentary Research Center of the CCP Central

Committee, 1997, p. 17). It was a fundamental shift of China's national goal, implying that China would stop taking class struggle as the most important task and replace it with the development of the national economy. Accordingly, China's foreign policy should aim at creating and maintaining a favorable international environment so that China would be able to concentrate itself on economic development.

The debate started with an initial question: how to understand the overall international situation. To put it simply, was it war or peace that characterized the era and the International Relations in our world? If war dominated International Relations, then China should continue to prepare for war. Otherwise, it should go for non-military development. The theoretical foundation for China before the reform to interpret the political life of the world had been Leninism, especially Lenin's argument that the world was in an era of war and revolution, meaning that imperialism was war and that only proletarian revolution could eliminate imperialist war (Lenin, 1967). In the post-1949 years, Lenin's theory informed the Chinese leaders and fitted well into China's understanding of the international situation, which was featured by the struggle between two ideologically contending forces represented by the socialist and the capitalist camps. Lenin's prophecy that imperialism was dying and socialism would win through struggle against capitalism was taken as the essential feature of the world and the era. Following this theory, Chinese leaders before the reform had believed a world war was inevitable and that 'Countries want independence, nations want liberation and peoples want revolution' (Zhou, 1975; Mao, 1994). It was then logical to mobilize the whole Chinese nation to be prepared for war and for disasters. Orthodox scholars therefore held this view firmly well after the reform and opening policy was initiated.

If our world should continue to be in an era of 'war and revolution', a life-and-death struggle between the two worlds divided by ideological difference would be politically justified. China was a proletarian revolutionary. Such an identity should require that it could not devote the major resources to economic development and should not embrace the West-dominated international society and the capitalist world. What was the characteristic feature of our era and our world became the debating topic and whether it was an era of 'war and revolution' or one of 'peace and development' divided the orthodox and the reformist scholars in the 1980s immediately after the reform and opening up.

Since the ‘war and revolution’ argument was believed as Lenin’s theory and therefore was politically correct, it was not easy to argue against it when Leninism was the orthodox theory in the country. Even in the historic communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the CCP, it still argued that ‘the serious danger of war continues to exist’ (Documentary Research Center of the [CCP Central Committee, 1997](#), p. 19). Reform-minded scholars, however, began to engage orthodox ones in an open debate, for without a re-evaluation of the era and the international situation it would be impossible to open up. The journal of *Reference on World Economics and Politics* (the predecessor of *World Economics and Politics*) published 15 articles from 1982 to 1983, focusing on whether Lenin’s theory on imperialism continued to be valid. Two typical titles of the articles are ‘The Notion of “Dying Imperialism” should no longer be used’ on the one hand, and ‘The Notion of “Dying Imperialism” should be upheld’ on the other, reflecting two opposite views on interpreting Lenin’s theory. Overall, those articles showed differences between the two debating sides in three aspects. The first is whether capitalism was dying. One side argued that capitalism had strong adaptive capability and therefore would continue to exist for a long time in history, while the other side believed that capitalism was dying as it was becoming imperialism, especially when the world was full of desire for revolution against global capitalism. The second is whether war continued to dominate the world’s political life. One side held that war no longer constituted the defining feature of the world and that peace had become a common desire of the majority of nations, while the other side contended that war continued to be the greatest danger due to the aggressive nature of capitalism/imperialism and that peace was mere wishful thinking. The third is what the priority for nations in the world was in general. One side believed that development should be the priority, for war was no longer the greatest threat; while the other side insisted that revolution was the priority, arguing that if economic development was emphasized over the danger of world war, historical mistakes would be made (issues of *World Economics and Politics*, 1982–85).

This debate was highly relevant to China’s international strategy. Political leaders were cautious, but moved step by step toward the argument that our era was one of ‘peace and development’. This is reflected mainly by the gradual evolution of the Chinese leaders’ view on systemic war. For example, Deng Xiaoping said in 1977 that world war ‘could be

postponed' (Deng, 1983, p. 77). The CCP's Twelfth Congress in 1982 reiterated this judgment, but did not completely abandon the argument about the danger of war. Its report said that the danger of world war got more serious because of the rivalry of the two superpowers. Experience had shown, however, that people all over the world, through joint efforts, would be able to disturb their strategic competition (Hu, 1982). In 1985, Deng argued, 'It is possible to have no large-scale world war in a relatively long period of time and it is hopeful that world peace can be maintained' (Deng, 1993, p. 127). He also said in the same year that the major issues of the world were peace and development (Deng, 1993, p. 104). In 1987, the report of the Thirteenth Party Congress put forward the judgment that the peace and development are the two major themes of the world and officially based China's international as well as domestic strategy on this judgment (Zhao, 1987).

Although there was no official announcement about which side had won the debate, it was a clear fact that reformists had got the upper hand. The report of the Thirteenth Party Congress, which usually puts forward the most authoritative guidelines for policy making, expressed explicitly the Party's view on this issue. Once peace and development were perceived as the dominant feature of the world situation, it opened the door for China to get into international society and concentrate itself on economic growth through international cooperation. Successive reports of the Party Congress since 1982 had reiterated that peace and development characterized our era (for example, Jiang, 1992, p. 186; 1997, p. 447). The most significant result of the debate was that the understanding of the dominant feature of our era as 'peace and development' and the adoption of the independent foreign policy of peace enabled China to adopt the 'no enemy assumption', which paved the way for it to be getting into the international community.

Hardly had the notion of peace and development been accepted, when a closely related question emerged as the theme of the continued debate. It was China's interest. If China was a proletarian revolutionary, it should take the interest of the world proletariat as its own interest, for the proletariat knows no national boundaries. Otherwise, it should have its own interest and take such interest as the cornerstone for its foreign policy. Thus the debate continued, but this time it was between orthodox scholars and the newly rising Chinese realists.

The early 1990s saw the first wave of translating Western IR classics, which seemed to show a special preference for realist works. Hans J. Morgenthau's monumental work, *Politics among Nations*, was translated and published in Chinese in 1990, which was the first Chinese version of the mainstream Western IRT and attracted intensive attention in the Chinese IR community. Immediately afterward, the Chinese edition of Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* and *Theory of International Politics* and Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* were published in 1991, 1992, and 1994, respectively, pushing realism to the most conspicuous height in China's IR studies. Publications based on the realist assumptions increased rapidly and ranked as the number two immediately after orthodox Marxism–Leninism (Qin, 2008). Realism-oriented Chinese scholars began to engage the more orthodox intellectuals in the debate over China's interest in the 1990s.

As an important legacy of the Marxist ideology, socio-economic classes were considered the key players and the unit of analysis in international politics as well as politics in general. Due to the overwhelming influence of this orthodox tradition in a China that had just come out of the cultural revolution, many in China believed that national interest, if there was something like that, was first of all the interest of the ruling class (Zhang, 1989, p. 58; Gao, 1992, p. 69). Since the ruling class controlled the state power, it sought its own interest and defined its interest as the interest of the nation-state. Bourgeois states, for example, pursued their economic interest overseas simply for the interest of the bourgeois class inside these countries. Furthermore, this logic was applied to international politics, where countries were divided into two categories: bourgeois states and proletarian states. It was argued that these two kinds of states had opposite goals and served opposite classes. China's fundamental identity was proletarian in nature and therefore the interest of the proletariat over the world was also China's national interest, which conflicted fundamentally with that of the bourgeois states such as the United States and West European countries.<sup>2</sup>

Essentially, this argument was a continuation of the view that characterized the world as a place for war and revolution. Substantial

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2 It should be noted that in the 1970s the Soviet Union became the most formidable enemy of China and that Mao again resorted to the 'united front' strategy, taking West European countries as those that could be united, even though those were not friends.



international cooperation, therefore, was impossible because of the fundamental difference in national interest and state goals. Newly rising realists in China represented a very different view against this orthodox theory. Contrary to the orthodoxy doctrine, realist views were actively and eagerly presented in the Chinese IR community (Yan, 1996), among which Yan Xuetong's book *Zhongguo Guojia Liyi Fenxi (An Analysis of China's National Interest)* was representative. These scholars followed largely the realist tradition of E.H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau, making three important counterarguments in general. First, national interest was not the interest of the state, class, or dynasty. It was not ideologically defined either. Rather, it was the interest of a nation-state *per se*, shared by the ruling and the ruled and including security, economic, political, and cultural interests. Second, national interest was an independent variable. It was not necessarily dependent on and consistent with international interest or world interest. Some of the national interests might agree with those of the world and some might not. Third, national interest came first. A nation-state did and should place its national interest above everything else. If the national interest and world interest were congruent, the nation-state would support the world interest. Otherwise it would not and should not.

The idea that national interest should be the primary reason for a country's international strategy and the guideline for its international behavior was widely accepted by the mid- and late-1990s. Supported by many, it became the most discussed concept in academic publications, from defining the theoretical meaning of national interest to identifying the more specific interests of China. This debate crowned realism in China's IR community. In fact, 'national interest' has since appeared again and again in the declared policy and official documents in China.

The first debate in fact began to touch a more fundamental question, albeit implicitly: China's identity vis-à-vis the international system. It is in this respect that the debate was beginning to find an answer to the long-standing question puzzling China: whether it was and should be a member of the international proletarian camp or a normal nation-state in the international system. A world of war and revolution should have firmly placed China as a revolutionary in the international system, while a world of peace and development would provide an opportunity for China to be a normal member nation-state of the international system. As a normal nation-state, China naturally took the term 'national

interest' as both necessary and legitimate. The theoretical debate helped China to choose the latter. Since realism played a major role in the debate, it became the first established Western IRT in the Chinese IR community and would continue to be one of the most influential IRTs up to the present.

### 3 The second debate: a Hobbesian power or a Lockean state

The second debate is on China's national interest. Since it had been widely and firmly accepted that national interest was of paramount importance by the mid-1990s, then what China's national interest was and how to better realize it constituted the main questions for the debate. It was between the victorious realists and the emerging liberals, the former stressing the significance of power in an anarchic international system and the latter advocating the importance of cooperation through international institutions.

A most significant event in the Chinese IR community in the late 1990s and early 2000s was perhaps the introduction of liberal IR classics into China. A series of liberal works were translated and published in China between 2001 and 2002, including Keohane's *After Hegemony* and *Neorealism and Neoliberalism*, Keohane and Nye's *Power and Interdependence* (3rd edn) and Rosenau's *Governance without Government*. Following it was the dramatic increase in research products by Chinese IR scholars. It became quickly the strongest rival of realism. The distribution of the research products shows that liberalism and realism became two major schools to guide theory-related research in China. The publications based on the two schools accounted for 71% of the total in the IR field in China. Liberalism showed a particularly strong momentum: 37% of IRT-related articles published in the 1990s were liberally oriented, surpassing realism and other IRTs. It is thus reasonable to say that this period was a booming time for liberalism. *Dangdai Guoji Zhengzhi Xilun (An Analysis of Contemporary International Politics)* by Wang Yizhou played an important role in introducing liberalism. Although all strands of liberal IRTs have been explored during this period of time, it is especially worth noting that neoliberal institutionalism was most influential in its category (Wang, 1995).

The second debate, as mentioned above, unfolded in the 1990s and centered on China's national interest. It had one theme and two foci. The theme was China's national interest, and the foci were: what was China's most important national interest and how China should realize it. Recognizing the importance of national interest, Chinese realists and liberalists began to argue on the ordering of China's specific national interests and put forward their understanding of how China should realize its key interests and reach its national and international goals. More fundamentally, they in fact engaged each other in a competition as to what road China should take.

Realist-oriented scholars took the power approach. They stressed traditional security as the most important national interest in general and the pressure derived from the structure of the international system as the most dangerous security threat. They placed much emphasis on political and military security and held that the greatest threat to China came from the power gap in the international structure, which, as defined by Kenneth Waltz, was considered a crucial factor for China's security. It was argued that American hegemony and other major powers' effort to oppose the hegemony constituted the greatest contradiction of international politics (Yan, 2000). The outstanding security issues China faced, such as Taiwan and Tibet, were seen at least partly as the hegemonic efforts on the part of the United States to prevent China from rising as a major power first in the region and then in world politics. Events in other areas of the world were also interpreted as examples derived from the structural factors in international politics. As it was said after NATO's military action in Kosovo, 'If the NATO should succeed in its plot of dismembering Yugoslavia, the United States and its allies would use this strategy in Asia-Pacific and other regions.' The argument went on, 'The geopolitical need of the United States requires that it keeps the *de facto* separation of Taiwan, the Nansha Islands, and then Tibet from the mainland, for such separation will satisfy the long-term strategy of the United States and its allies for global hegemony' (Zhang, 1999, pp. 2 and 3).

As for the question of how to realize China's most important and urgent interest, the realist argument logically led to the conclusion that material power was the most important means to gain and maintain national interest. Some argued that the most serious security issue was national sovereignty and that military security continued to be the

primary goal of China as a nation-state. Thus, for Chinese realists, strengthening of the military might and political power was the surest way for China to maintain its national security and realize its national and international goals. It was true that realists agreed that for China, the most urgent interest was to develop its national economy, but it was only meaningful if the economic capabilities could be translated into military might. The purpose of such development was to increase China's overall power, especially its political and military capabilities so as to better handle the real threat, the threat from the power gap in the structure of the international system. For these scholars, Waltz 'has identified the most important and enduring structural factors and his structural realism has both historic and contemporary significance' (Wu, 2003, pp. 217–218).

Chinese liberals did not argue against the concept of national interest in the first place, but they disagree with the realists as to what China's most urgent national interest was and how to better realize it. As realist scholars attracted much attention to the structure-derived and traditional threat to China's security, the more liberal-minded scholars began to remind people that over-emphasis on structural conflict and traditional security may lead to a real conflict-ridden international environment and that world security, rather than mere national security, was also important (Su, 1997). Contrary to realists, Chinese liberals pointed out that security threats were multiple and that while traditional security threat continued to exist, non-traditional security had been becoming increasingly more formidable. Mainly through three aspects, they argued against the realist view on security and threat. First, the development of China's national economy was taken as the most important national interest of the country. Traditional security continued to be serious, but its seriousness was much reduced as compared with that of the Cold War years. It coincided with the shift of the national goal by Deng Xiaoping's reform. Second, they believed that the world had entered a new era, the one of globalization. It was a world with new contradictions and threats, new actors and activities, which were qualitatively different from those during the Cold War years. Third, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the US–Soviet bipolarity made structural factors and military threat less serious. As a result, transnational threats and global insecurity had gained more weight. Terrorism, environmental deterioration, refugees, drug smuggling, and so on were seen as formidable threats to

security. Fourth, new threats were often transnational in nature and no country could solve them single-handedly (Su, 2002).

Joining in and integrating into international institutions were the keys of the policy proposal Chinese liberals made for better and more rationally realizing the nation's most important interest. Faced with China's reality and influenced by neoliberal institutionalism around the year of 2000, liberal scholars in China began to introduce and advocate the institutional approach (Wang, 1995; Liu, 1997; Qin, 1998; Guo, 1999; Men, 1999; Su, 2000, 2002). Their argument focused on several dimensions related to international institutions and China's development. First, China should join international institutions, for only by doing so could China realize its national and international goals in the most cost-efficient way. International institutions and organizations could provide China with the best opportunity to take advantage of globalization and greatly reduce China's opportunity cost in the process of opening up to the outside world. Second, international institutions would exert positive influence on China's international behavior. In the process of joining international institutions, China engaged itself in communicating, imitating, and learning, and as a result, China would pay more attention to multilateralism and participate more actively in multilateral activities. Third, international institutions interacted with China's domestic institutions and influenced the latter's domestic political processes.

Among the three dimensions, the first one, China's integrating into the existing international institutions, had successfully become a most influential idea in terms of policy relevance. Between 1998 and 2005, the leading IR journal in China, *World Economics and Politics*, published 89 articles discussing international institutions. In reality, this happened to be the period when China joined most of the international organizations and multilateral international conventions, including the World Trade Organization (Qin, 2003; Johnston, 2008). If we say that realist scholars helped China to identify itself as a normal nation-state rather than a proletarian state, then liberally oriented scholars began to think about China's identity as a rational actor inside the existing international institutions.

As I discussed elsewhere, by the end of the 1990s, China's IR community had already introduced the most important works of realism and liberalism, which constituted the two major theoretical schools and policy positions (Qin, 2009). Both were influential. On the one hand, the

realist view that national interest rather than world revolution was the motivation of a state's international strategy and foreign policy had been generally accepted; on the other hand, international institutions were taken as a cost-efficient approach to benefit China. In sum, the 1990s witnessed a key academic debate around China's interest. It started with the question of what China's interest was and saw the rivalry between orthodox scholars, who insisted on the primacy of international proletarian interest, and the newly emerging realists, who stressed the national interest of China as a normal nation-state in an anarchic international system. It then came to the question of how to better realize China's national interest, which introduced the contention between Chinese realists and liberals. The former were worried most about the structural hindrance to China's growth and argued for strengthening political and military power first, while the latter encouraged China to join the international institutions for absolute gains and become a member of the international community. However, they implicitly agreed with each other on one important choice China had to make at the time. The realist view that national interest was of paramount importance in fact motivated China to bargain with the West on what they should trade off according to their respective national interest, while the liberal view urged China to integrate more into the international institutions for its own benefits. Both argued therefore for a continued and sustained opening-up policy.

A second debate established liberalism, mostly along the line of neo-liberal institutionalism, as a most influential IRT in the Chinese academic circles. Its strongest argument was that China's most important national interest was economic development and the most cost-efficient way to realize it was through integrating into the existing international institutions. Implicitly, Chinese liberals did touch upon the fundamental question of what China was vis-à-vis the international system. China should not only be a Hobbesian nation-state in an anarchical international jungle. It should be more a rational Lockean actor, joining and gaining in the international institutions by first accepting their rules and regulations. Liberalism has ever since been one of the most influential IRTs in China's academic circles, both in terms of academic products and of policy relevance.

## 4 The third debate: a revisionist challenger or a status quo power

The third debate was closely related to the ‘peaceful rise’ theme. Realists and liberals continued to argue along their respective theoretical assumptions. Constructivists joined the debate more in favor of the liberals, but went beyond the rationality argument and into the inquiry of China’s membership of international society.

The most conspicuous development in China’s IR at the turn of the century was the introduction of constructivism and its rapid spreading (Xue, 2006). There had been some discussion on constructivism during the previous period, but it attracted little attention from researchers as a school of IRT and it did not draw them to make relevant studies until 2000, when *Social Theory of International Politics* was translated into Chinese and published in China. The long preface written by Qin Yaqing, who was also the translator, started an upsurge in its application (Qin, 2000; Yuan, 2006). Fifteen research articles using constructivism were published in 2001, close to the 17 published articles of realism. In 2003, it surpassed liberalism and realism, boasting the publication of 34 articles. In 2007, 35 articles informed by constructivism were published, surpassing the 33 of realism, and fewer than the 44 of liberalism. A tripartite configuration composed of realism, liberalism, and constructivism emerged (Qin, 2008). This new development exerted a strong influence on China’s IRT development.

Against this theoretical backdrop, and as China was rising rapidly, the debate on China’s peaceful rise broke out. In the late 1990s, there was already an argument in the West that China would threaten the international order as it was growing in power. The most representative work was a book entitled *The Coming Conflict with China*, predicting the inevitable conflict between the United States and China (Bernstein and Munro, 1998). In addition, Samuel Huntington’s influential article, ‘Clash of Civilizations’, argued that the world would be caught in a conflict among different civilizations, especially between Christianity on the one hand and Islam and Confucianism on the other (Huntington, 1993). On the realist side, John Mearsheimer’s book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, implied that China, with rapid growing material power, would be inevitably the challenger in the international system (Mearsheimer, 2001; Qin and Mearsheimer, 2003). China, as a large

country so different ideologically, politically, and culturally, these scholars argued, is most likely to challenge the US leadership and constitute a dangerous destabilizing force in the international system.

The debate was initiated as a major IR topic in China by Zheng Bijian's short but influential speech in 2003, primarily as a response to the China threat theme. He said in his speech that China's road to a strong and prosperous power was a road of peace, a new path of 'peaceful rise'. He further argued that China would not repeat the road of previous rising powers, which had disrupted the international order, engaged themselves in violent expansion and started systemic war for world hegemony (Zheng, 2003, 2005).

Zheng's speech, especially the eye-catching term 'peaceful rise', started the debate among Chinese IR scholars. China's flagship academic journal, *Social Sciences in China*, organized a group of articles, reflecting the essence of the debate and the opposite views concerning China's rise (Yan *et al.*, 2004). All the major IRTs by this time have been introduced into China and therefore in the academic circles the debate has been somewhat structured around the three mainstream American IRTs (Qin, 2008). Realist scholars, together with strong nationalistic ones, argue against the view of peaceful rise. They have raised a sharp question: 'Can a sheep rise peacefully among a pack of wolves?' (Pan, 2005). They further argue that the 2500-year human history, both inside China and in the rest of the world, especially the history of the rising powers in the modern times, has demonstrated that there has been never such a thing as peaceful rise because the world follows the law of the jungle. 'Might is right' has always been the iron law and the one with the strongest coercive power has his say (Ni in Yan *et al.*, 2004, p. 58). Second, the existing hegemon will never allow the rising power to rise peacefully. China is still far from having a qualified and genuine rise and the hegemon, as well as other major powers, has already begun to contain it (Pan, 2005). Fourth, peaceful rise, even if adopted as a principal policy, does not mean non-use of military force (Yan in Yan *et al.*, 2004, p. 52). For them China should rely on its strong military power, giving up all illusions and preparing for war. Thus, for the toughest realists, peaceful rise is a mere wishful thinking, and for the modest realists, peaceful rise does not exclude use of force in international affairs.

Liberals, mainly following Robert Keohane's institutional approach, argue that China should get more integrated into the international



system and abide by international rules and norms. Wang Yizhou's book (Wang, 2003) and Su Changhe's article (Su, 2002) are representative of the Chinese liberal institutional approach. Three arguments have been made. First, cooperation reduces the possibility of a violent rise and international institutions provide effective instruments for international cooperation. As China takes economic development as its most important national interest, it should engage itself in international cooperation, for in a globalizing world no economy can develop successfully without cooperating with other economies as well as with the international economic system. Second, international institutions have a constraining function on members' behavior. China had already joined most of the international organizations, and the rules and regulations stipulated and embodied in these organizations are able to exert effective constraints on China's international behavior. Third, integrating into international institutions will influence China's domestic political processes, enabling China to reform and adjust its domestic legal and political policies in a more peaceful and cooperative way. They further argue that because China has, since the reform and opening up, benefited a great deal through integrating into the international system, notably the international economic system, there is no reason to believe that China would rise violently, disturbing the international order (Men, 2004).

Constructivists, who are mostly of the liberally oriented Wendtian strand (Wendt, 1999), have by now constituted a major camp in China's IR community. They basically agree with the liberals in the benefits China can gain and has gained from its integration into the international institutions, which in turn regulate China's international behavior. Chinese constructivists, however, go beyond the liberal emphasis on behavioral adjustment and place much more emphasis on China's membership of international society rather than of the mere international system. They argue that the three-decade process of integrating into international society has enabled China not only to benefit materially from such integration, but also allowed China to accept international norms and institutions. Qin Yaqing's article (Qin, 2003) makes a strong argument concerning the relationship between China and international society: China has become, from a revolutionary/revisionist state, a status quo power. Accordingly, China has been redefining its security interest from a pure political-military perspective to a comprehensive one and its

strategic culture from a more conflictual to a more cooperative one. As a result, this identity shift will reduce qualitatively the possibility of China's violent rise. Based on the case of the relationship between China and international society, Qin makes a more general statement: the more positively a state identifies itself with international society, the more cooperative its strategic culture is and the less zero-sum interpretation of security interest it embraces. Chinese constructivists have also studied China–US relations, pointing out that the hegemon and the rising power may not necessarily be enemies if they should construct their collective and shared identity in dealing with the common threats they face in a globalizing world (Liu, 1999). East Asian security has been studied with the conclusion that China and other nations in East Asia do not necessarily face a security dilemma because of the norms developed over years and based upon the region's culture, history, and tradition (Chen, 2002). In the final analysis, Chinese constructivists argue that China's peaceful rise will eventually rely on its identity as a responsible member of international society. Because of the effort made by constructivist scholars in China, ideas, identity, and international norms have become important research topics. Since the study of identity touches directly upon the century-long puzzle, it adds to the attractiveness of constructivist theories among Chinese IR scholars.

The debate is still going on. The international cooperationists, sustained by liberals and constructivists, seem to gain support in terms of policy relevance. International cooperation and peaceful development have been reiterated as the main principles of China's foreign policy and international strategy (Hu, 2007). In academic circles, the third debate goes deep into China's identity vis-à-vis the rest of the world. However, this time it is more about how to be a qualified member of international society. If the first debate helped solve the question of whether China was a proletarian revolutionary or a normal nation-state, and the second debate discussed more the question of whether China should be a Hobbesian or a Lockean actor, the third one definitely touches the fundamental question whether a rapidly growing China should be a violent rising power or a peaceful member of international society. Pushed by these debates, China's IR have been developing fast, producing a huge quantity of research products, and applying the major IRTs with contending perspectives and views of Chinese scholars.

## 5 Conclusion: toward a Chinese school of IRT

The last 30 years have witnessed a rapid development of IRT in China. Great progress has been made and several features are particularly worth noting. The first is that the theoretical debates have been closely related to the serious and practical questions China faces. For China and Chinese IR scholars alike, these questions are challenging as they have come one after another along with every step China has taken toward its integration into the international community. Furthermore, the debates, explicitly and implicitly, have an ontological deeper structure. It does not matter whether the specific debate is over national interest or peaceful rise, it concerns fundamentally who and what China is vis-à-vis either the international system or international society.

The 30 years have also seen the gradual establishment of IR as an independent academic discipline in China. China's IR used to be ideologically and politically dependent before the reform and opening up, having little sense about academic schools of thought and competition of ideas for knowledge production. Interpretation and justification of political and national leaders' strategic thinking and policy were the main tasks of professionals in this field (Zi, 1998, p. 4). The introduction of IRT from abroad has inspired the academic awareness. Remarkable progress has been made in translation of Western IRT classics, expansion of research programs, and production of more serious academic works. Different schools of IRT have competed with each other theoretically and empirically, shaping the configuration of a tripartite contention among realists, liberals, and constructivists.

Meanwhile, the 30 years' development of China's IRT also shows a fact: the domination of Western IRT, especially that of the United States. Statistics shows that most of the research works in the last 30 years have been using the three mainstream American IRTs – realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Qin, 2008), and the three debates discussed in this paper have been clearly shaped by these theories. It is paradoxical. On the one hand, Chinese IR scholars have made great efforts to establish an independent academic discipline by learning and introducing American IRTs, and they have been quite successful in this respect; but on the other hand, American IRTs have shaped and dominated the IR academic discourse in China. As the discipline has further developed,

Chinese scholars are getting increasingly unsatisfied with the mere learning and imitating of theories imported from abroad.

Hence the problem with the discipline as it is at present. A most serious concern expressed by the Chinese IR community is that there has been so far no Chinese IRT. Some Chinese scholars do believe that IRT can only have universal validity, arguing that IRT is scientific theory and that scientific theory recognizes no geographical, cultural, and national identity. Based upon this reasoning, they use American IRT categories to classify ancient Chinese philosopher-thinkers. Mencius, for example, is framed as an idealist (Xu, 2009, p. 6) and Xunzi as a realist (Yan, 2008, p. 135). However, most Chinese IR scholars are dissatisfied with such a situation, and have consciously striven for the birth and growth of a Chinese school of IRT.

It seems that the conditions for a Chinese IRT school are at least riper than before. More and more Chinese scholars are using Chinese experience and reality to test Western theory. In doing this, they have found that Western IRT sometimes fails to explain the behavior of China as well as other East Asian nations. For example, the ASEAN Way and East Asian regional integration processes have been marked by a kind of 'soft institutionalism', flexible, informal, and often non-binding, which, quite different from that of European regionalism, neo-institutionalism finds hard to explain (Acharya, 2001; Qin and Wei, 2007, pp. 7–15).<sup>3</sup> Second, a general consensus among Chinese scholars was reached in the mid-1990s on the possibility and desirability of building Chinese IRT, and the discussion since 2000 has focused more on how to build Chinese IRT than whether to develop Chinese IRT. The 'how-to' question tends to mark the very beginning of theory-innovation (Guo, 2005). Third, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, China has dramatically increased its interaction, both materially and ideationally, with the rest of the world, greatly promoting the development of Chinese IRT and encouraging Chinese scholars to create something of their own, not to replace Western IRT, but to enrich the knowledge of International Relations.

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3 The most recent discussion on the inadequacy of Western IRT is about the absence of a theory on relations. To use the concept of relationality for the analysis of international society provides such an example (Qin, 2010).

A promising area for a Chinese IRT is world order and global governance. The world is in a critical period of transformation, and global issues and new challenges require the world to provide for solutions different from those of the previous era. New institutions and governing patterns need to be created to deal with threats to the world and the members of the international community. China has continued to grow and is required to be a responsible stakeholder. Thus, it is reasonable for Chinese IR scholars to think about the emerging world order as well as institutions and governing models, especially what China and the Chinese culture can contribute theoretically to the building of such a world order. ‘Harmonious world’, for example, is a concept deeply rooted in the traditional culture of China for several thousand years, even though it has been recently put forward by Chinese political leaders as an ideal world order (Hu, 2005).<sup>4</sup>

A Chinese IRT school is yet to emerge. Two developments, however, are worth observing. Both touch on the question of world order and global governance and both have evoked scholarly discussion (Zhou *et al.*, 2006, pp. 5–49; Zhu *et al.*, 2009). The first is the emergence of what can be termed a traditional strand as an important phenomenon in the process of constructing a Chinese paradigm. Most of the research is done by Chinese philosophers and discusses how to apply valuable Confucian thoughts on harmony to deal with global issues. Theoretically, it tries to revive the Confucian thoughts and institutions of governance. Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia Tixi: Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun* (Zhou *et al.*, 2006) is representative. Zhao argues that the world governed by the state system is a ‘non-world’, for inter-state institutions cannot solve trans-state and global problems. The Confucian *Tianxia* institutions are global in its real sense, and therefore constitute the prerequisite for establishing a global system and solving global problems. The world order, therefore, must be based upon genuine world institutions as embodied in the Confucian world view (Zhao, 2005). This becomes a

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4 Cheng Zhongying, an American-Chinese scholar of Chinese philosophy, argues that the Chinese dialectics is dialectics of harmony, for there is a common metaphysical ground between Confucianism and Daoism that the nature of the universe is harmony or a process of harmonization. Conflict is not ontologically true and its existence and occurrence are merely for the achievement of harmony in life. Conflict is by nature resolvable through the self-adjustment by the individual of herself and of the relations between herself and the context (Cheng 1995, pp. 182–184).

dynamic force for the construction of a Chinese IR paradigm in spite of or because of the controversy it has aroused.

The second is the most recent appearance of an integrative approach. By 'integrative', I mean the combination of Western and Chinese ways of logical reasoning and theory development. It has embarked on conceptualizing and theorizing about Chinese intellectual legacy and socio-cultural experience for constructing IRT and for making conceptual breakthroughs in the framework of the established mainstream Western IRT. Informed by both Chinese and Western thoughts, it has made efforts to conceptualize the core Chinese thoughts for constructing a theoretical system and to use Chinese narratives and practices to enrich the established IRT. The most recent effort is to explore a core Chinese idea of 'relationalism', using it as a significant concept in parallel to the Enlightenment concept of 'rationalism' and as an essential assumption for building informal networking and for relational governance. It stresses 'becoming' in contrast to 'being' and argues for a processual construction in which processes, defined as on-going social relations, can be of and by itself, nurture collective emotion and identity, and help build a fiduciary community and moral order (Qin, 2009).

Thus, it seems likely that a fourth debate will emerge, this time focusing on the world order and going again into the deeper question of whom and what China is in shaping and being shaped by the emerging order of international society, together both with its rules, institutions, and norms, and with its narratives, practices, and relational networks. It can be expected that even greater effort will be made to employ the traditional and modern intellectual resources and to combine Chinese and Western paradigms so as to conceptualize and theorize in the hope of developing something different from the mainstream Western IRT.

Chinese IRT is still in its embryo stage. To stay on or to go beyond is the question. The Chinese IR community has a long-cherished hope to produce Chinese IRT. So it can be expected that IRT research in China will certainly get more original and innovative. Although the major achievements of the last three decades have been made by learning, the present situation seems to be that the more Chinese have learned, the more they want to create, especially when they find that Western IRT is sometimes unable to provide satisfactory explanation. The potential, therefore, is great, with more and more scholars and PhD students striving to explore the Chinese indigenous resources as inspiration for

theoretical breakthroughs. The American IRT tells Chinese scholars that theorizing about important thoughts is a sign of disciplinary maturity. If persistent efforts are made, it will be inevitable for Chinese IRT, with local experience and universal validity, to emerge and grow.

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