



Article

Will IR Theory with Chinese Characteristics be a Powerful Alternative?

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Abstract

The study of International Relations in China has dramatically increased over the past 30 years. Scholars have now developed a Chinese School(s) of International Relations theory, or at least, International Relations theory with ‘Chinese characteristics’. This recent Chinese move is neither new nor the first attempt, but located within larger efforts to move away from Anglo-Saxon dominance within the International Relations discipline by localizing International Relations theory. From this standpoint, although there seem to be more problems than promises in recent Chinese attempts, we still cannot ignore the great potential of this initiative, first because the pace of change is so fast, second because the number of scholars working on the topic is ever increasing, and last, because the rise of China brings more frequent interactions between Chinese and Western International Relations scholars. All these factors provide extremely fertile ground for any lucky, timely seed of Chinese International Relations theory to germinate, flourish, and proliferate.

Over the past 30 years, the rise of China has become a sensational global phenomenon and also the most popular topic of discussion in academia, media, and policy circles. What has gone unnoticed, however, is the parallel development and rise of the International Relations (IR) discipline in China. In other words, the Chinese IR community is rapidly catching up with the mainstream IR community. First, Chinese universities and think tanks are proactively inviting contributions from prominent IR scholars worldwide with a view to learning new trends in IR. Second, China’s IR community is second largest in the world only to that of the United States, and these scholars are busily translating mainstream theories into Chinese. For example, Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*, published in 1999, was translated into Chinese the very next year, while it took neighbouring South Korean scholars 10 years to translate the same book. Shambaugh raises several measures that can reliably be used to evidence this development in China. They include: The growing number of degree-granting institutions; the

growth in faculty and students; the increasing number of journals and book publications; the enhanced quality of researchers; and the growing interaction with government policy makers.¹

Although IR does not simply reflect the policy preferences of the state, we have known for several decades that the choices and preferences of foreign policy elites both shape and are shaped by dominant academic ideas. The circumstances under which the discipline took off in the United States coincided with 'the rise of the United States to world power' status.² The same trend is apparent in China. Since 2007, dominant research themes associated with liberal IR theory, such as soft power, peaceful change, and multilateralism, have become popular in China.³ This liberal turn reflects Chinese foreign policy concerns, as the country seeks to project the identity of a responsible great power embarking on a peaceful rise to world power status. The relationship between the rise of China and the rise of IR in China cannot be assumed to be one wherein they either converge or are entirely independent of one another. The rise of China and rise of Chinese IR are indeed closely linked, but so far too much attention has been paid to the former, and very little to the latter.

In this article, I focus on the remarkable growth of IR in China and ask the following question: Is there a distinctive character to Chinese IR, to the extent that talk about Chinese approaches to IR is meaningful? The question of the possibility and desirability of a Chinese IR community and its theoretical construct is now important. This change began in China more than 15 years ago, through scholars like Ren Xiao and Mei Ran. But the same discourse has now been internationalized as, due to the rise of China, the global IR community is paying more attention to this issue. The rise and significance of Chinese IR itself may not be new, but there are two aspects that distinguish this article from previous discussions on this topic. First, this article provides a novel perspective on Chinese IR, because it explores the development of a Chinese approach to IR within the comparative and larger context of global IR development. Second, by using research methods that include comparative disciplinary history, a systematic reading of documentary sources, and fieldwork and interviews with scholars, I provide a critical evaluation of current Chinese development in this field by pinpointing the obstacles and limitations that Chinese IR scholars must overcome in the near future.

This article comprises four sections. First, I examine what factors lead to building a distinctive disciplinary identity by comparing recent Chinese developments with other national approaches to or schools of IR. I explore whether it is even possible or meaningful to consider IR theory with national characteristics. Second, I explain why asking this question is important and timely for the study of IR in general. In this section, I review previous theoretical frameworks used to explore the relationship between the external world and internal academic disciplinary development, such as those introduced by Halliday and Schmidt.⁴

- 1 David Shambaugh, 'International Relations Studies in China: History, Trends and Prospects', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2011), pp. 339–72.
- 2 Stanley Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', *Dædalus*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (1977), p. 43.
- 3 Yiwei Wang, 'China: Between Copying and Constructing', in Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever, eds., *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 103–19.
- 4 Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994); Brian C. Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991); Brian C. Schmidt, 'Lessons from the Past: Reassessing the

Third, I explore whether there is any consensus among Chinese scholars on what constitutes Chinese theories, and what kinds of research projects represent a Chinese school, based on my fieldwork in Beijing in 2013, in Shanghai in 2013, and in Hong Kong in 2012 and 2015, interviews with scholars, and literature reviews. Fourth, I ask whether these Chinese attempts constitute a viable path for creating an independent Chinese IR theory through an assessment of current theoretical innovations.

Is IR Theory with National Characteristics Even Possible?

Is IR theory with national characteristics even possible? Porter asked the same question 15 years ago, and concluded that it is 'only minimally useful to speak about national perspectives on international relations'.⁵ To revisit this question, a working definition of IR theory is needed. Acharya and Buzan provide an inclusive definition of IR theory that holds that it must meet at least one of the following conditions: First, that others in the IR academic community substantially acknowledged it as theory; second, that it is self identified by its creators as IR theory, even if this is not widely acknowledged within the mainstream academic community; and third, that regardless of what acknowledgement it receives, the theory's construction identifies it as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about IR subject matter.⁶ Based on this understanding of IR theory, I use a method of comparative disciplinary history to contextualize recent Chinese development within the broader history of IR discipline, and to compare Chinese academic efforts with other national approaches. Disciplinary history consists in both scholarship on the history of the field and the methodological principles involved in such research and writing. It is about 'reconstructing the discursive history of the field in both its global and indigenous dimensions'.⁷

IR theory with national characteristics highlights three sensitive issues in IR discipline. First, this matter brings to mind the divide in IR discipline between IR theories and foreign-policy analysis. The conventional wisdom in IR is that IR theory is and should be different from the foreign policy analyses of individual countries, which allow more room for national differences and perspectives.⁸ In foreign policy analysis, incorporating national characteristics is taken for granted, while in IR theory, we do not expect country characteristics to be forefront. Second, it also relates to the scope of IR theory: i.e. whether IR theory needs to be universal in its scope or whether it could be particularistic. In the former case, the theory is applied to the whole system; in the latter, it can be applied to a subsystem, such as a

Interwar Disciplinary History of International Relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1998), pp. 433–59.

- 5 Tony Porter, 'Can There be National Perspectives on Inter(National) Relations?', in Robert M. A. Crawford and Darryl S. L. Jarvis, eds., *International Relations – Still an American Social Science? Toward Diversity in International Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 131.
- 6 Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, 'Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction', *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), p. 292.
- 7 Brian C. Schmidt, 'On the History and Historiography of International Relations', in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse-Kappen, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons, eds., *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 6.
- 8 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

European or East Asian system. Scholars generally believe that there is an impulse toward universal theory, but that there is also room for studying a subsystem.⁹ For Chinese scholars, the current focus is on the international relations of East Asia, but for some there is a strong aspiration to apply this distinct East Asian experience beyond East Asia.

Finally and most importantly, the question of IR theory with national characteristics addresses the core question of the discipline, i.e. ethnocentrism. IR scholars have argued that regional diversity is desirable in theory production.¹⁰ Acharya further claimed that the critical flaw of the discipline lies in its 'ethnocentrism'.¹¹ IR as a discipline has strong Anglo-Saxon origins, due to the founding in 1919, immediately after World War I, of the world's first Chair for the study of international politics at the Department of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.¹² It is widely believed that E. H. Carr and Hans J. Morgenthau laid the foundation for the current IR discipline.¹³ Between 1950s and early 1970s, during which occurred the behavioural revolution in social science, the discipline went through the first debate between traditionalists, who emphasized an historical and interpretive approach, and behaviouralists, who advocated methods inspired by the natural sciences. The divide between traditionalist and behaviouralists was constructed roughly along the Atlantic Ocean, with Hedley Bull and Morton Kaplan at the center of the debate.

Through this debate, twin concepts emerged, the first that of 'IR as an American social science', the second that of the English School. Hoffman's insight has been reconfirmed by later scholars that revisited the theme of 'American social science'.¹⁴ For example, Schmidt, after surveying the IR discipline, reconfirmed 'the overwhelming and continuing dominance of the American IR scholarly community' in the field.¹⁵ More recently, Tickner and Waever found that the American IR is 'simultaneously a single local instance of the field and an integral component of everyone else's universe'.¹⁶ The development of IR discipline in the United States was a little different from the later development of national schools, or IR with national characteristics. Since the post-World War II development of IR as a discipline was mainly conducted by scholars in American institutions, there was no explicit label for any so-called 'American school of IR' or 'IR with American characteristics'. Certainly, there were in the United States somewhat distinct and common positivism-oriented methods, rationalist approaches, and research

- 10 Ole Waever, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline: American and European Developments in International Relations', *International Organization*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (1998), pp. 687–727; Schmidt, 'On the History and Historiography of International Relations'.
- 11 Amitav Acharya, 'Ethnocentrism and Emancipatory IR Theory', in Samantha Arnold and J Marshall Biers, eds., *Displacing Security* (Toronto: Centre for International and Security Studies, York University, 2000), pp. 1–18.
- 12 Schmidt, 'On the History and Historiography of International Relations'.
- 13 Steve Smith, 'Paradigm Dominance in International Relations: The Development of International Relations as a Social Science', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1987), pp. 189–206.
- 14 Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science', p. 41.
- 15 Schmidt, 'On the History and Historiography of International Relations', p. 4.
- 16 Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever, eds., *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 329.

styles,¹⁷ but a variety of theories, especially across and within Realism and Liberalism, coexisted within ‘American social science’.

However, this is not a US-specific phenomenon, since the early development of IR in the UK reflected the problems Great Britain faced in its foreign relations.¹⁸ These efforts in the UK later formed the ‘English School’, which is ‘a group of scholars located mainly in the UK who have a common ontological disposition and are critical of the kind of scientific methods advanced by positivists’.¹⁹ Interestingly, these two concepts are at the center of the Chinese discourse today. ‘IR as an American social science’ is frequently referred to when scholars evaluate the current status of IR and criticize intellectual dependence, and the ‘English School’ is viewed as one possible and powerful model for a Chinese school. For example, Ren claims, ‘The work of the English school was of interest in their own right, and as an alternative to the American IR theory ... If there could be an English school, why not a Chinese school?’²⁰

However, recent Chinese moves are neither the first nor a unique attempt to escape from this Anglo-Saxon dominance in IR. Various efforts were made in the 1980s to map IR disciplinary practices in non-Western countries.²¹ For example, Gereau traced the IR scholarship in 19 countries, including in Western Europe, the USSR, India, and other countries in South and Southeast Asia, and explored diversities within the IR discipline.²² Similarly, Holsti explored IR theories in South Korea, India, France, Canada, Australia, and Japan. Similar efforts continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s.²³ Later scholars emphasized the unique and interesting aspects of certain countries or regions, such as Australia, Germany, and Japan, and also Africa and Muslim regions.²⁴ Scholars argued that IR is ‘quite different

17 Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*.

18 Smith, ‘Paradigm Dominance in International Relations’, p. 197.

19 Tim Dunne, ‘The English School’, in Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 267.

20 Xiao Ren, ‘Toward a Chinese School of International Relations’, in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian, eds., *China and the New International Order* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 297.

21 Frederick Gereau, ‘The Discipline International Relations: a Multi-National Perspective’, *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (1981), pp. 779–802; Kalevi J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985).

22 Gereau, ‘The Discipline International Relations’.

23 Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline*.

24 Richard Higgott and J. L. Richardson, *International Relations: Global and Australian Perspectives on an Evolving Discipline* (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1991); Chris Brown, ‘Fog in the Channel: Continental IR Theory Isolated’, in Robert M. A. Crawford and Darryl S. L. Jarvis, eds., *International Relations – Still an American Social Science? Toward Diversity in International Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 203–20; Farhang Rajaei, ‘Paradigm Shifts in Muslim International Relations Discourse’, *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1999), pp. 1–13; Takashi Inoguchi and Paul Bacon, ‘The Study of International Relations in Japan: Toward More International Discipline’, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2001), pp. 1–20; Kevin C. Dunn and Timothy A. Shaw, *Africa’s Challenge to International Relations Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Arlene B. Tickner, ‘Hearing Latin American Voices in International Relations Studies’, *International Studies Perspective*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2003), pp. 325–50.

in different places' and thus that 'location matters'.²⁵ The turn of the century brought rekindled interest in non-Western IR theories.²⁶ More recently, projects have become specific, and a group of scholars have actively engaged with IR scholars around the world in pursuit of possible contributions to non-Western IR theories.²⁷

From this observation I arrive at three conclusions. First, the discourse about IR theory with national characteristics, whether or not it is useful, exists and is often powerful, since the theme is catchy and intuitive, as proven in cases of 'IR as an American social science' and the 'English School'. Second, serious empirical study of the phenomenon is not easy because it involves deep self-reflection and examination, which is always difficult. In addition, self-reflection from diverse perspectives is even more arduous since there is a tendency to understand the history of IR 'as if a complete consensus existed on the essential dimensions of the field's evolution'.²⁸ Third, the recent Chinese move is neither new nor the first attempt in this respect, and is located within the larger effort to move away from the Anglo-Saxon impact and create indigenous and local, or simply non-Western IR theory.

Why Chinese IR Theory?

Why are recent Chinese efforts worth examination? I find three reasons why Chinese moves to build Chinese IR theory are significant and timely. First, recent developments in Chinese IR theory are closely linked to changes in the real world due to the rise of China. Second, the use and potential misuse of history and tradition in Chinese IR will contribute to our understanding of the relationship between IR theory and history. Finally, Chinese IR is not only linked to the rise of China but also connected to the decline of the West, and a growing self-reflection within the IR discipline. In other words, the Chinese School(s) is situated within growing dissatisfaction and self-reflection in the IR discipline. All three of these aspects highlight an important nexus between the real world and the discipline, or the power-knowledge nexus. The first point is mainly about the relations between the external world and academic discipline; the last, about the tension within academic disciplines between different communities. The second point situates in the middle, where the past reality affects the discipline through interaction with the external world and the internal world of academic discipline.

Therefore, it is necessary to examine existing theoretical frameworks that have considered the connection between external political power events and developments of internal theory. This has been a critical issue that many scholars have explored,²⁹ but scholars like Wang and

- 25 Waeber, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline', p. 723; Porter, 'Can There be National Perspectives on Inter(National) Relations?', p. 144.
- 26 Steve Smith, 'The Discipline of International Relations: Still an American Social Science', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2000), pp. 216–55; Crawford and Jarvis, eds., *International Relations*.
- 27 Tickner and Waeber, eds., *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*; Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia* (London: Routledge, 2010); Arlene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, *Thinking International Relations Differently* (London: Routledge, 2012).
- 28 Schmidt, 'On the History and Historiography of International Relations', p. 7.
- 29 Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*; Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*; Waeber, 'The Sociology of a Not So International Discipline'.

Kristensen, and Nielsen have more recently delved into this question, particularly in the case of Chinese IR.³⁰ In this article, I use the insights of Halliday and Schmidt as a theoretical framework.³¹ Halliday's understanding is that IR as a discipline is produced by three concentric circles of influence: Change and debate within the subject itself, the influence of new ideas within other areas of social science, and the impact of world developments.³² Halliday here echoes much of Hoffmann's understanding of the IR discipline in America, which was mainly affected by three factors: Intellectual predispositions, political circumstances, and institutional opportunities.³³ The recent Chinese move is important in at least two of the concentric circles Halliday identified: Debates that are largely internal to an academic network, and debates/ideas/metaphors that shape policy choices.³⁴

Schmidt provides a more cautious view in terms of the linkage between the external world and internal academic disciplinary development.³⁵ Internal disciplinary development in IR has often been described as a result of changes in and challenges from the external world, which he refers to as a 'contextual explanation'.³⁶ He further examines 'the issue of what the *actual* connection between external context and internal conceptual change could be'.³⁷ This is because there is an important 'temporal lag between an external event and the field's reaction to the event', and academic responses to outside events are 'multifarious'.³⁸ Most significant is how the context of external events is 'perceived by scholars'.³⁹ It is the discourse of IR that has 'continuously constructed its own image of international politics'.⁴⁰ Kristensen and Nielsen provide a similar view and argue that the external world can influence the discipline 'by imposing or dissolving an overlay, or by providing material resources or organizational platforms that favour certain intellectual factions or generations over others'.⁴¹

The Rise of China and the Rise of Chinese IR

Cox stated, 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.' Chinese IR theory, if it becomes effective, will hence be there for someone and for some purpose.⁴² Hoffmann saw that the IR discipline is 'too close to the fire' and needs to distance itself from the

30 Hung-jen Wang, *The Rise of China and Chinese International Relations Scholarship* (Lanham: Lexington, 2013); Peter M Kristensen and Ras T. Nielsen, 'Constructing a Chinese International Relations Theory: A Sociological Approach to Intellectual Innovation', *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013), pp. 19–40.

31 Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*; Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*; Schmidt, 'Lessons from the Past'.

32 Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*.

33 Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations'.

34 Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations*.

35 Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy*.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

40 Schmidt, 'Lessons from the Past', p. 433.

41 Kristensen and Nielsen, 'Constructing a Chinese International Relations Theory', p. 36.

42 Robert Cox, 'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1981), p. 128.

perspective of powerful states.⁴³ Smith reaffirmed this, and argued that IR in general strongly reflects US foreign policy concerns.⁴⁴ With regard to the rise of Chinese IR theory, scholars question whether or not IR theory with Chinese characteristics is a political project for China's political purposes.⁴⁵ It is important to identify, in advance, what Chinese IR theorists are trying to achieve. IR theory is a human invention that will become more and more opaque as time elapses. It is essential and timely, therefore, to investigate recent efforts in this regard while they are in their infancy, rather than wait for a decade or two to discover any hidden agenda or political projects. The relationship between theory and reality is complex. Achieving a clear understanding of one helps us gain a better perspective of the other.

Scholars who have closely studied IR discipline in China agree that there is a close link between the country's academia and its policy circles.⁴⁶ The discipline-policy nexus could become even closer as Chinese scholars become more aware and convinced of their emerging and unstoppable status as denizens of a world power.⁴⁷ As China rapidly moves to the center stage of world politics, the question of China's international purpose and foreign policy becomes more important than ever.⁴⁸ What is China's international mission, and how might it realize its agenda? Does it have a blueprint for action? At the unofficial level, however, China's intellectual elites have been advancing a diverse set of arguments about China's future international role.⁴⁹ Because the intellectual power of these emerging views will, to varying degrees, influence policy choices in the future, it is essential to pay serious attention to the lively intellectual debates taking place inside China. How to develop Chinese IR theories is one such debate. In China, as with all countries, theory is never purely academic. It always has the prominent purpose of a guiding policy. The shape of Chinese IR theories will hence provide an important clue to the direction of Chinese foreign policy.

History, IR, and the Case of Chinese IR Theory

History matters in IR theories. Wight provides an interesting equation: Politics: International Politics = Political Theory: Historical Interpretation.⁵⁰ As mainstream IR theory has been shaped by modern European history, abundant historical and intellectual resources could

43 Hoffmann, 'An American Social Science: International Relations', p. 59.

44 Smith, 'Paradigm Dominance in International Relations'.

45 Song Xinning, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26 (2001), pp. 61–74; William A. Callahan, 'China and the Globalisation of IR Theory: Discussion of "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics"', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26 (2001), pp. 75–88; William A. Callahan, 'Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or a New Hegemony?', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2008), pp. 749–61.

46 Baogang He, 'The Dilemmas of China's Political Science in the Context of the Rise of China', *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2011), pp. 257–77; Shambaugh, 'International Relations Studies in China'; David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

47 Acharya and Buzan, 'Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? '.

48 Yongjin Zhang, 'China Anxiety': Discourse and Intellectual Challenges', *Development and Change*, Vol. 44, No. 6 (2013), pp. 1407–25.

49 Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*.

50 Martin Wight, 'Why Is There No International Relations Theory?', *International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1960), p. 48.

also serve as the basis for developing non-Western IR theory.⁵¹ The Chinese case is no exception. Most Chinese efforts to create their own IR theory start from historical experience. Since many Chinese scholars base their theory on ancient or modern Chinese history, this will shed a light on how we deal with history in creating IR theories. For example, Yan Xuetong heads a team of scholars at Tsinghua University which seek, discover and utilize the potential of ancient Chinese thought and history for constructing IR theory and deriving policy lessons.⁵² Hui recently explored the potential influence on IR of studying Chinese history—especially, history that has been disentangled from ‘thought’—so possibly correcting the discipline’s ethnocentric tendency.⁵³

The relationship between history and theory has long been a core questions in IR.⁵⁴ The tension between history and theory is ever present in IR theory, and the debate is ongoing.⁵⁵ One of the key criticisms of using history or historical thinkers is that it constitutes presentism, which is ‘a tendency to write the history of the field in terms of its participation in an ancient or classic tradition of thought that often serves to confer legitimacy on a contemporary research program’.⁵⁶ The critical problem of presentism is that history could be distorted to fit the theoretical assumptions or claims the author makes.⁵⁷ Abundant historical resources in China could thus be used to construct new theories or modify existing ones. A closer examination of the use—and possible misuse—of history in the Chinese IR theory will provide an important case through which to explore one of IR’s perennial problems, i.e. the role of history in IR theory.

The Search for Alternatives to Mainstream IR

The annual meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA) in 2012 included three consecutive special panels on the theme ‘The End of International Relations Theory?’ sponsored by the *European Journal of International Relations*. It was the lack of inter-paradigm debates and grand theory in IR that inspired the conveners of this special panel. Two years later, similarly themed panels were organized that contemplated the status of IR theory, and the future of IR. In 2014, Stephen Walt echoed the argument he raised with John Mearsheimer in the 2012 panel, in which he criticized North American IR for being dominated by simplistic hypothesis testing, whose focus is usually either on unimportant questions or important questions with obvious answers.⁵⁸ The very fact that prominent scholars have started to

- 51 Acharya and Buzan, ‘Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?’.
- 52 Feng Zhang, ‘The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 73–102.
- 53 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, ‘History and Thought in China’s Traditions’, *Chinese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2012), p. 138.
- 54 Jack S. Levy, ‘Too Important to Leave to the Other: History and Political Science in the Study of International Relations’, *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1997), pp. 22–33; John M. Hobson and George Lawson, ‘What is History in International Relations?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2008), pp. 415–35.
- 55 Schmidt, ‘On the History and Historiography of International Relations’.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, ‘Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing is Bad for International Relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2013), pp. 427–57.

problematize through these themes the current state of IR theory signifies that there is concern about the role of theory in mainstream IR, and that serious reflection has begun.

This is a significant move, since understanding its own history has not always been a popular topic in mainstream IR.⁵⁹ There is a similar trend in the United States, a notable example that of Peter Katzenstein's trilogy of civilizations in IR, which devotes a whole volume to Chinese civilization.⁶⁰ This self-reflection has been further advanced in the United States with legislation to restrict National Science Foundation funding for political science research projects. These contexts provide important backgrounds for Chinese IR theory. If self-reflection has begun, the next step is the search for alternatives, wherein Chinese IR theory could be considered as one candidate, regardless of whether or not Chinese scholars desire this result. At this point, Chinese scholars do not claim that their theoretical innovations are alternatives to mainstream IR theory, but that they more or less supplement it. However, grand theories tend to have universalistic ambitions, and with the rise of China, it is possible that these theories will claim to be powerful alternatives. In this case, an interesting question is that of whether the next great debate in IR could be formed along the lines of country or civilization.

Chinese School(s) of IR

Various labels have been used to describe Chinese efforts to create a distinct IR, such as 'IR theory with Chinese characteristics', 'Chinese localization (or nativization) of IR theory', 'China's exploration of international political theory', 'the Chinese view of international relations or international politics', and 'The Chinese School.'⁶¹ Nevertheless, there is no consensus yet about whether a Chinese School(s)'s distinctiveness lies in its methods, topics, questions, core concepts, theoretical construct, or approach. Scholars emphasize different aspects of a Chinese School(s). Some see the distinctiveness of a Chinese School(s) as consisting in a research question that scholars are asking.⁶² Others claim that differences in emphases result from different understandings about conducting innovative research work.⁶³ What is a Chinese School(s) of IR? Is there any consensus among scholars on what constitutes a Chinese School(s)? Is there any consensus among scholars on what kinds of research projects represent or constitute a Chinese School(s)?

Modern IR study started in China with the establishment, in 1953 at Renmin University of China, of the Department of Diplomatic Studies, which in 1955 developed into the Foreign Affairs College. New departments and schools were also established in major universities, including Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Fudan University. Since the late 1970s, there has also been an important trend of establishing state-run or quasi-state-run think tanks,

- 59 Tickner and Waeber, eds., *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*.
- 60 Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Sinicization and the Rise of China: Civilizational Processes Beyond East and West* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
- 61 Jiangli Wang and Barry Buzan, 'The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations: Comparison and Lessons', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), p. 11.
- 62 Ren, 'Toward a Chinese School of International Relations'.
- 63 Yaqing Qin, 'Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), pp. 313–40; Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

such as the Chinese Academy of Social Science, China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, and China Institute of International Studies. I will not examine the history of IR discipline in China since many detailed overviews already exist.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, one aspect is worth noting. In China, as with any other non-Anglo-Saxon country, the history of IR is relatively short.⁶⁵ Scholars further argue that IR actually began in China in 1979, amid economic reform and opening-up, when Deng Xiaoping made the statement, 'research on world politics, political science, and law needs to make up for lost time'. Pre-1976 IR was mainly Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory of international relations, and included such concepts as imperialism, colonialism, peasant revolution, and Mao's Three Worlds Theory.⁶⁶

Developments in Chinese IR discipline were heavily influenced by those in the West. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars focused on strategic studies and foreign policy analysis, with particular emphasis on realist IR theories. Realism is still dominant among many leading Chinese scholars, but liberal IR theories also wield growing influence. For example, Wang Jisi found that, among articles published in 10 leading IR journals in China on nine key issues, those on the four themes of international organization, international regimes, human rights, and globalization/global governance directly related to non-traditional IR topics.⁶⁷ The other five topics were IR theory, great power relations, security, area studies, and international political economy. Shambaugh also noticed greater emphasis on topics associated with Western liberal IR theory, such as globalization, global governance, international cooperation, interdependence, transnationalism, multilateralism, and international organizations.⁶⁸

Similarly, interest in constructivist IR theory has also expanded in China. For example, according to Qin, three non-traditional IR themes—multilateralism and international institutions, international society, and non-state actors and global governance— have received consistent and growing attention in China.⁶⁹ In addition, themes such as identity, psychology, peace research, democratic peace, feminism, non-traditional security, global governance, and interdependence were among the terms that most frequently featured in Chinese academic journals.⁷⁰ All these new trends in Chinese IR show that there is growing diversity in Chinese IR with regard to IR theories. Moreover, a dialogue between Chinese scholars

64 Gerald Chan, 'International Studies in China: Origins and Development', *Issues & Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1997), pp. 40–64; David Shambaugh and Jisi Wang, 'Research and Training in International Studies in the People's Republic of China', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1984), pp. 6–14; Gustaaf Geeraerts and Men Jing, 'International Relations Theory in China', *Global Society*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2001), pp. 251–76; Ford Foundation, ed., *International Relations in China: A Review of Ford Foundation Past Grantmaking and Future Choices* (Beijing: Ford Foundation, 2002); Shambaugh, 'International Relations Studies in China'.

65 Song, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics', p. 63.

66 Wang, 'China'; Song, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics'.

67 Ford Foundation, ed., *International Relations in China*.

68 Shambaugh, 'International Relations Studies in China'.

69 Qin, 'Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?'.

70 Ford Foundation, ed., *International Relations in China*.

and Western scholars is ever expanding through the academic journals and books that Chinese scholars published.⁷¹

However, at the same time there has, since the very beginning of disciplinary development, been a consistent call to create IR theories that are uniquely Chinese. Noesselt finds deeper historical roots, and claims that imagining the new world order from ‘a Chinese culture-based perspective’ is not a new phenomenon, but one that existed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as in the case of Kang Youwei’s *Datongshu*.⁷² Peng also finds that the IR discipline and various efforts to indigenize it—mostly in the form of area studies of Europe and of international law—existed even in pre-1949 Chinese IR, and had lasting impact on the IR revival.⁷³ However, full-blown attempts came much later. It was Huan Xiang, foreign policy advisor to Zhou Enlai, who first openly proposed at the first IR conference in Shanghai the construction of IR theory with Chinese characteristics which directly linked to Deng Xiaoping’s ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’.⁷⁴ Similarly, Qiu Yuanping, vice director of the Foreign Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee, stated: ‘it is unacceptable that China does not have its own theory’ of IR.

Immediately after Huan Xiang raised his proposition at the first IR conference in Shanghai, Liang Shoude, head of the Department of International Politics at Peking University, provided the first-cut definition of IR theory with Chinese characteristics. It held, first and foremost, that national interests are the kernel of all considerations.⁷⁵ Liang moreover insisted that such theory should, in addition to being based on China’s vision of socialism, also serve China’s national interests. The second main point was that the concept of the means of production should be imported into the study of international politics,⁷⁶ and in other places Liang argued economic factors should be given first consideration.⁷⁷ Third, the theory should promote development through reform, safeguard world peace, correctly handle the relationship between stability and progress, and establish a just and reasonable new international order. Later scholars expressed similar views on the need to develop Chinese IR theories. For example, Qin argues that it is ‘possible and even inevitable’ that a Chinese School of IR theory will emerge, reflecting the past 30 years of developments in IR.⁷⁸

There are three converging understandings of a Chinese School(s) of IR or IR theory with Chinese characteristics. The first is that the raw material of a Chinese School(s) should be something uniquely Chinese. There is a strong consensus among scholars that a Chinese

71 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Shijing Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

72 Nele Noesselt, ‘Revisiting the Debate on Constructing a Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics’, *China Quarterly*, No. 222 (2015), pp. 6–7.

73 Lu Peng, ‘Pre-1949 Chinese IR: An Occluded History’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2014), pp. 133–55.

74 Nele Noesselt, ‘Is There a “Chinese School” of IR?’, *GIGA Working Papers*, No. 188 (2012), pp. 14–15.

75 Shoude Liang, ‘Constructing an International Relations Theory with “Chinese Characteristics”’, *Political Science*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (1997), pp. 23–39.

76 Shoude Liang, ‘International Politics with Chinese Characteristics’, *Studies of International Politics*, No. 1 (1994), pp. 15–21.

77 *Ibid.*

78 Qin, ‘Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?’, p. 329.

School(s) of IR consists in a theoretical construct(s) of global politics that uses something uniquely Chinese, such as Chinese history, tradition, political thoughts, culture, literature, problems, or puzzles. (Qin, 2012) It is common for Chinese scholars to reassess Chinese history and Chinese political thought in their attempts to pinpoint the relevance of these traditions to the study of IR.⁷⁹ For example, Yan argues that Chinese IR scholars must look to their traditional culture and thought since ‘the hope for Chinese IR theoretical study lies in rediscovering Chinese thought’.⁸⁰

Second, scholars agree that current developments and future prospects for a Chinese School(s) have been heavily influenced and will be affected by the real world change in global politics, especially with the rise of China. The rise of China provides fertile ground for the rise of a Chinese School(s); scholars indeed commonly agree that the rise of China and the rise of a Chinese School(s) of IR are intrinsically linked. Zhang, for one, provides three reasons why the rise of China and the rise of Chinese IR are closely interlinked.⁸¹ First, as China further develops, Chinese scholars are more likely to become aware of the deficiencies of existing IR theories in explaining global politics in general and China’s behavior in world politics. Second, the new reality provides Chinese scholars with new questions and puzzles under a new global environment. Third, the rise of China will inevitably raise the question of legitimacy in a changing global order, especially that relating to China as a newly rising power which replaces, or at least complements, the global order as defined by the United States and Western Europe since the end of World War II. In a way this is not particularly a case for Chinese experience. The new global reality has led to developments of new theories, as seen in neorealism, integration theories, and neoliberal institutionalism.

Third, scholars agree that the development of a Chinese School(s) parallels the ever-increasing influence of mainstream IR. A Chinese School(s), from its very origin, has had to interact with mainstream IR, and this relationship is what motivates scholars to create a Chinese School(s). Scholars believe that there is a role a Chinese School(s) should play in relation to the IR discipline. Certainly, expectations of what a Chinese School(s) would or could do vary. Even at the top end of the scale, few scholars believe that a Chinese School(s) aims to replace existing theories or systems. For example, Xu and Sun claim that the current goal of the Tsinghua approach is ‘to borrow from the classics in order to enrich understandings of contemporary phenomena, or in other words, to innovate by applying classical thinking to develop, supplement, or even replace current theories’.⁸² Most scholars, however, do not go this far. But they have in common the expectation that a Chinese School(s), at minimum, should complement and enrich mainstream IR. But most scholars expect more than the minimum. In sum, challenging and providing alternatives, thus complementing and enriching, but not replacing, existing theories is the shared understanding of such contributors.

79 Wang and Buzan, ‘The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations’, p. 25.

80 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, p. 256.

81 Yongjin Zhang, ‘Introduction’, in Yongjin Zhang, ed., *Constructing a Chinese School(s) of International Relations: Ongoing Debate and Critical Assessment* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

82 Jin Xu and Xuefeng Sun, ‘The Tsinghua Approach and the Development of International Studies in China’, in Zhang, ed., *Constructing a Chinese School(s) of International Relations*, p. 6.

In addition, scholars generally agree that there are at least three schools so far whose projects and theoretical constructs are distinct; they are those of Zhao Tingyang, Yan Xuetong, and Qin Yaqing. Certainly, there are scholars other than these three who are making important contributions, such as the balance of relationships theory of Shih Chih-yu and Huan Chiung-Chiu, the *gongsheng* (symbiosis) theory by Shanghai-based scholars like Hu Shoujun and Jin Yingzhong, and individual works by Tang Shiping. These scholars make theoretical innovations based on Chinese history, tradition, culture, and experience. Moreover, the three research traditions do not always embody coherent projects. For example, the Tsinghua approach led by Yan Xuetong is not a single, unified effort but rather at least two approaches, one focusing on history, the other on theory.⁸³ Based on the English School experience, Wang and Buzan also expect it 'highly unlikely that a single monolithic "Chinese School" will come to dominate IR thinking'.⁸⁴ However, the three scholars and their research projects are distinct and certainly worth exploration.

The first, Zhao Tingyang, is a philosopher who gained fame for his 2005 book, *The Tianxia System*. *Tianxia* or 'all under heaven' also refers to a tributary or suzerain system, known as an ordering principle of traditional East Asian international relations before the arrival of the Western nation-state system.⁸⁵ *Tianxia* is widely understood to mean a unified world dominated by the middle kingdom, whose neighbors and those beyond look to it for guidance and pay tributes to it. The system is often described as several concentric circles, comprising the emperor at the center, the inner subjects, outer subjects, tributary states, and barbarians. While intellectual curiosity and ambition have indeed been initial drivers of his *tianxia* theory, another important motivation is to 'rethink China', thus also to rethink the world and develop Chinese views and theories of world politics. There is a strong desire to provide an indigenous Chinese perspective on international relations, and to prepare China intellectually for a greater, more constructive and distinctive role in world affairs. Zhao proposes the potential revival of the *tianxia* system as an alternative to the existing modern state system.

The second, Yan Xuetong, believes that Chinese IR scholars must look to their native traditional culture and thoughts.⁸⁶ Yan's work involves re-reading thinkers of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, particularly Xunzi. Yan demonstrates another distinctive approach within IR and a particular type of Chinese consciousness. Yan leads a group of researchers and students at Tsinghua University collectively referred to as the 'Tsinghua approach'.⁸⁷ Yan has also been at the forefront of mustering methodological rigor and emphasizing intellectual exchange with international scholarship, evident in the creation of the Chinese Journal of International Politics. Yan argues that all IR theories are universal and have no national characteristics; thus the goal of building a Chinese IR theory is not achievable.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, it is the label, 'Chinese School', or 'IR with Chinese

83 Xu and Sun, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Development of International Studies in China', p. 1.

84 Wang and Buzan, 'The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations', p. 3.

85 David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University, 2010).

86 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, p. 256.

87 Zhang, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations'.

88 Ren, 'Toward a Chinese school of International Relations'.

characteristics' to which Yan stands in opposition. Yan's project aims at creating a universal theory based on China's historical experience, culture, and philosophy.⁸⁹ What Yan is assuming is that if theorizing by Chinese scholars is to be successful, the label 'Chinese School' or 'Chinese characteristics', is not necessary, since the theory developed will become a universally valid theory, not a Chinese theory. For this reason, I find his project the most ambitious, even more so than Zhao's bold proposal to revive the ancient *tianxia* hierarchical system.

Third is Qin Yaqing, the pioneer who introduced the notion of the 'Chinese school' to Chinese IR scholarship. Qin, in contrast to Yan, strongly believes that IR theory differs from natural science, in that the former entails cultural meaning, context, and understanding. Qin sees that the time is ripe for development of a Chinese IR theory, and further argues that it is 'possible and even inevitable' that a Chinese School will emerge.⁹⁰ Qin critically engages with Yan's approach, arguing that although Yan brings traditional Chinese thinkers and historical experience back into IR theory, his strong belief in rationality as a core assumption of IR theory is basically Western, and thus problematic for the creation of a genuinely Chinese IR theory. Instead, Qin adopts an interactive approach that links Western IR theories with Chinese cultural thinking.⁹¹ Qin introduced 'relationality', a concept deeply rooted in Chinese tradition and culture, as a key concept for his theory. At this point, however, Qin's theory is defined by what his theory *is not* compared to the theories of Yan and Zhao, rather than by what his theory *is*. For example, Qin sees the two other approaches as incomplete, since Zhao's *tianxia* approach uses traditional Chinese concepts for understanding of the problems we face today, and Yan's Tsinghua approach, although re-introducing traditional philosophy, history, and culture to IR theory, understands world affairs and Chinese international behaviour through imported Western concepts.⁹² Qin further developed his idea in his recent book titled, *Relationality and Process: Cultural Construction in Chinese International Relations Theory* by Shanghai People's Press.

Challenges and Prospects

Chinese efforts to create a Chinese School(s) help us to move away from mainstream IR theory. In addition, introducing Chinese history, tradition, and thinkers has the potential to enrich IR theory. It could indeed develop theoretically critical and innovative concepts, such as benign leadership or moral leadership, as Yan holds. Acharya and Buzan predict that a few benefits will ensue from non-Western IR theories, since such theories 'capture distinctive Asian patterns and experiences' and compare non-Western experience with more general patterns in IR.⁹³ All these projects and theoretical innovations, however, have certain limitations at this stage. In order for a Chinese School(s) to be further developed and flourish, these limitations must be overcome in the long term. I find five obstacles a

89 Xu and Sun, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Development of International Studies in China'.

90 Qin, 'Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?', p. 329.

91 Yaqing Qin, 'Culture and Global Thought: Chinese International Theory in the Making', *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals*, No. 100 (2012), p. 78.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Acharya and Buzan, 'Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?', p. 307.

Chinese School(s) must overcome. They are: (i) exceptionalism; (ii) dualism; (iii) the roman-ticization of Chinese tradition, culture, history and thought; (iv) conceit beyond a self-consciousness of being great power; and (v) explicit and straightforward promotion of national interest.

First, in his plea for global IR, Acharya, as president of the ISA, argues that one of the most important aspects of global IR as an aspiration is that it eschew ‘cultural exceptionalism and parochialism’.⁹⁴ Exceptionalism is ‘the tendency to present the characteristics of one’s own group (society, state, or civilization) as homogenous, unique, and superior to those of others’.⁹⁵ An example Acharya uses to demonstrate exceptionalism is that of such concepts as ‘Asian values’, ‘Asian human rights’, or ‘Asian democracy’. A possible candidate for the future case, unfortunately, is a tendency to use ‘the Chinese tributary system as the basis of a new Chinese School of IR’.⁹⁶ Chinese exceptionalism appears in scholarly emphasis on the peaceful rise of China. Scholars assume, mostly based on China’s practice so far, that China will be different from any other great power in its behavior or disposition. For example, Yan explains that dominant states influence the evolution of international norms through three means. They are: ‘a process of demonstration – imitation; a process of supporting – strengthening; and a process of punishment – maintenance’.⁹⁷ The emphasis here is on the first two options, where demonstration and supporting are prioritized over punishment. The underlying assumption reveals the wishful thinking that, unlike the United States, a process of demonstration will make other countries follow China’s norms and values. However, whether China will act differently is an open research question, and not something that can be presupposed and believed in.

The second obstacle is dualism, i.e. a dichotomous understanding of the West and China. Dualism is most apparent in the case of Zhao’s explanation of the *tianxia* system. Zhao proposes the potential revival of the *tianxia* system as an alternative to the existing modern state system.⁹⁸ Here, the *tianxia* order is compared with the Westphalia order which, according to him, is an anarchic, zero-sum, military-dominated, amoral system.⁹⁹ Hence, all that is good and desirable—order, legitimacy, voluntary submission—are clustered within the Chinese traditional system, and what is bad and undesirable—anarchy, disorder, war—are inherent in the Westphalia system. Based on this dualism, the *tianxia* order is understood as ‘a hierarchical but stable alternative’, since the system is run by moral, cultural, and political power, and participation is voluntary.¹⁰⁰ This understanding is a clear example of dualist thinking, which is heavily dependent upon Chinese exceptionalism.

In some cases, scholars constructing a Chinese School(s) using a theoretical construct of mainstream theory do not start from previously accumulated IR knowledge. In other words, Chinese scholars that use the mainstream vocabulary need to be fully aware of the

94 Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds’, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), p. 5.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

97 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*.

98 Tingyang Zhao, ‘Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept “All-Under-Heaven (Tian-xia)”’, *Social Identities*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (2006), pp. 29–41.

99 *Ibid.*

100 Noesselt, ‘Revisiting the Debate on Constructing a Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics’, p. 6.

knowledge accumulated and embedded in these concepts. However, this has not always been the case, and is pointed out as one of difficulties of communicating with a Chinese School(s). For example, Hui's criticism of Yan's use of 'norm' is a clear example.¹⁰¹ Use of the term outside the context of previously accumulated knowledge makes continuing the debate or conversation close to impossible. Cunningham-Cross and Callahan made a similar criticism of the Tsinghua approach, arguing that Yan's definition of 'politics' was difficult to understand.¹⁰²

The third obstacle, a related pitfall of the previous two obstacles, is romanticization of things that are uniquely Chinese, such as Chinese tradition, culture, history, and thought.¹⁰³ This obstacle, of course, is not unique to Chinese scholars; we all tend to misperceive our native history and tradition as well as to romanticize our native culture and experience. However, this is a serious problem for Chinese scholars, since the version of history that scholars romanticize is similar to official Communist Party narratives and popular sentiments, and hence smacks of nationalism. As with many other Asian countries, due to modernization and revolutions China has been disconnected from its native classical intellectual resources and traditions, and now seeks to rediscover and reconnect with them. Most efforts to build Chinese IR theory are, therefore, about rediscovering and reconnecting to Chinese history, tradition, legacy, and culture. But the main question is, first: To what extent do these resources actually remain in China today, and second: How many scholars have the background knowledge and skills necessary to rediscover the past.

Moreover, danger lies in recovering and resuscitating past concepts. One example is Zhao's *tianxia* system, which is problematic. Historically, various types and forms of the *tianxia* system existed, depending on China's military and economic strength. In addition, the hierarchy was neither stable nor steady, since the Emperor did not always have the intention or power to rule the region. The *tianxia* system, as Zhao understands it, is a social fact constructed in the late 19th century in the course of interaction with the Western system. Many characteristics of the *tianxia* system, such as moral and cultural leadership and voluntary submission, turn out, when viewed from the periphery, to be myths. Voluntariness and harmony are the results of structural power. It may appear harmonious from the center, but from outside looking in it was not harmonious at all. Benevolent and cultural leadership was not benevolent or cultural in the least, from the peripheral perspective. Yan's concept of morality, or *wangdao*, is another candidate for romanticization of historical concepts.¹⁰⁴ First, whether or not this moral and benevolent leadership was truly moral and benevolent is an open research question. Second, whether these historical concepts can be used to explain today's world is also an open question.

The fourth point is related to exceptionalism, since exceptionalism justifies 'the dominance of the powerful states over the weak'.¹⁰⁵ For a great power there is a difference between self-consciousness and self-conceit. Healthy and moderate self-consciousness is a

101 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, 'Building Castles in the Sand: A Review of Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (2011), pp. 425–49.

102 Lindsay Cunningham-Cross and William A. Callahan, 'Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2011), pp. 349–74.

103 Callahan, 'China and the Globalisation of IR Theory', p. 88.

104 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*.

105 Acharya, 'Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds', p. 5.

necessary component of all theory development. It is what motivated Yan and Qin to theorize differently from mainstream IR scholars. This self-consciousness is on the rise in China in almost all fields of humanities and social sciences. It can be observed not only in academia but also in real world politics.

A few Chinese scholars assert that theories produced by scholars from big powers of international status provide a greater degree of intellectual and theoretical autonomy. These arguments are fallacious, and not helpful to the development of Chinese IR. Interesting theoretical concepts and frameworks, such as dependency, originated in and advanced from weak states, and many important international practices—international human rights, multilateralism, developmental norms—were either invented or promoted by weak states.¹⁰⁶ Second, even if these statements are true, expressing self-conceit does not further the advancement of a Chinese School(s). For example, Xu and Sun acknowledge that Yan's proposal of 'voluntary submission of small states to a China-led hierarchy' is not welcome in East Asia.¹⁰⁷ Cunningham-Cross and Callahan find that 'both the Western world as well as China's Asian neighbours will find it difficult to accept the hierarchical order appealed by Yan Xuetong, particularly when equality is the fundamental principle of the contemporary international society'.¹⁰⁸

Finally, the last challenge is that of explicit promotion of national interest, or the Communist Party's interest.¹⁰⁹ With regard to the rise of Chinese IR theory, many scholars have already raised the question of whether or not IR theory with Chinese characteristics, or a Chinese School(s), is a political project for China's political purposes. For Song, such 'ideological shackles' are a main problem in the development of Chinese IR, because 'it is impossible for Chinese scholars to publicly criticize the foreign policy of their government'.¹¹⁰ Noesselt even states that the purpose of a Chinese School(s) is 'to fulfil two general functions—to safeguard China's national interests and to legitimize the one-party system'.¹¹¹ The 2004 document of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, which defines Marxism as 'an indispensable element of any innovative reformulation of IR theory by Chinese academia' is clear evidence in this respect.¹¹² The recent situation in Beijing has not been too optimistic. In 2013, the *New York Times* published the Party memo warning of seven subversive ideas from the West,¹¹³ and in July 2015, a new national security law was passed which defines security as broadly as to include culture, education, and cyberspace.¹¹⁴

106 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

107 Xu and Sun, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Development of International Studies in China', p. 5.

108 Cunningham-Cross and Callahan, 'Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power', p. 362.

109 Song, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics'.

110 *Ibid.*, pp. 72–73.

111 Noesselt, 'Revisiting the Debate on Constructing a Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics', p. 1.

112 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

113 Chris Buckley, 'China Takes Aim at Western Ideas', *New York Times*, 19 April, 2013.

114 Edward Wong, 'China Approves Sweeping Security Law, Bolstering Communist Rule', *New York Times*, 1 July, 2015.

The current situation is of even greater concern due to the political, institutional, and cultural constraints placed on academics in China. He argues that, due to a lack of academic freedom and democracy, 'official selection and endorsement is a much more important criterion than peer review in judging the quality of social science research'.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Hui points out that political and institutional constraints lead to a brain drain, where 'China's most talented want to study abroad and, after graduation, prefer to work at obscure Western universities rather than elite Chinese universities'.¹¹⁶ In order for a Chinese School(s) to be a truly global IR component, Chinese scholars have to move away from the national interest of China. A lesson could be found in the case of the English School, whose success, according to Wang and Buzan, is attributable to its eschewing of 'parochial concerns' and aim to build global theory.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

These obstacles and limitations are not new.¹¹⁸ From the very beginning, there has been internal criticism of a Chinese School(s) of IR, such as that it would lack content, not advance the field, and have ideological implications. Certainly, difficulties still remain. Xu and Sun frankly admit that there are currently numerous problems in the Tsinghua approach, such as a slow pace of innovation, a need to integrate theory and history, and to develop the core concepts and distinct methodology.¹¹⁹ However, many scholars are more optimistic and provide a positive answer as to the possibility and desirability of a Chinese School(s) of IR. Of course, an exploration of 'how exactly' Chinese scholars could overcome the limitations that I have pointed out, and whether or not it would be successful are important research topics. I consider these two questions, however, as something to be answered in another article, rather than this one. I see my contribution as exploring the development of Chinese IR within the global IR context and evaluating the current achievements and limitations, rather than suggesting ways to overcome these limitations in the future.

The possibility of a Chinese School(s) is higher now than 15 years ago, and will likely be more so in the future. The development pace of creating a Chinese School(s) is rapid, and the number of scholars working on the topic ever increasing. The latter point is especially important, because it denotes growing self-consciousness as a distinct intellectual group. In the case of the success of the English School, its scholars gradually formulated the collective identity of a scholar whose problems and assumptions differ from those of American researchers. A similar trend is observed in China, where scholarly consciousness is ever increasing and research on a Chinese School(s) expanding. Ironically, both proponents and critics of a Chinese School(s) contribute to the creation of a Chinese School(s) category that is distinct from the mainstream IR.

In addition, in light of the rise of China, mainstream scholars pay particular attention to the research and theories of Chinese scholars, and there is frequent interaction between them. All these factors provide an extremely fertile ground for a Chinese School(s). It is not

115 He, 'The Dilemmas of China's Political Science in the Context of the Rise of China'.

116 Hui, 'Building Castles in the Sand', p. 435.

117 Wang and Buzan, 'The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations', p. 26.

118 Song, 'Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics', pp. 71–73.

119 Xu and Sun, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Development of International Studies in China'.

just the rise of China that affects the rise of Chinese IR, but also the development in a Chinese School(s) of Chinese IR, which could have impact on the rise of China. For example, Beckley claims, after comparing three sources of power—wealth, innovation, and conventional military capabilities—that the US edge will continue.¹²⁰ Although Beckley mainly examines innovations in science and technology, innovations in humanities and social science also hold much potential for transformation of the long term fundamental world order.¹²¹ Thus, Beckley's comparison of China and the United States as regards innovation is completely based on the current existing order and system, but reimagining world politics could change the rules of the game themselves.

The importance of IR theory can also be examined in English School literatures. Buzan and Little claim that, 'To understand the contemporary international society it is essential to develop and then to build on an analysis of previous international societies.'¹²² Of the many Chinese IR theories, one of the societies that scholars are trying to recover and rebuild is the East Asian international society, mainly because it is nowadays a key focus of analysis. The United States is 'pivoting to' the region, and China is expanding its influence over it. To understand how the relations between China and the United States will unfold in the future, we first have to understand how intellectuals read the past and try to reimagine the future through the past. Carlson similarly argues that Chinese foreign policy elites 'have started to give some serious consideration to what a Chinese-defined international order might look like'.¹²³ At the very core of these considerations lies consideration of Chinese IR, or IR with Chinese characteristics, which is a claim about 'the normative underpinning' of the 'reconstituted' international system.¹²⁴ Chinese IR, in a way, is part of a broader discussion of 'how China will be a world power'.¹²⁵

The effort to create and advance a Chinese School(s) of IR is now a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. The important issue is not whether or not there *is* or *is not* a Chinese School(s) but *what kinds of* Chinese School(s) will emerge, and *in which direction* current Chinese efforts will be aimed. One important lesson of the English School is that it has cultivated 'an open conversation with several different and sometimes contending standards' and become a focal point for debates around international society.¹²⁶

One possible way to achieve a Chinese School(s) of IR which is not parochial is to 'bring East Asia back in', and start with an open dialogue with its regional—East Asian—neighbors. The development of Chinese IR theory has an important theoretical and practical implication for the East Asia region. For this reason, South Korea provides a good case in point. Despite differences in background and traditions, both Chinese and Korean IR

120 Michael Beckley, 'China's Century? Why America's Edge Will Endure', *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (2011/12), pp. 41–78.

121 *Ibid.*

122 Barry Buzan and Richard Little, 'Introduction to the 2009 Issue', in Adam Watson, ed., *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. xxi.

123 Allen Carlson, 'Moving Beyond Sovereignty? A Brief Consideration of Recent Changes in China's Approach to International Order and the Emergence of the *tianxia* Concept', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 20, No. 68 (2011), p. 102.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 102.

125 Callahan, 'Chinese Visions of World Order', p. 757.

126 Wang and Buzan, 'The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations', p. 25.

scholarship has been heavily affected by the mainstream IR. Korean IR scholars are concerned about creating and developing a Korean IR theory, or at least an IR theory with Korean problems and perspectives. As with many other non-Anglo-Saxon countries, the history of IR scholarship in South Korea is relatively short, and for the best part of it scholars have been busy importing mainstream IR theories and applying them to Korean or East Asian cases. However, awareness and dissatisfaction have increased, as mainstream IR theories do not easily fit the Korean or East Asian contexts. The first attempt to solve these problems entails modifying and revising the existing theories, but these efforts are not always satisfactory. A few scholars have tried to construct indigenous IR theory in order to gain a clear view of their national surroundings, and cope with the future. The attempt to create new IR theories has been accelerated by the real world changes in East Asia, manifest in the rise of China and renewed US attention to the region. East Asia has become not only the place where there are power clashes, but also where different ideas clash.

Scholars in South Korea believe that China, with the rise of its military and economic strength, will start—or have already started—to *theorize* international relations differently from Western mainstream IR scholars. This, they believe, will start from building a new perspective (or reviving a traditional perspective) of the international relations of East Asia, which traditionally has been China's home turf. This attempt could go hand-in-hand with creating new theoretical concepts and frames for a global order in international relations. The Chinese projects have already been started, but are still at an early stage. However, with the rise of China's substantial power, this process will be accelerated and come into full fruition in the near future.

Back to my own question: Is it a mirage or an effective alternative? Apparently, it is not a mirage, since it is not an optical illusion; it is actually happening. Is it an effective alternative? Currently, this seems less likely, and there seem to be more problems than promises. However, we cannot ignore the potential, for three reasons. First, because the speed of change is so fast and cannot be ignored. Second, the number of scholars working on the topic is ever expanding. And finally, the rise of China brings more frequent interactions between Chinese and Western scholars. All these factors provide extremely fertile ground for any 'lucky and timely seed of Chinese IR theory' to germinate, flourish, and proliferate.

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