



Forum: Debating the Chinese School(s) of IR Theory

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Abstract

The papers in this Forum, along with eight papers consecutively published in previous and current issues of this journal, constitute a special symposium, which engages in a dialogue between the “Chinese School” of International Relations (IR) theory and “Western” IR theories. The contributors are renowned Western theorists representing various Western paradigms and leading Chinese theorists from the three branches of the Chinese School, namely “moral realism,” “relational theory,” and “sym-biosis theory.” The dialogue between the Chinese School and Western theories has become feasible due to recent theoretical breakthroughs achieved by the former and the observed efforts to enhance theoretical diversity in the latter. Contributors from both sides are committed to fostering an equal, comprehensive, and constructive dialogue. Western theorists provide an evaluation of the Chinese School as a whole and delve into the specifics of its branches. They compare the Chinese School with Western theories, highlighting similarities and differences, reflecting on shared issues, identifying both contributions and shortcomings of the Chinese School, and proposing solutions for its further development. In response, Chinese School scholars reiterate their theoretical concerns and refine their theoretical stances accordingly. This dialogue demonstrates the potential for Chinese and Western theorists to overcome language and cultural barriers to achieve mutual understanding and valuable collaboration.

Introduction: Setting the Stage for Debating the Chinese School(s) of IR Theory

Xiao Ren, Stefano Guzzini, Toni Erskine, and Peng Lu

Over several decades now, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has been witnessing both the gradual rise of non-Western theories and the increasing critical examination of

Western theories. A recontextualization, or indeed “provincialization,”¹ of IR’s academic production has taken place, which provides the context for the present dialogue.² The Anglo-American hierarchy within IR, to the extent it can be considered a world-wide discipline in the first place, has been challenged in two ways. On the one hand, there has been an attempt to turn this ostensibly international field into a truly global one—an attempt given voice in calls for a “Global IR.”³ These calls have been led by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan following their important reflection on the absence of non-Western IR theories.⁴ On the other hand, there are many “local” academic communities, some with long histories, which have emerged or become more visible (whether they understand themselves to be contributing to a single global field or lying outside it).

The present dialogue between Chinese and “Western” theorists—consisting of articles across two consecutive issues of the *Chinese Journal of International Politics*,⁵ as well as this Forum—takes place against this dual backdrop of a push for a Global IR and the establishment or recognition of distinctive national or regional scholarly IR communities with their own organizational hierarchies and intellectual debates. Moreover, this dialogue seeks to build on important yet still nascent endeavours to engage Chinese and Western IR theories in conversation. Valuable attempts have been made at meaningful exchange by scholars representing both groups—such as the debate between Yaqing Qin and Barry Buzan on China’s peaceful rise,⁶ and interventions by scholars, including Peter Katzenstein, Amitav Acharya, and Zhang Feng.⁷ Nevertheless, existing exchanges remain too few and far between and have hitherto struggled to prompt on-going reciprocal engagement, regardless of laudable

¹ We mean this in Chakrabarty’s sense. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, 2nd Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

² See also: John Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conceptions of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

³ Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 647–59; Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations: Origins and Evolution of IR at Its Centenary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁴ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2010). For a broader approach, see Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Wæver, eds., *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009).

⁵ In addition to the present Forum, the articles that make up this symposium are as follows: Peng Lu, “The Chinese School of IR Theory: Ignored Process, Controversial Progress, and Uncertain Prospects,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 128–52; Toni Erskine and Liane Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory: Locating (and Deciphering) the ‘Moral Realism’ of the Tsinghua Approach,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 153–73; Yan Xuetong, “Upgrading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 174–86; Stefano Guzzini, “Relationalism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin’s Theory of World Politics,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 187–205; Yaqing Qin, “The Zhongyong Dialectic: A Bridge into the Relational World,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 206–21; Peter Katzenstein, “Is There a Chinese School of IR Theory?” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 222–41; Chih-yu Shih and Jason Kuo, “A Relational Analysis of Exceptionalism: Connecting Liberalism with Confucian Multilateralism and Emotion,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 242–61; Ren Xiao, “Why There Is Now Non-Western International Relations Theory,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 262–76.

⁶ Barry Buzan, “China in International Society: Is ‘Peaceful Rise’ Possible?” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2010), pp. 5–36; Yaqing Qin, “International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities and China’s Peaceful Rise,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010), pp. 129–53; Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski, “Theorizing China’s Rise in and beyond International Relations,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2018), pp. 289–311.

⁷ Peter Katzenstein, “The Second Coming? Reflections on a Global Theory of International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), pp. 373–90; Amitav Acharya, “From Heaven to Earth: ‘Cultural Idealism’ and ‘Moral Realism’ as Chinese Contributions to Global International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019), pp. 467–94; Zhang Feng, “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. See also Maximilian Mayer and Xin Zhang, “Theorizing China-World Integration: Sociospatial Reconfigurations and the Modern Silk Roads,” *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2021), pp. 974–1003; Astrid Nordin et al.,

attempts. Of the three prominent branches of Chinese IR theories presented here, “relational theory,” associated with the work of Yaqing Qin and Chih-yu Shih, has engaged with constructivism and the English School on a relational world most often known as Tianxia;⁸ the “moral realism” of Yan Xuetong invokes mainstream Western IR theories on China’s competition with the USA over hegemony⁹; and the “symbiosis school,” championed by Shanghai-based scholars, tends to remain removed Western IR theory.¹⁰ As for Western IR scholarship, Chinese IR theories are generally overlooked (with some notable exceptions already mentioned). Moreover, the limited interactions that have occurred frequently revolve around mainstream Western theoretical perspectives. This represents a dual neglect. First, other Western perspectives and research traditions, also outside the Anglo-American core, have not yet become part of the dialogue. Second, the focus of such engagements has often sidelined analysing Chinese IR theories on their intrinsic merits and investigating what Western approaches can learn from them.

A more comprehensive and genuinely interactive dialogue between Chinese and Western IR theories seemed urgently needed—one that would promise to benefit both. With this objective in mind, Lu Peng and Ren Xiao organized an online workshop in April 2021, inviting representative Chinese IR theorists to engage in discussion with prominent Western IR theorists from various theoretical perspectives. Barry Buzan, Toni Erskine, Zhang Feng, Stefano Guzzini, Beate Jahn, Peter Katzenstein, Stephen Krasner, Milja Kurki, Justin Rosenberg, and Ayse Zarakol delivered detailed presentations on aspects of the Chinese School from their respective theoretical standpoints. In response, Yan Xuetong, Ren Xiao, and Chih-yu Shih explained their theoretical positions and proposed agendas for future collaboration with Western theorists. Subsequently, Yaqing Qin joined the dialogue, and participants from both sides continued to exchange ideas. Many participants expanded their initial presentations into fully developed analyses, benefiting from the comments and feedback of everyone present at the workshop. In March 2023, these papers were presented on two panels at the International Studies Association annual convention in Montreal, designed and organized by Toni Erskine, Lu Peng, and Stefano Guzzini, and further enriched by incisive comments from discussants Martha Finnemore and Qi Haixia.

After 3 years of constructive discussions and collaboration, we have arrived at the present dialogue. Its structure was inspired by a reversal of the common direction of such theoretical engagement, whereby scholars outside the core reflect on Anglo-American theoretical movements. Here, Western scholars engage Chinese IR theory. In doing so, a number of

“Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2019), pp. 570–81.

⁸ Yaqing Qin, “A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), pp. 415–34; Yih-Jye Hwang, Raoul Bunschoek, and Chih-yu Shih, “Re-Worlding the ‘West’ in Post-Western International Relations: The ‘Theory Migrant’ of Tianxia in the Anglosphere,” in Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski, eds., *China’s Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022), pp. 102–22; Zhao Tingyang, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

⁹ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁰ Most members of this specific Chinese School branch neither publish in English nor communicate with Western theorists. Instead, they publish in Chinese IR journals on the value and existence of the symbiotic system. See Jin Yingzhong, “Weishenme yao yanjiu guoji shehui gongsheng xing—jianyi heping fazhan shidai guoji guanxi lilun” (“Symbiosis of International Society and IR Theory of Peace and Development”), *Guoji Zhanwang (Global Review)*, No. 5 (2011), pp. 1–17; Su Changhe, “Gongsheng xing guoji tixi de keneng—zai yige duoji shijie zhong ruhe goujian xinxing daguo guanxi” (“The Possibility of Gongsheng International System: How to Build a New Type of Big Countries Relations in a Multi-Polar World”), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 9 (2013), pp. 4–22; Su Changhe, “Yi xin pubian zhuyi goujian shijie zixu—dui gongsheng wenti de jinyibu sikao” (“Construct World Order with New Universalism—Further Thought about the Symbiotic Issue”), *Tansuo yu Zhengning (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 11 (2014), pp. 35–8. Ren Xiao may be the only exception of the symbiotic branch who is active in interacting with Western IR. However, while doing so, he tends to speak on behalf of the Chinese School in general instead of symbiotic theory. See Ren Xiao, “Grown from Within: Building a Chinese School of International Relations,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2020), pp. 386–412.

contributions discuss the very idea or project of a single “Chinese School” of IR theory. They are of different minds on this issue. For some, establishing such theoretical schools has advantages. Such labelling can provide a common reference point for identifying and further developing positions with shared theoretical assumptions, as shown by IR’s so-called “English School” of international theory (otherwise known as the “international society” approach) or the “Copenhagen School” of security studies (also called “securitization theory”).¹¹ Moreover, this more formalized scholarly structure for Chinese IR theory may also help the discipline’s Chinese community reflect upon, and potentially theorize from, specific Chinese historical experiences and political traditions that differ from both Western and other non-Western traditions. After all, the experience of the British Empire and the practices of European diplomacy clearly influenced theorizing within the English School. Moreover, the politics of *Ostpolitik* inspired the Copenhagen School. Of course, such experiences in themselves do not constitute a theory, may or may not ultimately contribute to one, and would always require translation—as we can see through the examples of these Schools. Nevertheless, making explicit the experience that gave rise to a particular body of theorizing helps to contextualize theoretical assumptions and proposals.

However, there are also good reasons to be wary of the attempt to reduce the diverse Chinese theoretical approaches to a single “school.” Both the English and Copenhagen Schools, to return to these examples, are quite narrow endeavours when we compare them to the positions often placed in the “Chinese School.” Moreover, they refer to an initially quite coherent single set of scholars, and not merely some geographic or cultural reference that would provide coherence. In fact, any of the three branches of Chinese IR theories considered here would be closer to the idea of a single school than their overarching amalgamation. Of course, the academic community in England, let alone the UK, has many more theoretical branches than the relatively classical and mainstream English School. It is a single approach that originated (in large part) in England (even among non-Brits, like the Australians Hedley Bull and Coral Bell, who had strong UK connections),¹² but not one of England. Attempting to impose a single roof over the variety of Chinese approaches, instead of referring to them as individual theoretical projects, may end up stifling the richness and variety of Chinese theorizing. Who, in a cultural context as large, rich, and diverse as the Chinese, or even, if one turned the argument territorial, in a country the size of China, wants to have *one* School? That would be an expression of intellectual poverty, and, if mainly applied in contrast to an essentialized West, an indefensible reification of civilizational histories and binaries, hardly conducive to a constructive and empathetic dialogue.¹³

A further point for consideration is the different role that the English School and, in particular, the Copenhagen School have played in academic politics. As mentioned above,

¹¹ It is impossible to provide an overview over the thousands of publications attached or inspired by these two schools. Hence, we will simply indicate the classical works from which others developed. For the English School, see: Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); and Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977). For the Copenhagen School, see Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

¹² For an account of the Australian and British connections of both Bull and Bell, two members of the so-called “British Committee on International Theory” associated with the English School, see Toni Erskine, “Still Avoiding Armageddon: Neglected Antecedents and the Future Promise of Australian Normative IR Theory,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 6 (2021), pp. 619–36.

¹³ See e.g. Victoria Tin-bor Hui’s critique when addressing the attempt to reduce Chinese cosmologies to just one or to extrapolate from certain philosophical traditions to foreign policy behaviour or indeed IR theories. 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 (2012), pp. 425–49; and Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “History and Thought in China’s Traditions,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2012), pp. 125–41.

it may sometimes make sense to erect a “school” in order to become visible within academic debates.¹⁴ Obviously, North American IR would have no need for this move in order to become visible. Such a move makes most sense when it empowers smaller academic communities—which is perhaps not the case for the Chinese example. Here, the attempt to have a single School of Chinese IR theory runs the risk of recreating a kind of great power politics, but now within the academic field, which would come at the expense of less influential academic communities within and without the West. If so, the two tendencies that informed the present dialogue would start to collide: the development of a national or regional academic community would not be helpful for the creation of a more truly Global IR.

For these reasons, it is important to see the more modest endeavor of the present dialogue. The dialogue addresses Chinese IR theories, but does not pretend to represent or try to eclipse the wealth of intellectual exchange that has already taken place, in which Chinese ideas and cosmologies have been reflected upon and often integrated into theories proposed by Chinese scholars and others, be it within or without China.¹⁵ Hence, we do not wish to suggest that this is all there is to Chinese thought, which is obviously not limited only to scholars who are Chinese, and within that, primarily the ones living in China. Also, this dialogue is not to be confused with the wider meeting of different traditions of thought, whether Chinese, Western, or originating elsewhere. This dialogue can usefully be understood in the context of non-Western theories becoming more visible in the global discipline of IR, but it is a mere snapshot of this. In short, the dialogue has a modest, yet important, purpose. It is a meeting between some Western IR theorists and some Chinese theorists—to learn from each other (even when that happens through lively debate over points of disagreement and critique), to redress stark cases of neglect or misunderstanding, and to thereby enrich the theoretical positions on both sides of the imagined divide between us.

The “Chinese School”: An Outsider Perspective

Barry Buzan

Introduction

My perspective on the so-called “Chinese School” of IR, is that of an outsider.¹⁶ That has both advantages (detachment, and in some ways a wider view from outside China) and disadvantages (I do not read or speak Chinese, and therefore my perspective on it is largely informed by that part of its work that is written in English). Both of those aspects will be apparent in what follows. Yet although an outsider, I have been in regular contact with the Chinese IR community for the past 20 years; I have had the privilege of watching the “Chinese School” emerge over the past two decades; and I have been in regular contact

¹⁴ Oddly enough, though, in both cases, it was critics who attached the brand of “school,” not its proponents—even if the latter gladly adopted the label. See respectively: Roy E. Jones, “The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1981), pp. 1–13; and Bill McSweeney, “Identity and Security: Buzan and the Copenhagen School,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (1996), pp. 81–93.

¹⁵ See e.g. (in chronological order): L. H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory* (London: Routledge 2018); Chengxin Pan, “Toward a New Relational Ontology in Global Politics: China’s Rise as Holographic Transition,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (2018), pp. 339–67; Kosuke Shimizu, *Critical International Relations Theories in East Asia: Relationality, Subjectivity, and Pragmatism*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Karin Fierke, *Snapshots from Home* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022); Siyang Liu, Jeremy Garlick, and Fangxin Qin, “Towards Guanxi? Reconciling the Relational Turn in Western and Chinese International Relations Scholarship,” *All Azimuth*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2022), pp. 67–85; Ching-chang Chen, Astrid Nordin, Peter Mayer, “Political Healing in East Asian International Relations: What, Why and How,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 6 (2024), pp. 1019–34.

¹⁶ I put “Chinese School” in quotation marks because while the name exists, both its content and its right to exist are strongly contested.

with several of the principal figures involved. I have myself conducted two pieces of research on it: an article comparing it with the English School, and a book chapter looking at the contribution of classical Chinese thinking and practice of world order/IR.¹⁷ I have also researched quite deeply into Chinese history, politics, and foreign relations.¹⁸

In this short paper, I have two aims. The next section sets out both my own view of the origins, aims and content of the “Chinese School,” and, more tentatively, how I think others in the Western IR community, also outsiders, see and understand it. The following section looks at some issues for the “Chinese School,” particularly Sino-centrism and the problem of how to represent Chinese history. The conclusion asks whether the umbrella of the “Chinese School” is necessary or useful now that IR in China is so much better developed than it was 20 years ago, and how Chinese IR relates to the project to create a Global IR.

Perspectives on the “Chinese School”

My own view of the “Chinese School” is that it originated as a mobilizing label aimed at bringing into being something that did not yet exist. Two decades ago, Yaqing Qin and others started calling for the creation of a “Chinese School” in order to inspire Chinese IR scholars to move beyond the stages of learning and applying Western IR theory, and into theory development of their own.¹⁹ In this, the “Chinese School” differs fundamentally from other schools (e.g. Copenhagen School, English School) where the label was applied to something that was already acknowledged as being in existence. From this perspective, the “Chinese School” started life as an empty signifier. It is a common practice both in China (“peaceful rise,” “China Dream,” “Belt and Road Initiative”) and elsewhere (“Asia-Pacific,” “Indo-Pacific”) to launch such empty signifiers in the hope that they then inspire the actions and attitudes that will flesh them out with substantive content. The label itself specified little. It could mean IR theory based on Chinese history and political theory, or it could mean IR theory made by people who were in some significant sense Chinese, or it could mean theorizing about China itself.

Outsiders probably carry the expectation that the “Chinese School” is mainly, or wholly, done by Chinese people, who might reasonably be thought to have a comparative advantage in knowledge of the language and culture. However, that association is almost certainly shallow. The moment one begins to think about it, numerous complexities arise about how to define “Chinese people.” Is it Chinese citizens who mainly live and work in China? What about foreigners who live in China, or who fit the criteria of drawing theory from Chinese history, political theory and philosophy? What about ethnic Chinese who have studied or who live abroad? Are Singaporean-, or American- or British-Chinese, “Chinese”? Defining who is Chinese is as difficult as defining who is Western or non-Western.²⁰ Consequently, there will be some association of the “Chinese School” with Chinese IR scholars working in China, but no hard criteria.

To the extent that the aim of the call for a “Chinese School” was to inspire Chinese IR scholars to step across the boundary from theory-taking to theory-making, it did not matter what the nature and content of the new theory-making actually was, or even who

¹⁷ Wang Jiangli and Barry Buzan “The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations: Comparisons and Lessons,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (2014), pp. 1–46; Barry Buzan and Amitav Acharya, *Re-Thinking International Relations: If IR Had Emerged from China, India or the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), chapter 4.

¹⁸ Barry Buzan and Evelyn Goh, *Rethinking Sino-Japanese Alienation: History Problems and Historical Opportunities* (London: Oxford University Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Yaqing Qin, “Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?” in Acharya and Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, pp. 26–50.

²⁰ 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), pp. 301–9.

was doing it. It is mainly from this perspective—primarily as a call to action—that I will assess the “Chinese School.” This call to action could be read in purely academic terms, as an initiative aimed at getting the long-neglected study of IR in China up to speed, and on level ground, with the West and the rest of the world. It could also be read as complementary to the broader political aim of the Chinese government to improve China’s ability to resist and contest Western hegemony, both academic and political. These motives no doubt distributed themselves differently for individual Chinese scholars.

Shifting up to a more general view of how outsiders understand the “Chinese School,” my sense is that very few among that wider audience will either know about, or be much interested in, its origins as a mobilizing empty signifier. Instead, most will see “Chinese School” as work that draws on Chinese history and political theory and philosophy in order to formulate new IR theory, and/or to critique and modify existing theory. One way of grasping this perspective is that the development of the “Chinese School” in some important senses reveals what IR theory would look like if it had been developed first in China rather than in the West.²¹ Outsiders will be sensitive to whether or not such work has political aims. To the extent it is seen as purely academic, introducing new empirical material and ideas to the study of IR, it will be generally welcomed. But if it is seen as representing the views of the Chinese government, it will, at least in most Western countries, be discounted and treated with skepticism.

The main outsider understanding of the “Chinese School” will almost certainly be its substantive links to Chinese history and political theory and philosophy, and I will also use this criterion to assess the “Chinese School.” The Chineseness (or not) of its authors will be of secondary concern. Although the “Chinese School” could be constructed as being about the contemporary rise of China, few outsiders will see it that way because there is already a large global literature on that topic drawn from many theoretical perspectives both inside and outside China. Neither will the “Chinese School” be associated with Marxism, which has its own tradition, and which so far has been largely absent from what might be thought of as the core opus of the “Chinese School.” The absence of Marxism is underlined by the broader absence of a significant critical theory strand in contemporary Chinese IR: poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, racism studies, and suchlike.

Outsiders will care little about the turf wars and internal squabbling within China about what “Chinese School” means, and who wants to be in and who out. To the extent they are aware of it, they will see it as a typical academic “narcissism of small differences.” They will perhaps see this narcissism amplified by the notable prominence of individual “big names” (Qin, Shih, Yan, Ren, Zhao) in defining the sub-schools of the “Chinese School” (relationalism, Tsinghua, *Gongsheng*, *Tianxia*). It is not that “big names” do not exist in Western IR, for they obviously do. It is more about the unusual degree to which particular schools of thought are associated with individual big names in China that outsiders will find odd, and potentially a bit disturbing. A structure like that potentially blurs the lines between debates about theory and interpretation on the one hand, and the personality politics of the profession on the other.

Ironically, outsiders will almost certainly lump together the work of Qin, Yan and Zhao as within the “Chinese School,” because those works all fit clearly into the template of drawing theory from Chinese history and political theory and philosophy. They will do this regardless of the views of the principals within China about where their work does and does not belong. More problematic is how to place Tang Shiping, who fits Qin’s original empty signifier idea of the “Chinese School,” that Chinese themselves should get engaged in theory-making, but not the expectation that “Chinese School” theory should relate to Chinese history, political theory and philosophy. Tang is not usually mentioned in China as being part of the “Chinese School,” and as far as I am aware, does not associate himself with

²¹ Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Thinking International Relations*, chapter 4.

it. He sees IR theory as universal, and makes no particular attempt to draw from Chinese history, political theory, or philosophy. Like Yan, he seeks to make his own contribution within the universal realist tradition.

It is also unclear how outsiders will place *Gongsheng* theory, which again fits with Qin's idea of inspiring Chinese theorists to move to theory-building, but doesn't so obviously fit with the idea of being mainly rooted in Chinese history, political theory, and philosophy. Ren Xiao makes the case for it being within the "Chinese School" because it draws on the *zhongyong* doctrine of the mean in Chinese dialectics.²² *Gongsheng* theory stresses symbiosis that political and cultural differences must not only be accepted and respected, but also be treated as equal. Outsiders may well be skeptical that the sources for a view stressing relations amongst equals can be found within the famously hierarchical realm of Chinese history, political theory and philosophy. Indeed, does *Gongsheng* theory need this Chinese link? It already has strong resonance with various aspects of non-Chinese IR theory going all the way back to Herz's work on self-limiting nationalism.²³ It fits with uneven and combined development in taking difference as the normal condition of international society.²⁴ It has strong resonance with English School pluralism in valuing that difference, and in seeking to embed it within an international society of legal equals pursuing a norm of peaceful coexistence.²⁵ And it aligns with Amitav Acharya's enthusiasm for difference as an engine of creativity in his call for a more Global IR.²⁶ Since *Gongsheng* theory is not yet well known outside China, it is an open question as to whether outsiders will see it as more within the "Chinese School," or more in line with Tang's work in being mainly a development within Western IR theory.²⁷

Issues for the "Chinese School"

This section looks briefly at two issues for the "Chinese School": Sino-centrism, and the problem of how to represent Chinese history.

Peng Lu rightly raises the problem of Sino-centrism in Chinese IR.²⁸ He sees a long tradition of privileging Chinese knowledge, and worries that the "Chinese School," in the sense of those who draw on China's history, political theory and philosophy, represents a revival of this tradition, and a turn away from the idea that IR theory should be universal. Regardless of whether or not one accepts Peng's wider argument, he is certainly not alone in seeing Sino-centrism as a potential problem for IR theory-making in China. Shih, for example, argues that China remains in the grip of Confucian hierarchical relationalism, and has failed to develop separate norms for dealing with interstate relations.²⁹ Onuma argues that

²² Ren Xiao, "A *Gongsheng*/Symbiotic Theory of International Relations—A Non-Western Manifesto," unpublished manuscript, 2021; Ren, "Grown from Within," pp. 3–4, 386–412. On *zhongyong* dialectics, see Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

²³ John H. Herz, "The Territorial State Revisited," in James N. Rosenau, ed., *International Politics and Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 76–89.

²⁴ Justin Rosenberg, "Problems in the Theory of Uneven and Combined Development Part II: Unevenness and Multiplicity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2010), pp. 165–89; Justin Rosenberg, "Kenneth Waltz and Leon Trotsky: Anarchy in the Mirror of Uneven and Combined Development," *International Politics*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2013), pp. 183–230; Justin Rosenberg, "International Relations in the Prison of Political Science," *International Relations*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2016), pp. 127–53.

²⁵ Barry Buzan, *An Introduction to the English School of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chapters 6–7.

²⁶ Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations*.

²⁷ Shiping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁸ Peng Lu, "Chinese IR Sino-Centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2019), pp. 150–67.

²⁹ Chih-yu Shih, *The Spirit of Chinese Foreign Policy: A Psychocultural View* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 118–22.

the Chinese Tribute System was the most alien of premodern societies to any idea of an international law amongst equals.³⁰ It was conceptually so strongly Sino-centric, that it made China's relations with others effectively expressions of China's domestic authority. Even treaties were constructed as imperial edicts, not as something negotiated between sovereign polities. Overweening Sino-centrism effectively trumped any formal acceptance of dealing with others as independent entities. Luttwak also worries that much of China's political theory and philosophy come from the pre-Qin period, when China was more or less an international system in itself, and international relations took place mainly within the sphere of Chinese culture and civilization.³¹ This tradition of thought, he argues, is profoundly ill-suited to IR in a multicivilizational world:

[China has] a deeply rooted strategic culture that is both intellectually seductive and truly dysfunctional. Its harmful consequences have marked the historical experiences of the Han nation, supremely accomplished in generating wealth and culture from earth and water by hard work and wonderful skill, but exceptionally autistic in relating to the non-Han, and therefore unsuccessful in contending with them whether by diplomacy or by force. Nor is this culture at all appropriate for the fluid conduct of inter-state relations among formal equals, as opposed to the management of a China-centred tributary system.

Paine reinforces this view with her trenchant observation that: "Only in the late nineteenth century did the Chinese learn that civilization had a plural."³²

These concerns about Sino-centrism are surely an issue for the "Chinese School" understood as trying to draw from Chinese history, political theory, and philosophy as a basis for IR theory-making. The "Chinese School" in this sense faces a dilemma. On the one hand, it is surely right and necessary for China, and on the other cultures and civilizations, to get their own histories, political theories, and philosophies taken into account in Global IR. There can be no question that modern IR is deeply Euro- and West-centric, with much of its theory based on the European/Western historical experience, and the normative foundations of European/Western political theory and philosophy. Indeed, echoing Paine's remark quoted above, it might now be said that only in the early 21st century has the West begun to learn that civilization has a plural. West-centrism is just a consequence of the timing and conditions under which the discipline of IR came into being within a context of the global dominance of Western and Japanese wealth and power.³³ If IR is to become properly global, then there is a compelling need to widen and rebalance its historical and normative foundations. Yet that said, there are also dangers associated with the development of parochial national schools of IR, which risk fragmenting the discipline into self-isolating and mutually exclusive intellectual silos.³⁴ Global IR is not about replacing the dominance of Western parochialism with the dominance of Chinese, Indian, Islamic, or any other parochial story. It is about integrating these stories. If the "Chinese School" becomes merely another parochialism that reprojects Sino-centrism, then not only will Peng's critique, and the similar worries of others, be fully vindicated, but also China itself will be ill-served by a mode of theorizing that does not work well in a multi-civilizational global society. Many years ago, Senator William Fulbright wrote an insightful book about the USA

³⁰ Onuma Yasuaki, "When Was the Law of International Society Born? An Inquiry of the History of International Law from an Intercivilisational Perspective," *Journal of the History of International Law*, Vol. 2 (2000), pp. 11–8.

³¹ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 260.

³² S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 336.

³³ Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations*.

³⁴ Acharya and Buzan, "Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?" pp. 301–9; Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations*, pp. 235, 258.

as a superpower, entitled *The Arrogance of Power*.³⁵ It would be a tragedy if the unfolding of a parochial “Chinese School” supported the unfolding of a self-centred and self-righteous Chinese state, and thereby generated an opportunity for someone to write a follow-on with the title: *The Arrogance of Power with Chinese Characteristics*.

IR as a discipline everywhere faces the tension between two tasks both of which are legitimate, but sometimes contradictory: giving advice to the prince, and speaking truth to power. For the “Chinese School,” this tension is in some ways related to the issue of Sino-centrism, and manifests itself most obviously in how to represent Chinese history. It is also linked to the constraints of working within a country where the government itself has a strongly political view of history. But I have discussed that issue elsewhere and it needs no further elaboration here.³⁶ The main question is where and how to draw the line between an academic analysis of China’s history, and a propagandistic projection of it as an intrinsically peaceful culture and polity. It is, of course, a perfectly reasonable academic project to assess historical records to see whether some cultures and polities have been more aggressive or more peaceful than others. That is a legitimate scientific question of comparative politics. But it is also common for states themselves to project the idea that they are intrinsically peaceful, whether on cultural or ideological grounds. Many governments do this. The Anglosphere democracies project themselves as peaceful because they are liberal, but their record of war and imperialism is long and bloody. The Soviet Union projected itself as peaceful because it was a socialist/communist state, but it too had a record of war and imperialism. India projects itself as peaceful on cultural grounds, and because it has almost no record of aggressive imperialism outside the subcontinent, and spread its cultural and religious influences into Asia peacefully.³⁷

An academic case can be made that China is a basically peaceful culture when China’s history is compared with Western imperialism.³⁸ But in China’s case, this peace claim misrepresents history by leaving out the very high levels of violence when China is disunited and undergoing civil war, and so is a kind of international system in its own right. This was true during the Warring States period before 221 BC,³⁹ a time that was so violent and destructive that Pines argues that it laid the foundations for China’s long and deep philosophical and political commitment to maintaining unity and hierarchy.⁴⁰ When China fragments, as it has periodically done in the transitions between dynasties, such as between the Han and Tang, after the Tang, and after the Qing, extensive and intensive civil war results before a new unity is established. During the decay of the Qing dynasty during the 19th century, the Taiping Rebellion probably killed more than 30 million people. The Civil War that stretched from the fall of the Qing dynasty to the establishment of communist rule in 1949 killed perhaps 12 million people.⁴¹ Even when the gaze is turned outside, China’s record is not obviously peaceful. As clearly shown by the famous 15th century voyages of Zheng He, which were about expanding the scale of the Tribute System, and a Sino-centric *Tianxia*, classical China used both persuasion and coercion when it suited its purpose. Zheng He’s fleets went heavily armed and did not refrain from using force to promote what would now

³⁵ William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Random House, 1966).

³⁶ Barry Buzan, “How and How Not to Develop IR Theory: Lessons from Core and Periphery,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), pp. 391–414.

³⁷ Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Thinking International Relations*, chapter 3.

³⁸ David Kang, “Why China’s Rise Will Be Peaceful: Hierarchy and Stability in the East Asian Region,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2005), pp. 551–4.

³⁹ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Buzan and Goh, *Rethinking Sino-Japanese Alienation*, pp. 112–22.

be called regime change in other countries.⁴² Wade goes as far as to liken these voyages to “gunboat diplomacy,” or even a “proto maritime colonialism.”⁴³

The “Chinese School” unavoidably sits on this awkward boundary line. The pressures on it within China to present a benign view are probably considerable, but in relation to the external audience, for it to do so risks it being associated with government propaganda. The “Chinese School” cannot avoid this difficult dilemma, and has to learn to navigate it as best it can. An associated issue is that IR in China is still divided between those like Tang and Yan on one side, who see IR theory as necessarily universal, and those on the other side, who seek to make a contribution from local roots. As the work of Yan, Qin and Ren demonstrates, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. Yet there is some danger that they could become so if the “Chinese School” is pushed towards becoming a form of national IR theory, exclusively by and for China. How well or not Chinese IR does in handling these pressures, could determine how much traction it gets both inside China and in the rest of the world. It would be a loss to both Global IR and the standing of IR theory-making in China, if this resulted in a zero-sum game for the “Chinese School” between global and domestic imperatives.

Conclusions

What, then, does this outsider perspective tell us about the “Chinese School”? The most obvious conclusion is that the original purpose of Qin’s empty signifier has been handsomely fulfilled. Theory-making in China is now quite widespread and deep, with several prominent Chinese IR theorists in play doing original thinking, and an expanding literature of theoretical, and theoretically informed works. IR in China is thus now well past the point of needing to be pushed over the boundary between theory-taking and theory-making. It does not matter for the purposes of theory-making whether these works are viewed as deeply original in the sense of introducing theories not currently present in IR or viewed as contributions to existing theoretical strands in modern IR.⁴⁴ By this specific criterion, the empty signifier has served its purpose and could be dropped. It is no longer either necessary or useful to have the “Chinese School” label as a collective umbrella and motivation. Indeed, it might now even risk becoming a burden, fuelling unnecessary frictions about what it means, and who is in and who is out. The particular structure of Chinese IR, where prominent individuals and universities play a very central, and often competitive, role, perhaps exacerbates this problem. The “Chinese School” label also risks encouraging either or both of a nation(alist) school of IR, and one that is seen as being tied to the government. There is a case, therefore, for dropping the “Chinese School” label, and letting the various emerging “schools” of IR theory in China—relationalism, Tsinghua, *Tianxia*, evolutionism, *Gongsheng*—just go their own way, under their own labels, abandoning any attempt at collective grouping under the “Chinese School.”

But before going down that path, it is worth asking whether the “Chinese School” label still has significant utility as a marketing tool for Chinese IR in the wider world. Is there still value in retaining “Chinese School” as an umbrella for those approaches which focus on Chinese history, political theory, and philosophy as distinctive sources for developing IR theory? That, after all, is how most of the rest of the IR community outside China see the “Chinese School,” and it is a label that makes sense in distinguishing a body of work that has those particular Chinese characteristics. Such an approach would be uncomfortable for Yan Xuetong and his Tsinghua colleagues, who do not like to be associated with the

⁴² Ja Ian Chong, “Popular Narratives vs. China’s History: Implications for Understanding an Emergent China,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4, (2014), pp. 952–4; Feng Zhang, “Confucian Foreign Policy Traditions in Chinese History,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2015), pp. 200–2.

⁴³ Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment,” *Working Paper Series No 31* (October 2004), Asia Research Centre, National University of Singapore, pp. 18–9.

⁴⁴ Lu, “Chinese IR Sino-Centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement,” pp. 150–67.

“Chinese School,” and prefer their own brand. But as noted above, outsiders will care little about the turf wars and personality politics within Chinese academia. To the extent that Chinese IR seeks to make an impact in the wider world, the marketing question is perhaps now the main one: whether the label “Chinese School” is more a help or a hindrance, both within and outside China, in getting Chinese IR the attention it deserves?

A further question is how Chinese IR will fit into Global IR, whether as a “Chinese School,” or under a range of more specific school labels? This question can be considered against the understanding of Global IR set out in Acharya and Buzan.⁴⁵ Acharya himself has already given some thought to the specific ways in which the “Chinese School” of IR might fit, or not, with Global IR, including setting out general criteria such as overcoming exceptionalism, having a critical mass, developing a research agenda that is used by a sizeable number of scholars, not being a fad, and being picked-up and used outside China or East Asia.⁴⁶ There are three possibilities for how Chinese IR might relate to Global IR. In some ways, Chinese IR has obvious compatibilities with Global IR, and has already become part of it. In other ways, Chinese IR could find itself in a troubled and controversial relationship with Global IR. And it is also possible that Chinese IR could find itself in direct opposition to Global IR. Given that the development of IR in China has already made sufficient strides to have generated several schools of thought, these three possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Chinese IR is now impressively big and diverse. If that trend continues, then all three possibilities could be in play at the same time in relation to different strands of thought. Indeed, staking out this relationship has already begun, with scholars such as Yan Xuetong setting out a case against the compatibility of moral realism and Global IR.⁴⁷

The most obvious way in which Chinese IR fits smoothly into Global IR is in terms of adding in Chinese history and political theory to the empirical and theoretical stock of IR. A key goal of Global IR is to pull the discipline away from its foundational dependence on Western history and political theory, and to make it more inclusive by adding in the contributions and expertise from area studies. A major goal of Global IR is to make the entire corpus of IR theory confront the many layers of Eurocentrism that have accumulated within it because of the nature (born at the peak of an imperialist age), place (Europe and America), and timing (late 19th and early 20th century) of its foundation. Chinese IR has already contributed considerably to that. China’s history is quite different from the Western one, featuring a much stronger role for hierarchical than for anarchical relations,⁴⁸ and, via the Tribute System, giving cultural factors more prominence than economic and military ones.⁴⁹ Chinese IR also offers some deep theoretical contributions including relationalism, “face,” *zhongyong* dialectics, and benign authority.⁵⁰ Global IR is about “pluralistic universalism,” which both recognizes and accepts the diversity of human history, while at the same time rejecting claims of national or cultural exceptionalism, and aiming to place specific histories into their wider context of regional and global connectivities and interplays. The aim is to build a global historical perspective, finding a holistic perspective on the scale of the planet and humankind, while at the same time integrating local histories into that wider picture.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations*, pp. 295–320.

⁴⁶ Acharya, “From Heaven to Earth,” pp. 467–94.

⁴⁷ Yan Xuetong, “Chinese Values versus Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?” in Yaqing Qin, ed., *Globalizing IR Theory: Critical Engagement* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 102–23.

⁴⁸ Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and its Imperial Legacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴⁹ Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Thinking International Relations*, pp. 53–65, 73–6.

⁵⁰ Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*; Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*; Buzan and Acharya, *Re-Thinking International Relations*, pp. 65–71.

⁵¹ For one attempt to do this, Barry Buzan, *Making Global Society: A Study of Humankind across Three Eras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

The second possibility is that all or part of Chinese IR will fall into a troubled and controversial relationship with Global IR. The most obvious path to this outcome would be if it set itself up in some form of zero-sum competition with Western IR, going beyond criticism and towards rejection. Global IR aims at more than simply a pluralism of coexistence among different theories and perspectives. Ideally, it strives not simply for the preservation of existing theories and perspectives as they are, but for each to take into account, and give due recognition to, the implications of other theories for themselves. “Global IR is really more about pluralisation *within* theories rather than just *between* them.”⁵² Global IR subsumes, rather than supplants, existing IR knowledge. It does not seek to displace the corpus of Western IR in itself, but to displace its hegemony within the discipline. Global IR also acknowledges the rising globalization of the world, its growing interconnectedness and interdependence, whether in terms of economy and culture, or in terms of shared fates such as pandemics and climate change. In that respect, any drift towards parochialism would look counter-productive and generate friction.

The third possibility is that Chinese IR could fall into opposition to Global IR. The most obvious way in which that could happen is an extension of the second possibility: if all or part of it set itself up with the explicit aim of replacing the hegemony of Western IR theory with the hegemony of Chinese IR theory. Taking that direction would go against the idea that Global IR is mainly about synthesizing ideas, and acknowledging diversity, and that it is not at all about choosing one approach over others. Both the tendencies towards Sino-centric thinking discussed above, and pressure from the government to support the project of “rejuvenating” the Chinese nation, could push things in this direction. This would be especially so if, as seems increasingly likely, world politics becomes defined by deep rivalry between the West and China. Global IR is on the whole not compatible with nationalistic IR projects, claims to exceptionalism, and exclusionary conversations. From a Global IR perspective, a move towards a Sino-centric IR would be a retrograde step, simply replacing one undesirable centrism (Western) with another (Chinese).

IR as a discipline is obliged to try to keep itself above the world politics that it studies. Its history to date shows how difficult this is, with both unconscious and conscious political biases in play throughout. Many of these have been rooted in the peculiar circumstances of the discipline’s formative decades. Global IR is an attempt both to overcome this legacy, and to make the discipline a better and more representative fit with the subject it studies, which is the political, economic, and social organization of humankind on a planetary scale. Chinese IR is now a significant part of the discipline, and how it unfolds will therefore play a crucial role in whether Global IR succeeds or fails in its aims.

Chinese IR and the Politics of Knowledge

Beate Jahn

Introduction

While Chinese scholars have, for some time now, developed international theories complementary to or competing with their Western counterparts, Western scholars have been attempting to pluralize and/or globalize IR. This forum takes stock of these developments and explores the potential of Chinese IR theory for the discipline at large.

My contribution explores this issue from a politics of knowledge perspective. I will first argue that the development of Chinese IR has two key aims: the first, intellectual, goal lies in the provision of a “better” understanding of international relations and the second, political, goal consists in challenging the hegemony of the West by undermining the theories that prop-up the hierarchical international order. These goals will then serve as a benchmark for

⁵² Acharya and Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations*, p. 301.

the assessment of Chinese international theories, and I will show in the second and third part of my reflections that Chinese and Western theories of IR are broadly comparable—including in their intellectual and political limitations. These limitations have their roots in the complex nature of the relationship between power and knowledge, theory and practice, which is largely ignored in the direct pursuit of intellectual and political goals. Paradoxically, therefore, I will conclude that Chinese (like other, including Western) international theories may have better chances of overcoming these limitations by focusing on the complex relationship between power and knowledge in general and the way in which this relationship has manifested historically in the Chinese case in particular.

The Purposes of Chinese International Theory

The entire project of developing Chinese international theory is based on an explicit or implicit recognition of the close relationship between power and knowledge—in a number of different registers. First, political power shapes knowledge. During the Maoist period, for example, the Chinese state abolished the social sciences in general and thus also precluded the development of Chinese International Theory. Yet, after 1979, this policy was overturned and the project politically supported.⁵³ The same connection between political agencies like governments and knowledge production is also familiar in the West—from the interest of the US government for IR knowledge after WWII through its introduction of Political Science as “democracy science” in Germany at the same time.⁵⁴ Second, however, this connection between political agents and academics is not just a one-way street. Academic analyses are often motivated by the issues and problems of the time and aim to inform political practice—whether by influencing public opinion or the policies of non-governmental or governmental actors—hence, the revolving door between academia and government in American IR.⁵⁵ American and British academic reflections on international relations around the turn of the 19th century, for example, tended to revolve around questions of colonial administration, imperialism, and racism⁵⁶—and, conversely, we find academic work in the colonies, like Sarkar’s Hindu Theory of IR, explicitly designed to make the case for colonial independence.⁵⁷ Yet, when the future of imperialism came under serious threat, those theories of, and about, imperialism were replaced by modernization theories⁵⁸ or, more directly in IR, the English School.⁵⁹ In all these cases, knowledge is used to justify certain forms of power, to challenge particular power relations and those power relations in turn inform, prop up, and validate certain forms of knowledge.

This relationship between politics and knowledge also underpins the project of developing Chinese IR theory. It is based on the assumption that hegemonic forms of knowledge ignore the experiences, resources and interests of less powerful actors and this leads to intellectual and political limitations. Intellectually, the exclusion of the perspectives and interests of significant numbers of actors undermines the general validity of international

⁵³ Yongjin Zhang and Teng-chi Chang, “Introduction: The making of Chinese International Theory?” in Yongjin Zhang and Teng-chi Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations: Ongoing Debates and Sociological Realities* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–16.

⁵⁴ Hans Kastendiek, *Die Entwicklung der westdeutschen Politikwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Campus, 1977).

⁵⁵ Stanley Hoffmann, “An American Social Science: International Relations,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 106, No. 3 (1977), pp. 41–60.

⁵⁶ David Long and Brian C. Schmidt, eds., *Imperialism and Internationalism in the Discipline of International Relations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁵⁷ Benoy Kumar Sarkar, “Hindu Theory of International Relations,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1919), pp. 400–14.

⁵⁸ M. E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and “Nation Building” in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ William A. Callahan, “Nationalising International Theory: Race, Class and the English School,” *Global Society*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2004), pp. 305–23.

theories. Politically, such theories serve to uphold or extend a hierarchical international system. Consequently, the development of Chinese IR theory has two key aims: one, to improve our understanding of international politics by integrating hitherto marginalized (specifically Chinese) perspectives, experiences, and resources—in short, by producing “better” international theory; and two, to challenge the hegemony of Western international theories and thus to undermine Western political hegemony.⁶⁰ These two goals will now serve as benchmarks for assessing the potential and limitations of Chinese international theory—particularly in comparison with Western theories.

The Intellectual Potential of Chinese International Theories

Do Chinese theories manage to integrate neglected viewpoints and resources and thus produce international theories with greater general validity? On a first glance, the answer is: yes. All three main Chinese theories—moral realism, relational theory, and symbiotic theory—draw on classical Chinese thought and elaborate that and how this enhances the quality of Western international theories. Working out different categories of leadership, including, in particular, humane leadership, moral realism integrates a moral dimension to broadly realist conceptions of international relations—which carries the promise of actual progress in international affairs.⁶¹ Relational theory shows that the Chinese conception of the individual as always already constituted by particular relations differs fundamentally from Western constructivism based on an originally unencumbered individual—with significant implications for international politics.⁶² And the symbiotic theory argues that the assumption of symbiosis—of the mutual dependence of all things, and in particular the necessary and valuable role of difference—undermines the dominant Western monism and its political implications in the form of missionary policies that have had such a detrimental effect in international affairs.⁶³

These theories are highly sophisticated and can easily compete with Western theories. In both cases, classical theory is used to identify metatheoretical assumptions from which theories of international politics are derived. The validity of these theories is then tested by applying them to particular historical and contemporary cases. In both cases, this also leads to the development of a range of different, and competing, theories (often derived from different classical sources) and debates between them.

Yet, these parallels also raise the question in how far, and in what sense, these theories are “Chinese”—and consequently to what extent they do manage to add neglected viewpoints to our understanding of international affairs. After all, as Yan Xuetong notes,⁶⁴ Western classical realism is not entirely devoid of morality. One only has to think of Morgenthau’s *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* or Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.⁶⁵ Similarly, Qin and Nordin point out that critical theories in the West—feminism and post-colonialism in particular—also work with relational foundations.⁶⁶ And Ren likens the concept of *Gongsheng* to the understanding of symbiosis by the German botanist de Bary in the 18th century⁶⁷—a concept that now plays a crucial role in environmental thought (and its international political implications). In all three cases, therefore, it is not difficult

⁶⁰ Mario Telò, “Building a Common Language in Pluralist International Relations Theories,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2020), pp. 455–83; Lu, “Chinese IR Sino-Centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement,” pp. 150–67.

⁶¹ Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

⁶² Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. M. Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (2019), pp. 601–14.

⁶³ Ren, “A *Gongsheng*/Symbiotic Theory of International Relations.”

⁶⁴ Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, pp. 6–7.

⁶⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932).

⁶⁶ Qin and Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought.”

⁶⁷ Ren, “A *Gongsheng*/Symbiotic Theory of International Relations,” p. 6.

to find parallels between Western and Chinese thinking and Chinese theories are often presented as Chinese versions of particular Western theories: moral realism/realism, relational theory/constructivism and so on. Hence, the core concepts of Chinese theories—morality, relationalism, symbiosis—can also be found in Western theory.

There can be no question that a Confucian conception of morality differs from a Hobbesian one or that a Daoist conception of relationality differs from Western constructivist versions. These theories clearly challenge the Western monopoly of knowledge production by demonstrating that highly sophisticated intellectual resources for thinking about international affairs are equally, and in the Chinese case even earlier than in the West, available in other cultures. But the parallels between Chinese and Western forms of IR knowledge production also highlight what many observers have pointed out: namely that the “Chinese” credentials of these theories are potentially much too narrow for any broader appeal.⁶⁸

First, it is unclear whether, how, and to what extent classical Chinese thought genuinely underpins contemporary political reflections in China—especially in light of radical ruptures in Chinese history, from the century of humiliations to the Maoist period. Second, Chinese theories are as vulnerable as Western, or any other, theories to the particular interests and perspectives that shape the political and cultural context of the contemporary Chinese state within which they are produced. This may narrow their broader appeal and general validity. It also points to a third problem: namely, the question of who and what is included and excluded in such a unitary conception of “Chinese” theory. Do these theories represent the thinking of ethnic and religious minorities in China, of the huge Chinese diaspora around the world, of Chinese women at home and abroad?⁶⁹ In other words, even if these theories offer genuinely original and creative ways of thinking about IR, it is unclear how much of the diverse Chinese historical experience, how many of the diverse sections of Chinese society, and which of the many Chinese political interests and viewpoints these theories actually represent. Hence, the goal of providing “better,” in the sense of more inclusive, international theories raises the challenge of providing a highly inclusive conception of what is “Chinese”—to which I will return below.

The Political Potential of Chinese International Theories

Do Chinese theories manage to challenge the hegemony of Western thought and the hierarchical international order it is assumed to prop up? Each of the Chinese theories clearly identifies and addresses weaknesses in Western theories and their political ramifications. Thus, the centrality of power in realist theory plays a key role in justifying a hierarchical international order—which is mitigated by the role of morality in moral realism.⁷⁰ Similarly, the constitutive nature of relationality addresses the individualist rationality of Western constructivism and thus paves the way for deeper forms of cooperation.⁷¹ *Gongsheng* theory clearly identifies the missionary policies of the West as an important means to uphold unequal power relations in world politics and undermines it by replacing its foundational monism with symbiotic thinking.⁷² Despite these promising theoretical moves, however, it is not clear that these theories actually do challenge the hegemony of Western theories in the field or the political hegemony of the West in international affairs.

Yet, here again, it is instructive to recall that Western theories are not necessarily more successful. As mentioned above, symbiotic thinking is not at all alien to Western thought;

⁶⁸ Telò, “Building a Common Language in Pluralist International Relations Theories”; Lu, “Chinese IR Sino-Centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement”; Acharya, “From Heaven to Earth,” pp. 467–94; L. H. M. Ling, “What’s in a Name? A Critical Interrogation of the ‘Chinese School of IR,’” in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*, pp. 17–34.

⁶⁹ Ling, “What’s in a Name?”

⁷⁰ Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

⁷¹ Qin and Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought.”

⁷² Ren, “A *Gongsheng*/Symbiotic Theory of International Relations.”

yet neither the Chinese nor the Western version appears to be very influential in our field. Relationalism, as Qin and Nordin point out, provides the basis for all critical theories in the West and nevertheless plays a marginal role, both intellectually and politically.⁷³ There is an entire strand of normative international theory in the West that elaborates moral principles but it does not play much of a role in the dominant conception of IR. Yet this does not mean that moral, relational or symbiotic thinking—whether Chinese or Western—are marginalized while dominant theories really do reflect and inform international politics.

The fact that realism and liberalism provide competing explanations of the Cold War highlights that neither of them unequivocally reflects or explains international affairs in that period. Similarly, the fact that realism was utterly incapable of explaining the end of the Cold War (not to mention predicting it)⁷⁴ or that liberal policies in the post-Cold War period produced the opposite of the intended consequences,⁷⁵ reminds us that even dominant theories do not necessarily reflect or shape political practice. Hence, while Western realist and liberal theories for the moment may retain their dominance in academia, even their relationship to practice—to the justification or expansion of a hierarchical international order—is not straight forward.

These examples remind us, first of all, that there is no unitary Chinese or Western theory but rather internal theoretical diversity and differential power. And inasmuch as knowledge is somehow connected to power, this also draws attention to internal political inequality. Second, it is clear that there is no direct, linear, causal link between knowledge and power. Power, for example of the Chinese state, does not necessarily ensure the influence of Chinese theories. Nor does the quality of theories guarantee their academic or political success.⁷⁶ This draws attention to the complexity of the relationship between power and knowledge. The uptake of new theories may require a paradigm shift à la Kuhn.⁷⁷ Or it may require an epistemic shift à la Foucault.⁷⁸ But neither paradigm shifts nor epistemic shifts are open to purposeful manipulation. While we can critique existing paradigms and analyse epistemes and their limits, we cannot change them at will.

Hence Chinese theories of IR suffer from the very same problem as Western theories, namely that they are theories in the conventional sense. They are abstractions from practice that open up a gap between theory and practice. And attempts to bridge this gap are an integral part of knowledge production—for Chinese and Western theories alike.⁷⁹

In sum, therefore, these reflections suggest that neither Chinese nor Western theories of IR currently manage to integrate neglected viewpoints and thus to approach a more general validity. It also suggests that the aim to challenge Western academic, and by extension political, hegemony has so far not been reached. However, having explored the nature of these challenges, it is now possible to sketch ways of addressing them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I argue that systematic and focused reflection on the relationship between power and knowledge in Chinese history has the potential to address the challenges facing Chinese international theory development at least to some extent.

⁷³ Qin and Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought.”

⁷⁴ Richard Ned Lebow, “The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism,” *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (1994), pp. 249–77; Friedrich Kratochwil, “The Embarrassment of Changes: Neo-Realism as the Science of *Realpolitik* Without Politics,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1993), pp. 63–80.

⁷⁵ Beate Jahn, *Liberal Internationalism: Theory, History, Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013); Beate Jahn, “Liberal Internationalism: Historical Trajectory and Current Prospects,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 1 (2018), pp. 43–61.

⁷⁶ Beate Jahn, “Theorizing the Political Relevance of International Relations Theory,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2017), pp. 64–77.

⁷⁷ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1966).

⁷⁹ Jahn, “Theorizing the Political Relevance of International Relations Theory.”

“What is ‘Chinese’ is not ‘IR,’ and what is ‘IR’ is not ‘Chinese.’” is how Lily Ling summarizes the first problem.⁸⁰ The question confronting Chinese international theorists, therefore, is how to establish the Chinese nature of their contributions properly, while at the same time providing such Chinese theory with genuine general appeal and validity.

The answer lies, I will argue, in a systematic historical analysis of the relationship between Chinese thought and political practice. What are the different forms of thinking in China historically; which of these forms of thinking have become dominant and which marginalized and why; how have these forms of thinking influenced politics and what kinds of thinking were facilitated by different political contexts? And, crucially, it is not sufficient to investigate this linkage between political thought and practice for particular periods or cases only (such as the warring states period), or to demonstrate the working of particular principles in exemplary cases (like ASEAN) only—because those practices are designed to provide empirical support for abstract theoretical principles rather than to bridge the gap between theory and practice by treating theory itself as a concrete (Chinese) historical practice.

Establishing this relationship, first, turns abstract notions of relationality, morality, or symbiosis that may also be widely available in other cultures into concrete Chinese practices. Second, the requirement of a systematic linking of the entirety of Chinese history to its forms of thinking—paying particular attention to changes and to periods currently ignored—integrates the internal and external diversity of China and its people and peoples. Did the century of humiliations make a difference to Chinese political thought? Did that experience, and if so how, influence Maoist conceptions of the international? And what kinds of foreign policies were justified by it? Such a reflexive approach produces a rich, diverse, and dynamic (rather than static) Chinese understanding of the political role that relational, symbiotic and so on thinking has actually played.

Moreover, in this historical form, the richness and changing nature of moral, relational or symbiotic theory and practice is attractive as a potential resource for other actors. In addition, such a project writes China with all its ups and downs into the history of the world and thus corrects the biased sources from which Western international theories draw. This approach, in short, properly Sinicizes China’s intellectual contribution and it establishes its general appeal not by preaching abstract concepts but by contributing to a richer and more diverse conception of the world. Finally, it operates like “humane (intellectual) leadership” by providing a model of addressing theoretical biases in a constructive and non-confrontative way.

The second challenge consists, as I have argued above, in bridging the gap between theory and practice—and this means confronting the complex relationship between theory and practice. It means recognizing that the quality of theories does not ensure a wider practical role—that bad theories can be much more influential than good ones; that even theories that are backed up by considerable power (such as the rising power of the Chinese state) are not necessarily picked up; and that even where theories are consciously applied they often have unintended consequences. We cannot control the outcome. This suggests that it makes no sense to use theory building to pursue instrumental objectives—such as undermining the hegemony of Western theories—directly.

It may therefore be more promising to approach this task indirectly, by analysing the epistemic level that links the logic or grammar of knowledge to a particular historical period or community. This entails the recognition that knowledge does not just consist in particular conscious and explicit claims (in content and substance) but includes deeper structures that link it to a myriad of political and cultural forces that characterize a particular historical period and interfere in the instrumental use of knowledge. Analysing epistemic shifts in Chinese political thought and practice, therefore, contributes a deeper understanding of the

⁸⁰ Ling, “What’s in a Name?”

historical account mentioned above. It also adds to our understanding of particular regimes of knowledge and their potential and limitations.

Though epistemes are not open to purposeful manipulation, they are definitely open to analysis and reflection. And such analyses can reveal the grammar, for example, of current Western forms of knowledge, investigate their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their limitations. Does this Western episteme, for example, also underpin contemporary Chinese knowledge or is the latter based on a different episteme? The answer to such questions helps explain the dominance of particular theories. But more importantly, the analysis of epistemes makes their working conscious and thus also highlights idiosyncracies and limitations. And in doing so, it does bridge the gap between theory and practice—by interfering with the otherwise unconscious operation of this logic of knowledge. I am suggesting, in short, that a focus on epistemic shifts does not only provide for a better understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge in China; it also provides the means to investigate the nature of the relationship between Western and Chinese knowledge today; and it provides the means to bridge the gap between theory and practice by bringing the unconscious operation of knowledge in the contemporary world to light.

Finally, both moves will make Chinese theoretical work highly attractive for other theorists—not only in the West but globally. Such studies produce a rich and sophisticated account of Chinese developments as well as a contribution to our general understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge that serve as a model for other scholars who are interested in contributing their own perspectives and resources to international theory and who want to challenge the hierarchical nature of international theory and practice.

Marxism and the Chinese School of International Theory

Justin Rosenberg

The Challenge of International Theory

International theory finds itself in a paradoxical position. It is always produced in particular national contexts and for particular political purposes. And yet, in order to do justice to its subject matter, *real* international theory must simultaneously transcend this origin. It must rise above the one-sidedness of any given national perspective and instead represent the perspective of multiple interacting societies. It sounds like an impossible challenge. And yet Hans Morgenthau made it part of his very definition of political realism. “Political realism,” he wrote, “refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe.”⁸¹ We might refer to this criterion—whether a theory transcends its national origins—as “the Morgenthau test.” And when Stanley Hoffman called postwar IR “an American social science,”⁸² he meant that American IR was failing this test. In its positivist epistemology, as well as its representations of political reality, it was functioning more as a national ideology than as a disinterested field of analysis. Is the Chinese School, however unintentionally, now going down the same road?

In principle, the emergence of a Chinese School of international theory seems inevitable. As we have already implied, every society sees the world from its own political and cultural point of view; this point of view always contains the nucleus of an international theory which is further elaborated if it becomes a great power; and that theory in turn serves to naturalize and legitimate the particular form of power and the particular interests of the society concerned. In this broad sense, we can speak of Spanish international theory flourishing in the 16th century, Dutch international theory in the 17th century, British in the 19th and American in the 20th, as well as many others besides.

⁸¹ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 6th Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 13.

⁸² Hoffmann, “An American Social Science,” pp. 41–60.

So, can the Chinese School avoid becoming a nationalist ideology, producing theories that identify China with the moral law of the universe? Perhaps not, but there is a way for it to improve its chances of becoming not *only* that. And this way is to start actively including critical and self-critical perspectives which until now seem to have been largely excluded within the Chinese School. In the early post-reform decades, Chinese IR was focussed on importing liberal, realist, and constructivist approaches. Between 1978 and 2007, these “accounted for 78 per cent of IR theory work in China,”⁸³ and it is understandable that this tidal wave of foreign ideas sparked the Chinese School’s search for alternative, indigenous foundations. But the imported approaches comprise only the *mainstream* of Western IR theory. Alongside that mainstream, we also find critical approaches like feminism, post-structuralism, and postcolonialism, which have the potential to counterbalance ethnocentric, nationalist thinking. And we also find another critical approach, one that appears to have no hope at all in the current discussion: Marxism. Marxism comprised only 6% of Chinese IR theory research over the same period,⁸⁴ and it seems to be entirely excluded from the work of the Chinese School. Nevertheless, in the pages that follow, I wish to argue that it should be included in the debate.

I am not proposing a return to the doctrines of Marxism–Leninism that were imported from the Soviet Union in the 1950s or the Maoist ideology of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” These approaches are rightly treated as unfortunate “political baggage,”⁸⁵ which held back the development of IR theory in China. They did not even protect IR theory from the dangers of Sino-centrism which, as Lu Peng points out, “gradually became the dominant epistemology in the Mao era.”⁸⁶ What I am advocating instead is Marx’s critical method of historical sociology which we call historical materialism. Even this must seem at first a hopeless suggestion. After all, as long as Marxism remains the state ideology of China, finding a *non*-Marxist language would seem to be the *precondition* for any free intellectual development. But if we look at where the Chinese school has gone to find this other language—namely, classical Chinese thinking—we find this raises two problems of its own. First, it leads back to the danger of nationalist ideology through cultural particularism. And second, using the classical language of *Gongsheng* and *Tianxia* also means that the Chinese school has almost nothing to say about what may be the single most important aspect of modern international relations: namely, capitalism.

To repeat: Marxism has catastrophic failings of its own—especially when it becomes a state ideology. But used as a critical theory, it makes three potential contributions which can help counterbalance the Sino-centrism of the Chinese School. These are: a relational view of reality which is not ethnocentric; a method of ideology-critique which also enables *self*-critique; and a narrative of modern world history that could make sense of China’s *whole* modern experience, rather than talking only about China’s rise. Indeed, the last of these, which involves the idea of “uneven and combined development,” even forces Marxism itself to relativize its claims to intellectual authority. Let us examine each of these contributions in turn.

Relationality and Ethnocentrism

In one of the most intellectually ambitious contributions to the Chinese School, Yaqing Qin has developed the idea of relationality as a distinctively Chinese foundation for IR theory. In doing so, he has been careful to renounce any “form of cultural essentialism.”⁸⁷ And well he might. After all, his relational theory draws directly on American constructivism,

⁸³ Wang and Buzan, “The English and Chinese Schools of International Relations,” p. 211.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 199.

⁸⁵ Ren Xiao, “The “Chinese School” Debate: Personal Reflections,” in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*, p. 66.

⁸⁶ Lu, “Chinese IR Sino-Centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement,” p. 5.

⁸⁷ Qin and Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought,” p. 2.

just like Chih-yu Shih draws on Western structuration theory to expound the concept of *Tianxia*.⁸⁸ But what then is *Chinese* about his theory? The answer is that Qin also argues that relationality is the foundational concept for “Confucian cultural communities,” while Western society is based on what he calls “individualistic rationality.” And he further argues that relational theory is based on *Zhongyong* dialectics with its concept of internal relations and its rejection of the binary claim that something cannot be both A and not-A at the same time.⁸⁹

There is a slippage here into a broad cultural contrast between East and West. And it is a contrast that could not be sustained if Marxism was in the picture. In his 2019 article, co-authored with Astrid Norton, Qin acknowledges that non-mainstream critical approaches within Western IR do “emphasize relationality,” citing post-colonial and feminist theories, and even practice-turn perspectives.⁹⁰ There is, however, no mention of Marxism (either here or in Qin’s major work, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*). This is remarkable because of all the Western critical theories, Marxism is surely the most directly focussed on the critique of “individualistic rationality.”

“Society,” wrote Marx, “does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of inter-relations, the relations within which these individuals stand.”⁹¹ In his early writings, Marx even extended this relational ontology to the whole of nature: “A being which does not have its nature outside itself is not a natural being and plays no part in the system of nature.”⁹² For humans, this system of nature comprised both a physical and a social relationality, a duality which he called “the twofold relationship.”⁹³ And this became the centrepiece of his sociological method: according to Marx, it was the changing historical form of this “twofold relationship” (also referred to as “relations of production”), which explained the different kinds of society that have existed, and the wider process of socio-historical development too. Even the thing we call “the individual” is a contradictory identity produced by a particular kind of social *relation*, which reaches its climax in modern capitalist society: “[T]he epoch which produces... the isolated individual is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social relations.”⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Marxist dialectics is *all about* internal relations⁹⁵ and the rejection of the binary opposition of A and not-A. (Leon Trotsky, for example, expounded dialectics explicitly in these latter terms.)⁹⁶ And finally, the climax of Marx’s thought was precisely his anti-substantialist theory of fetishism, in which he showed how, in his words, “capital is not a thing, it is a definite social relation of production pertaining to a particular historical social formation, which simply takes the form of a thing and gives this thing a specific social character.”⁹⁷

The point here is not that Chinese thought lacks the resources to conceptualize relationality. It is that these resources are not unique to China. And counterposing them to a monolithic conception of the West ignores the West’s own counter-tradition of relational

⁸⁸ Chih-yu Shih, “Relationality versus Power Politics,” in Chih-yu Shih et al., eds., *China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁸⁹ Yaqing Qin, “A Relational Theory of World Politics,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2016), pp. 39–41.

⁹⁰ Qin and Nordin, “Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought,” p. 2.

⁹¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 265.

⁹² Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, introduced by Lucio Colletti (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 390.

⁹³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *Collected Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 43.

⁹⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 83.

⁹⁵ Bertell Ollman, *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ Leon Trotsky, *The Age of Permanent Revolution: A Trotsky Anthology*, ed. by Isaac Deutscher (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1964), pp. 355–39.

⁹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 953.

theory; it reinforces claims about essential cultural difference, claims which present China as aligned with “the moral laws that govern the universe.”

Critique and Self-Critique

A second contribution of Marxism is the critique of ideology. Let's consider the idea of “all under heaven” as a master concept for the Chinese school. As expounded by Chih-yu Shih,⁹⁸ *Tianxia* is a holistic vision of how all the different elements of the human and natural worlds are integrated together. Every element has its own place and its own appropriate way of relating to the others. Smaller and weaker parts show deference to larger more powerful parts, and in return they are treated with magnanimity and generosity. This creates a harmonious world system which contrasts with the conflictual, competitive disorder of the Western-inspired Westphalian system.

What would Marx say about this? I think he would say three things. First, this looks like an ideological worldview which naturalizes hierarchy and legitimates a dominant role for China. As Lily Ling pointed out: however benign this worldview is, “*Tianxia's* horizontal axis radiates outwards only.”⁹⁹

Second, Marx would probably also add that—once again—this is not so distinctive to China. All pre-capitalist societies produced ethnocentric cosmologies which organized nature, humanity, and supernature into a hierarchy. In these cosmologies, the ruling class is legitimated by being represented as the mediating link between heaven and earth—whether we call that link “the son of heaven” or, as in Europe, “the divine right of kings.” In fact, mediaeval Europe had a legitimating cosmology that was quite similar to “all under heaven.” It was called “the Great Chain of Being.” And it justified the feudal structures of the time by fitting humanity into a harmonious hierarchy which descended, as E. M. Tillyard described, “from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects.”¹⁰⁰

This raises an obvious question for the Chinese School. Karl Marx *began* his intellectual development with a radical critique of his own national intellectual inheritance, calling it, quite literally, *The German Ideology*. Would there be room in the Chinese School for a book called *The Chinese Ideology*? And if so, what would it say?

Finally, I think Marx would add that if the West today no longer has a holistic ideology of this kind, this is not because it is Western. It is because it is capitalist. And although Marx critiqued the capitalist cosmology of secular liberalism, the idea of bringing back a *pre-capitalist* cosmology like *Tianxia* would make no more sense to him than bringing back the Great Chain of Being. Of course, we can use such pre-modern cosmologies to criticize the ruthless individualism of capitalism as a social system. But we cannot use them to *conceptualize* that social system, because ancient categories do not correspond to the way that *modern* society—and international society—works.

IR Theory and Historical Explanation

This leads us to the third contribution from Marxism—namely an explanation of modern Chinese history. What I mean here is “the century of humiliations,” the communist revolution and then the reforms and the dramatic rise of China that we see today. This history tells us important things about how to conceptualize modern IR. And yet, the Chinese school seems to be much more focused on providing an indigenous worldview to go with the present-day *rise* of China than on explaining the overall historical picture. In order to pass the Morgenthau test, an international theory would have to explain the failures as well as the successes. And historical materialism can be used for this too.

⁹⁸ Shih, “Relationality versus Power Politics.”

⁹⁹ Ling, “What's in a Name?” p. 56.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in Paul Lombardo, “The Great Chain of Being and the Limits to the Machiavellian Cosmos,” *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1982), p. 39.

It comes in two parts. The first part is that huge missing element of the Chinese School's worldview—namely an analysis of capitalism. For Marx, capitalism was not simply an increase in trading activities. It was a historically unique *form of society* based upon the competitive exploitation of commodified labour power. This core relational nexus—the “capital relation”—gave rise to three social logics which have come to define the experience of modern world development itself: first, a relentless expansion of commodified social relations, both within societies (taking over more and more aspects of human existence), and across them (in search of new markets, cheap labour, and sources of raw materials); second, unending technological advances (as companies compete to raise the productivity of labour and open up new sources of profit); and finally, the “miracle” of self-sustaining growth (as wealth is reinvested in expanded production on a larger and larger scale). As Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*: “what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?”¹⁰¹ And the emergence of this new form of society in one part of the world had a no less dramatic *geopolitical* consequence too. Over the course of the 19th century, the vast majority of pre-existing societies lost their independence entirely, being absorbed into European empires. This was truly a “century of humiliations” and not just for China. As Marx and Engels also wrote, the global expansion of capitalism would “batter down all Chinese walls.”¹⁰² In the case of China itself, the completion of this process was delayed by the titanic political upheavals generated inside the society. But it has nonetheless been occurring. By far, the largest single component of what was once called “globalization” was the late 20th century opening up of China to the offshoring of capitalist production in pursuit of cheaper labour—the “global labour arbitrage.” China alone accounted for half of the doubling of the world labour market in this period,¹⁰³ and almost two-thirds of the Global South's rising share of world merchandise exports between 1990 and 2007.¹⁰⁴ And the Chinese state's use of this process to launch “an imported industrial revolution”¹⁰⁵ finally ended its long resistance to the global expansion of capitalist society that had begun a century and a half earlier. For better or worse, China is now, as Marx and Engels predicted, incorporated into the capitalist world.

But this does not explain the paradox that Chinese capitalism has been fostered by a communist state. For this, we need the second part of Marxism's historical vision: Leon Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development (UCD).

Underlying this theory is a recognition that the human world comprises a multiplicity of interacting societies. It is both multiple and interactive, and this continually interrupts and subverts unilinear logics of process in the development of society. The international condition thus repeatedly produces outcomes that appear paradoxical but which in fact reflect the dialectical structure of the historical process itself. UCD has strong parallels with Ren Xiao's *Gongsheng* theory¹⁰⁶—but it also differs, not least because, once again, it does not privilege any one cultural region.

In Trotsky's theory, *all* national societies have been fundamentally shaped by their particular location in a *global* process of uneven development—a process which has been going on throughout history. “Unevenness,” he wrote, is “the most general law of the historic process.” History is *uneven* because countries inevitably develop in different ways and at

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in Karl Marx, ed., *The Revolutions of 1848* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 72.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

¹⁰³ Richard Freeman, “Labor Market Imbalances: Shortages, or Surpluses, or Fish Stories?” *Conference series; [Proceedings]*, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Vol. 51 (2006), p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ Adam Szirmai, Wim Naudé, and Ludovico Alcorta, *Pathways to Industrialisation in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 15–6.

¹⁰⁵ Ezra Vogel, *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 464.

¹⁰⁶ Ren, “A *Gongsheng*/Symbiotic Theory of International Relations.”

different speeds. But it is also *combined*, because they nonetheless co-exist and interact with each other in real time. In the modern world, the emergence of capitalist society injects a unique dynamism and enhanced pressure to this process. Spatio-temporal unevenness, in which capitalist industrialization occurs in some countries before others, creates an extreme imbalance of power while simultaneously bringing the world's societies into ever closer interconnection. As a result, late-developing societies experience a "whip of external necessity"¹⁰⁷ which forces them to industrialize if they want to survive. But it also means they have a "privilege of historic backwardness": co-existence with more developed countries enables them to import ideas and technologies from more advanced countries without having to re-invent them for themselves. This can not only produce a dramatic acceleration of their development but it also leads to the rise of new hybrid societies, which fuse the latest developments of world capitalism with the pre-existing cultural structures of individual countries. The outcome is new "social amalgams" with unique developmental trajectories, which do not—and cannot—follow the same path as their predecessors. It is a process that repeatedly changes both the balance of power in the international system and its cultural configuration.

What we call "international relations" is thus the way that successive conjunctures of uneven and combined development structure and restructure the human world. And it is also the attempt by different societies to survive and succeed in this turbulent and unpredictable environment, attempts which lead in their turn to ever new and different conjunctures of the same historical process. These outcomes cannot be predicted. But they can be analysed and explained by tracing the often paradoxical patterns of combined development (both within societies and across them) generated by the pressures of historical unevenness.

Does *anything* demonstrate the relevance of this theory more dramatically than the modern history of China? When Europe industrialized in the 19th century, Imperial China was unable to respond to the "whip of external necessity." As a result, it suffered a "century of humiliations," leading to the destruction of the Chinese state and then the anti-capitalist, Maoist takeover in 1949. Chinese communism then imported a Stalinist command economy from Russia, and combined it with collectivized peasant agriculture to produce the unique social formation of Maoism. This restored China's unity and independence. But by the 1970s, capitalist growth in East Asia had left China behind once again, and so the Communist Party itself began to import capitalist technology and investment and reforms from the West. Due to the unevenness of world development, this "opening up" of China coincided with the neo-liberal deregulation of the world economy. Partly as a result of this conjunction, China was now able to use the "privilege of historic backwardness" to engineer a spectacular industrial revolution. And the result was *both* a new hybrid society—a one-party communist state with an increasingly capitalist economy—and the geopolitical upheaval that we call "the rise of China."¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

Trotsky used the idea of UCD to solve the paradox of how a socialist revolution could occur in a "backward" country like Russia in 1917 (instead of in the advanced capitalist countries where the preconditions for it were supposedly much more developed). Today, however, we can see that this same idea contains the nucleus of a non-nationalist social theory of IR. And this is a vital resource. The theory we need to understand modern history as a process cannot be one that is unique to any particular culture—because the process itself lies beyond *all of them* in the interactions of the cultures themselves. Thus, replacing Eurocentric ideas

¹⁰⁷ Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1980), p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Justin Rosenberg and Chris Boyle, "Understanding 2016: China, Brexit and Trump in the History of Uneven and Combined Development," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2019), pp. e32–58.

with Sino-centric ones is truly unhelpful. The “Morgenthau test,” it turns out, is not only a normative challenge but also an analytical one.

However, the theory of UCD also brings with it a further challenge of its own. For it is not only the transformations of societies that are uneven and combined, but also the development of ideas. Trotsky argued that Marx’s critical theory was made possible by his experience of life in German society that was undergoing sudden and deep changes due to pressures from capitalist England and revolutionary France. The result, as Lenin pointed out, was a unique fusion of English political economy with French political thought and German idealist philosophy which in fact produced a fundamentally new way of thinking: Marxism. In a not dissimilar way, the idea of UCD itself grew out of the even more extreme “combination” of Marxism with the experience of late-Czarist Russia. On an even larger scale, the Islamic rationalism of the “middle ages” arose from a deliberate, internationally driven fusion of the revealed religion of Islamic monotheism with the intellectual legacy of Graeco-Roman civilization¹⁰⁹—a fusion that was then fed back into medieval Europe where it became an essential ingredient of the Renaissance, and hence of the “rise of the West.”

What these examples show is that uneven and combined development is not only a sociological mechanism for the creation of new social forces; it is also a fundamental source of intellectual and cultural creativity too. Perhaps the work of the Chinese School should ultimately be seen in this light. What new theoretical possibilities will arise from its interconnection of Western social science with classical Chinese thought? We cannot know in advance. But the creative potential—arising from both the intellectual richness of Chinese culture and the geopolitical pressures of its current situation—is surely present. Insofar as the Chinese School is bringing this richness to the process, it must be welcomed. Even if one disagrees with the products so far, it surely behoves all of us—Chinese Schoolers, Western mainstreamers, and Marxists alike—to remember that real intellectual advance will come not from the victory of one approach over the others, but from the encounter between them. And that, perhaps, is also the fundamental moral of IR itself.

Conclusion: Future Challenges and Ongoing Conversations with the Chinese School(s) of IR Theory

Peng Lu, Toni Erskine, Stefano Guzzini, and Xiao Ren

This lively and far-reaching dialogue—a symposium that consists of articles across two consecutive issues of the *Chinese Journal of International Politics* and the present Forum—represents the latest exchange between “Western” IR theories and the “Chinese School(s)” of IR theory.¹¹⁰ Notably, it distinguishes itself in a number of important ways. First, because it has its origins in a series of exchanges, whereby contributors discussed, debated, and learned from each other’s approaches over a 3-year period, it was able to evolve into

¹⁰⁹ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society* (London: Routledge, 1998).

¹¹⁰ In addition to the present Forum, the articles in this symposium are as follows: Peng Lu, “The Chinese School of IR Theory: Ignored Process, Controversial Progress, and Uncertain Prospects,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 128–52; Toni Erskine and Liane Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory: Locating (and Deciphering) the ‘Moral Realism’ of the Tsinghua Approach,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 153–73; Yan Xuetong, “Upgrading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 174–86; Stefano Guzzini, “Relationalism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin’s Theory of World Politics,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 187–205; Yaqing Qin, “The *Zhongyong* Dialectic: A Bridge into the Relational World,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024), pp. 206–21; Peter Katzenstein, “Is There a Chinese School of IR Theory?” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 222–41; Chih-yu Shih and Jason Kuo, “A Relational Analysis of Exceptionalism: Connecting Liberalism with Confucian Multilateralism and Emotion,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 242–61; Ren Xiao, “Why There Is Now Non-Western International Relations Theory,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (2024), pp. 262–76.

something resembling a genuine conversation. Of course, there is still much for positions on each ostensible side of the conversation to comprehend and appreciate about the other. In addition, points of contention remain. Nevertheless, these contributions take the form of honest attempts at engagement and mutual understanding, rather than one-way assessments of “alien” approaches (as can be the danger with such interventions). Second, this symposium has convened relatively comprehensive collections of scholars on both sides of the dialogue. It has ushered Western approaches into the conversation that had previously been overlooked in such exchanges. For example, Marxism and normative IR theory, although absent from previous dialogues, are active interlocutors here.¹¹¹ Moreover, leading figures from each of what are often understood as the three “branches” of Chinese IR theory have participated, clarifying their theoretical positions and mapping future paths for research.

Finally, and significantly, while identifying points of overlap and contrast between Chinese and Western IR theory, and engaging in the careful and constructive analysis of individual approaches, contributors have also critically reflected on weaknesses in their own positions. It is precisely these thoughtful engagements and critical self-reflections that help to make this dialogue so valuable and unique. These features of the current conversation have begun to address our concerns about the potential shortcomings of dialogues between Chinese and Western IR theories set out in our introduction to this Forum. In short, this symposium has established a new starting point for subsequent dialogues.

Yet, challenges remain for future interlocutors. Dialogues such as these, regardless how inclusive and constructive they aspire to be, cannot resolve all tensions—nor are they immune to oversights. After 3 years’ deliberation from various theoretical perspectives, the Chinese and Western IR theorists who participated in this dialogue still disagree—sometimes quite passionately—on specific issues. Moreover, there are important themes that remain untouched. Addressing these areas of contention and neglect will be important not only to the development of the Chinese School(s) of IR theory, but also to the relationship that this body of scholarship will have with other theoretical enterprises. We will briefly address each issue in turn.

The appropriate labelling and concomitant identity of Chinese IR theory is a contested topic on which even *we*, the guest editors of this symposium, lack a shared view. This is all to the good and has resulted in illuminating and productive discussions. In our introduction to this Forum, after touching on the potential benefits of the label “Chinese School of IR theory,” we concluded with the view of the sceptic, adopting the role of devil’s advocate by raising potential objections to conceptualizing this unmistakably important body of research as a single, unified “School.” Here, from our vantage point at the end of this Forum, looking back over the rich contributions made across the symposium, we return to possible benefits of such an identity and accompanying nomenclature by acknowledging two further, pragmatic reasons for embracing the singular status of the “Chinese School” of IR theory.

First, a defender of a singular “Chinese School” might emphasize that this refers to an explicit academic enterprise observable in its influence over the past 20 years.¹¹² Leading Chinese theorists, such as Yaqing Qin and Ren Xiao have published influential works under the title of the “Chinese School”¹¹³; and, their Western IR theory respondents have

¹¹¹ See, specifically, Erskine and Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory”; and Justin Rosenberg, “Marxism and the Chinese School of International Theory,” this Forum.

¹¹² For a review and analysis of this distinct process, see Lu, “The Chinese School of IR Theory,” pp.128–52.

¹¹³ Yaqing Qin, “Guoji guanxi de hexin wenti yu zhongguo xuepai de shengcheng” (“Core Problematic of International Relations Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School”), *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue* (Social Sciences in China), No. 3 (2005), pp. 165–76; Yaqing Qin, “Guoji guanxi lilun zhongguo xuepai shengcheng de keneng yu biran” (“A Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Inevitability”), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 3 (2006), pp. 7–13.

followed suit.¹¹⁴ To talk about the “Chinese School” is therefore to recognize an undeniable academic phenomenon—even if those who employ the label may themselves have different views on its value and what it represents. Second, one might argue that the label “Chinese School” best describes particular Chinese IR scholars’ collective efforts to leverage *specifically Chinese experience, philosophy, and traditions* for theoretical innovation. While “Chinese IR theories” acts as a general, broad-brush description of theoretical perspectives within Chinese IR, our champion might argue that it does not adequately account for specific attempts to theorize from what they perceive to be a uniquely Chinese reference point.

Our proponent of the “Chinese School” label might add that neither Chinese nor Western IR perspectives need worry about terminological imperfections and urge us to continue to use a term that has already been widely adopted—and focus our energies instead on theoretical understanding and innovation. Here it would be safe to conclude that constructive disagreements—which cut across Western and Chinese IR theoretical approaches—will continue. Of course, the longevity and perceived value of the “Chinese School” label will be decided neither in the pages of this symposium nor in these brief concluding remarks, but, rather, over time as conversations with, and within, Chinese IR theory continue. Our considered use of the “Chinese School(s) of IR theory” here and in our introduction to this Forum acknowledges this persisting diversity of views.

Labels aside, another enduring point of controversy is the theoretical contribution of the Chinese School. The failure of Western IR approaches adequately to theorize non-Western experience is often cited by Chinese IR scholars to justify the necessity of the Chinese School(s) of IR theory.¹¹⁵ This claim, in turn, leads to expectations regarding distinct Chinese features of this body of work. However, assessing whether and to what extent the IR theory of the Chinese School(s) exhibits such distinct features requires careful comparison with Western theories. In this dialogue, participants undertake a wide-ranging comparison of Western theories and contributions to the Chinese School(s) of IR theory. Predictably, they arrive at different conclusions due to the diverse theoretical angles employed in comparing and evaluating these bodies of scholarship. In general, scholars of the Chinese School(s) tend to view their work as embodying specifically Chinese features, which carry distinct value for theorizing international politics, while some Western participants in the dialogue are more cautious or even critical in their assessments.

Scholarship of the Chinese School(s) could diverge from Western IR theories across ontological, epistemological, methodological, or even cosmological dimensions. In practice, ontological breakthroughs emerge as the primary focus for scholars of the Chinese School(s). They either propose replacing the Western liberal international order with a Chinese symbiotic one,¹¹⁶ reformulating the power transition model with a Chinese mechanism

¹¹⁴ For example, Barry Buzan compares the Chinese School and the English School, see Wang and Buzan, “The English and Chinese School of International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 1–46; Barry Buzan, “The Chinese School: An Outsider’s Perspective,” this Forum; see also Katzenstein, “Is There a Chinese School of IR Theory?”

¹¹⁵ Su Changhe, for example, blames Western IR theories for the historical cycles of repeated war after peace in modern international relations. See Su, “Gongsheng xing guoji tixi de keneng” (“The Possibility of Gongsheng International System”), pp. 6–8. As a solution, he claims to “substitute, displace, and block concepts from the West with Chinese concepts” for “a Chinese social science language system.” See Su, “Yi xin pubian zhuyi goujian shijie zixu” (“Building World Order with New Universalism”), p. 36. A similar attitude is expressed in a more nuanced way by Yaqing Qin who justifies the Chinese School by claiming that American IR theories serve to maintain American hegemony and the English School is for promotion of Britain’s international position after the WWII, an implicit however unequivocal message about the failure of Western theories in serving China’s interest. See Qin, “Guoji Guanxi de Hexin Wenti yu Zhongguo Xuepai de Shengcheng” (“Core Problematic of International Relations Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School”), pp. 170–4.

¹¹⁶ Jin Yingzhong, “Guoji shehui de gongsheng lun—heping fazhan shidai de guoji guanxi lilun” (“Symbiosis Theory of International Society—IR Theory in the Era of Peace and Development”), *Shehui Kexue (Journal of Social Sciences)*, No. 10 (2011), p. 13; Ren Xiao, “Lun dongya gongsheng tixi yuanli—duiwai sixiang he zhidu yanjiu zhiyi” (“On the

emphasizing peaceful competition rooted in a conception of ethical leadership,¹¹⁷ or redefining rational agents with Chinese relational logic and reconstruct the world with relational networks.¹¹⁸ However, alongside these ontological challenges, the influence of Western theories persists across other dimensions of the Chinese School(s). Scholars of the Chinese School(s) unanimously embrace Newtonian/post-Newtonian and humanist cosmology, while critiquing one Western epistemology and relying on another to justify their efforts to theorize the world.¹¹⁹ Moreover, adopting Yaqing Qin's approach, which represents a Western model of theory innovation, scholars of the Chinese School(s) utilize Western methods rather than traditional Chinese ones to address China-relevant central questions through the lens of Chinese experience. Consequently, the scholarship of the Chinese School(s) emerges as an academic endeavour inspired by Chinese academic aspirations to surpass the ontological achievements of Western IR theories, but guided by Western cosmology, supported by Western epistemology, and equipped with Western methods.

Scholars of the Chinese School(s) variously respond to Western feedback with acceptance, clarification, elaboration, and sometimes rejection. For example, Yaqing Qin rejects Stefano Guzzini's observations of intrinsic tensions in his relational theory, but goes on to defend his theory by invoking the Chinese *Zhongyong* dialectic, which may bridge tensions in a relational world without reliance on a centre and periphery.¹²⁰ Chih-yu Shih and Jason Kuo, in direct conversation with Peter Katzenstein, acknowledge the existence of Sino-centrism in the Chinese School(s), but compare it with ethnocentrism in both Chinese and Western cultures in order to refute what they perceive to be an oversimplified treatment of Sino-centrism.¹²¹ In response to Toni Erskine and Liane Hartnett, Yan Xuetong accepts a lack of conceptual innovation in his moral realism but denies their suggestion of Sino-centrism in his theory, which he claims treats Chinese and Western experiences equally.¹²² Conversely, Ren Xiao questions the legitimacy of invoking Western criteria for theory evaluation, thereby rejecting particular challenges to the Chinese School(s) of IR theory.¹²³ These very different responses by Chinese IR theorists to engagement by their Western IR counterparts are arguably indicative of the different relationships between specific Western and Chinese IR theories, ranging from complementary to arguably incompatible. How the Chinese School(s) responds to Western criticism will at least partially determine its currently uncertain future.

In addition to these points of tension, Chinese and Western theorists in this dialogue have left themes and perspectives unaddressed. For example, as Nicholas Onuf insightfully

Principles of the 'System of Symbiosis' in East Asia—Studies of Diplomatic Thought and Institutions”), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 7 (2013), pp. 4–22; Su, “Gongsheng xing guoji tixi de keneng” (“The Possibility of Gongsheng International System”),” pp. 4–22.

¹¹⁷ Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

¹¹⁸ Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*; Chih-yu Shih, “Balance of Relationships,” in Shih et al., eds., *China and International Theory*, pp. 17–77.

¹¹⁹ Yan Xuetong follows Western positivism and insists on the universal validity of IR theory as scientific knowledge. He thus rejects other contributions to the Chinese School(s) because he maintains that national/cultural implications threaten universally valid scientific knowledge. See Yan Xuetong, “Guoji guanxi lilun shi pushi xing de” (“IR Theory Is Universal”), *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 2 (2006), p. 1. In contrast, other Chinese School scholars are sympathetic to post-positivism and hence are reluctant to understand scientific knowledge as Yan has done. For example, Yaqing Qin's understanding of social theory is more inspired by John Searle and Immanuel Lakatos and hence highlights the social/cultural implications of social theory. See Qin, “Guoji guanxi de hexin wenti yu zhongguo xuepai de shengcheng” (“Core Problematic of International Relations Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School”), p. 174; Qin, “Guoji guanxi lilun zhongguo xuepai shengcheng de keneng yu biran” (“A Chinese School of International Relations Theory”), p. 10. Notably, these epistemological positions are Western in terminology and content and have little to do with traditional Chinese epistemology.

¹²⁰ Qin, “The *Zhongyong* Dialectic,” pp. 206–21.

¹²¹ Shih and Kuo, “A Relational Analysis of Exceptionalism,” pp. 242–61.

¹²² Yan, “Upgrading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis.”

¹²³ Ren, “Why There Is Now Non-Western International Relations Theory.”

observed on a panel discussion about the Chinese School(s) of IR theory at the 2024 International Studies Association (ISA) conference in San Francisco, both Western and Chinese IR theorists tend to ignore the role of Western concepts such as “modernity” in legitimizing and reifying the dichotomy between Chinese culture and Western culture, and hence the dichotomy between Chinese and Western IR theories. Moreover, while we have lauded the diversity of Western approaches to engage with the Chinese School(s) of IR theory in the present dialogue compared to previous engagements, a number of perspectives are also notable in their absence, including, for example, feminist and postcolonial theoretical approaches. We hope that these will be introduced to future dialogues. Finally, we note that, in addition to valuable feedback from Western IR, the Chinese School(s) of IR theory requires critical input from other non-Western IR perspectives—in particular, IR theory of the Global South.

As Steve Shapin suggested in the early stages of the sociology of scientific knowledge, “one can either debate the possibility of the sociology of scientific knowledge or one can do it.”¹²⁴ This sentiment resonates with the journey of the Chinese School(s) of IR theory. Over more than 20 years of dedicated work on theoretical innovation, this body of scholarship has achieved tangible breakthroughs in terms of its three theoretical branches. Dialogues between the Chinese School(s) and Western IR theories have thus become possible. Building on previous, pioneering efforts to generate discussion between the two groups, the present dialogue has achieved greater depth and scope of engagement by introducing more Western and Chinese IR theoretical perspectives into the conversation—and by both comprehensively analysing the Chinese School(s) collectively and evaluating each of the three branches (in great detail) individually.

For us, the organizers of the dialogue, working together has been a gratifying process. It is wonderful to see it come to its eventual fruition here in the *Chinese Journal of International Politics*. We are proud of the achievements made through 3 years’ cooperation between Chinese and Western IR theorists in this project and hope that it generates further collaboration and constructive engagement, discussion and debate, as part of an on-going conversation.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

¹²⁴ Steven Shapin, “History of Science and Its Sociological Reconstructions,” *History of Science*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1982), p. 157.