From Heaven to Earth: ‘Cultural Idealism’ and ‘Moral Realism’ as Chinese Contributions to Global International Relations

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Abstract

The discipline of International Relations (IR) is increasingly being criticized for ignoring and marginalizing states and societies outside of the core countries of the West. The idea of a ‘Global IR’ has been proposed since 2014 a pathway toward a bridging the ‘West and the Rest’ divide and thus develop a more inclusive discipline, recognizing its multiple and diverse foundations. At the same time, there is a trend toward developing theories, or ‘schools’, on a national or regional basis, the leading examples of which come from China. This article examines some theoretical constructs emerging in China, such as the ‘Relational Theory’ of Qin Yaqing, who is the foundational scholar in the ‘Chinese School of IR’, the *Tianxia* (‘all under Heaven’) concept as applied to IR and world order by Zhao Tingyang, and ‘Moral Realism’ of Yan Xuetong, who is the leading figure of the ‘Tsinghua School’. To many scholars, both inside and outside China, the relationship among the various Chinese approaches and their overall contribution to the IR field remain unclear. Without claiming to capture all their nuances and complexity, this article hopes to stimulate a conversation among scholars, Chinese and foreign, with a view to generate greater clarity and highlight their importance to the study of IR. I argue that while making important contributions, the Chinese approaches to International Relations Theory (IRT) also face a number of challenges. This includes the need for them to offer more convincing proof that the concepts and explanations they propose can apply to other societies and to IR more generally. Moreover, there is the need for these approaches to attract a critical mass of followers worldwide, stimulate a research agenda for other, especially younger scholars, and distance themselves from the official Chinese policy framings. The Global IR approach offers a helpful framework for highlighting and perhaps addressing these challenges, especially in avoiding cultural exceptionalism and ensuring their wider relevance beyond China.
‘The process of theorizing in IR...is at the same time a process of dehumanization. Enormous efforts have been made to reduce to the minimum the complexity, reflectivity, and potentiality embedded in humaneness so that general laws may be found to regulate and predict human behavior and to develop universally applicable theories. Gradually, it has become an integral part of the shared background knowledge and the academic culture of Western societies...World politics, or politics of any kind, is human in the first place. Devoid of this spirit, there would be no world politics and no IR.’ (Qin Yaqing, China Foreign Affairs University)\footnote{Qin Yaqing, \textit{A Relational Theory of World Politics} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. xx–xxi.}

‘Tianxia should be so established to be a world system based upon the ontology of coexistence by means of relational rationality, which gives the priority to the minimization of mutual hostility over the maximization of exclusive interest, in contrast to the individual rationality which gives the priority to the maximization of self-interest...the impartial will of the heaven is above the partial preferences of human minds.’ (Zhao Tingyang, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences)\footnote{Zhao Tingyang, ‘A Neglected Project for Tianxia System’, paper presented to the international conference on ‘Global IR and Non-Western IR Theory’, China Foreign Affairs University, 24 April, 2018, pp. 1–2.}

Moral Realism is concerned with ‘formulating a systematic theory explaining the mechanism for a rising state to replace the leadership of a dominant state in...both the modern global system and geographically separated ancient interstate systems...Moral realism regards morality as of equal importance to policy making as are power, capability and interest.’ (Yan Xuetong, Tsinghua University)\footnote{Yan Xuetong, \textit{Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. xiii, 6.}

\textbf{Introduction: Chinese Approaches to International Relations Theory}

The discipline of International Relations (IR) is increasingly being criticized for ignoring and marginalizing the states and societies outside of the core countries of the West. The idea of a ‘Global IR’ (GIR) has been proposed since 2014 a pathway toward a bridging the ‘West and the Rest’ divide and thus develop a more inclusive discipline, recognizing its multiple and diverse foundations.\footnote{Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies’, \textit{International Studies Quarterly}, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 647–59. This article is based on the author’s Presidential Address to the 2014 Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA).} At the same time, there is a trend toward developing theories, or ‘schools’, on a national or regional basis, the leading examples of which come from China. This article examines some theoretical constructs emerging in China, such as the ‘Relational Theory’ of Qin Yaqing, who is the foundational scholar in the ‘Chinese School of IR’, the Tianxia (‘all under Heaven’) concept as applied to IR and world order by Zhao Tingyang, and ‘Moral Realism’ of Yan Xuetong, who is the leading figure of the ‘Tsinghua School’. To many scholars, both inside and outside China, the relationship among the various Chinese approaches and their overall contribution to the IR field remain unclear. Without claiming to capture all their nuances and complexity, this article hopes to stimulate a conversation among scholars, Chinese and foreign, with a view to generate greater clarity and highlight their...
contribution to the study of IR. I argue that while making important advances, the Chinese approaches to International Relations Theories (IRTs) also face a number of challenges. This includes the need for them to offer more convincing proof that the concepts and explanations they propose can apply to other societies and to IR more generally. Moreover, there is the need for the Chinese approaches to attract a critical mass of followers worldwide, stimulate a research agenda for other, especially younger scholars, and distance themselves from the official Chinese policy framings. The GIR approach offers a helpful framework for highlighting and perhaps addressing these challenges, especially in avoiding cultural exceptionalism and ensuring their wider relevance.

In this essay, I use the term ‘Chinese International Relations Theories’ (Chinese IRTs) rather than the more familiar term ‘Chinese School of IR’. The latter is associated with Qin Yaqing. But Chinese contributions to IR exist in the plural; there are serious differences among scholars on the rationale for a distinctive Chinese IR theory, including among those who draw primarily on Chinese history, culture, and philosophy and assert their relevance to contemporary Chinese foreign policy and IR in general. Thus, as will be discussed later, Yan Xuetong rejects the labeling of a ‘Chinese School’ of IR.

The desire to develop distinctive Chinese approaches to IR is not new. A review5 of some of the early literature on the development of Chinese thinking in IR shows multiple if related arguments about the rationale for a Chinese approach to IR. These can be summarized as follows6:

1. Theory cannot be universal but is always deeply rooted in the place and position of a nation in the international system.7

2. Chinese and East Asian culture are very different from the culture of the West. A Chinese School of IR should not just Sinicize Western theories such as Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism but develop theories from Chinese culture and universalize them through interactions with others [Chinese and outside scholars].8

3. Chinese academics should build on ‘Chinese characteristic’, including those drawn from the achievements of the Communist rule and its legacy.9

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5 This review was conducted by Claus Kao-Soong of the Schwarzman Scholars program. See acknowledgments.

6 These points are not exact translations but summaries of the key points of different cited authors.


9 Liang Shoude, ‘Zhongguo guoji zhengzhixue lilun jianshe de tansuo’ (‘Theory Building in Chinese Study on International Relations’), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), No. 2 (2005), pp. 16–21. Liang’s article raises the question whether ‘Chinese
In addition to acquire clear understandings of the existing IRTs that serve the interest of the Western countries, China would need its own theory to protect its own national interest.\(^{10}\)

These arguments have since evolved, with some scholars, notably Yan Xuetong, arguing that IR theory should and can be universal, even if derived from Chinese culture. In general, there have been three main suggested sources of Chinese IR thinking: Marxism, Chinese Philosophy, and the confluence of Western and Chinese intellectual traditions. The original impetus for a distinctive Chinese approach to IR emerged from earlier efforts to develop an ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’. This was proposed by scholars such as Liang Shou-De (a Marxist scholar at Peking University) in 1987 for developing an IRT with ‘Chinese characteristics’.\(^{11}\) But others such as Qin Yaqing regarded this approach as too limited. As the importance of Marxism in Chinese IR community declined, Qin’s preferred approach of developing a ‘Chinese School of IR’ that centers on Chinese history and philosophy gained prominence. But Qin was not alone nor was his constructivist-leaning approach unchallenged within China. Indeed, Qin himself acknowledges that aside from his Relational Theory, Yan Xuetong’s Moral Realism and Zhao Tingyang’s concept of Tianxia constitute three of the main elements of Chinese thinking on IR.\(^{12}\) I should stress that all these concepts are tied to China’s history and culture, but there are differences among them, and as will be discussed later, not all Chinese scholars base their engagement with IR theory on culture and identity.

Despite differences, there are two shared and interlinked motivations behind many recent Chinese approaches to IR theory, which can be summed up as frustration and ambition. On the one hand, these works were spurred by dissatisfaction with imported knowledge and most importantly, the lack of fit between Western IRTs and Chinese history, culture, and practice. At the same time, these scholars believe that the long and rich tradition of China would be a fertile source of contributions to IR. A Chinese IRT, they reasoned, should be based on ‘our questions, not other peoples’ questions’, on China’s history, not other people’s history.\(^{13}\) Both of these motivations are consistent with the GIR approach, which will be explained further.

\(^{10}\) Ye Zicheng, ‘Guoji guanxi yanjiu zhong de zhongguo shiye’ (‘The Chinese Viewpoints in the Study on International Relations’), Waijiao pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review), No. 3 (2005), pp. 64–71.


\(^{13}\) The wordings in the quotes are based on the author’s listening to numerous seminars and conferences in China in the past five years.
In this essay, I divide and discuss the emerging Chinese approaches to IRT into two broad categories: which can be called ‘Cultural Idealism’ and ‘Moral Realism’, respectively. Qin and Zhao can be placed together under Cultural Idealism, primarily because both share a strong idealistic ethos grounded in Chinese history, culture, and identity. Unlike Johnston’s formulation of ‘Cultural Realism’,\textsuperscript{14} ‘Cultural Idealism’ is so-called because it takes a relatively benign view of human nature and believes in the possibility of mutual understanding and cooperation among countries leading to avoidance of war and realization of world peace and governance. Cultural Idealism may be sub-divided to differentiate Qin’s primarily relationalist epistemology from Zhao’s structuralist worldview, but the overlap between the two is also significant. Although Zhao’s work is primarily about the Tianxia concept, and Qin’s focuses on Chinese relationality (zhongyang), Qin also embraces Tianxia, while Zhao is a staunch believer in relationality. This essay deals primarily with Qin Yaqing’s work, which is more extensive with a deeper grounding in IRT, relative to Zhao’s more philosophical approach. Yan is different from both; not only he rejects the label ‘Chinese School’, but he is also skeptical of the Tianxia’s theoretical potential and empirical validity. Instead, he embraces realist notions of anarchy and power politics in IR but sees certain types of morality and ethics as a necessary tool for managing global anarchy and the rise of China.

I am acutely conscious that the labels of ‘Idealism’ and ‘Realism’ may seem to be a concession to Western-centrism by applying modern and Western theoretical concepts to ideas grounded in deep Chinese history and culture. But this is excusable because terms such as culture, idealism, morality, and realism are generic concepts, with dictionary meanings, rather than being peculiarly part of the Western politics and IR lexicon (unlike, in my view, Neorealism, Liberalism, Neoliberalism, or Constructivism). They represent very broad understandings of politics and order in domestic politics and international affairs, whether ancient or modern. Hence, using them as points of reference is both convenient and useful. Moreover, such an exercise is consistent with the GIR approach underpinning this essay. GIR, as will be discussed later, does not reject existing IR concepts and theories in their entirety and starts with a clean slate. It rather calls for conversation and mutual engagement between what may be loosely identified as Western and non-Western traditions and ideas, without acknowledging the former’s adequacy or primacy, for the overall enrichment of IR theory.

The next two sections of the essay outline and critically evaluate key aspects of Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism, respectively. Next, the essay poses some questions and challenges facing these approaches. This is followed by a discussion of the main elements of the GIR framework, and how the Chinese IRTs might be related to it, with a view to stimulate further debate over their broader applicability and identify ways for their further development. The conclusion proposes a set

of criteria for extending nationally and culturally derived concepts and theories to the broader corpus of IR theoretical literature.

**Cultural Idealism: ‘Relationality’ and Tianxia**

Qin Yaqing is widely credited as the founder of the ‘Chinese School of IR’. Qin stresses the affinity between all social theories, including IRTs, and culture. All social theory must have a ‘theoretical hard core’ centered on a ‘big idea’ or a ‘big problematic’. For China, it is the idea of Datong, or ‘Universal Great Harmony’, key elements of which are the tributary system and the ‘all under heaven’ worldview (Tianxia). His subsequent work has been around the notion of ‘relationality’ and the ‘Relational Theory’ of IR. In his view, mainstream Western IRTs are generally founded on the Enlightenment’s idea of reason and privileges rationality over emotion. In contrast, indigenous Chinese traditions such as Confucianism stress relationality over rationality. From this perspective, international relations are defined by various kinds of relations: equality, hierarchy, and those in-between. His Relational Theory of world politics emphasizes the primacy of social context and action.

Qin’s Relational Theory is also an evolutionary theory whose epistemology is based on Chinese dialectics. Unlike the Hegelian concepts of thesis and anti-thesis ending in synthesis, the two ends in Chinese dialectics are non-conflictual and inclusive to start with, the yin and the yang of a complimentary and coevolutionary process. Harmony is the essence of Chinese dialectics. Drawing on the epistemology of Chinese zhongyong dialectics, he argues that instead of rational calculations of self-interest and need, states and non-state actors alike often base their action on relationships. It is relationships that make the world go around. Such a theoretical framework presents an alternative way of conceptualizing international relations, including rethinking the relationship between power and governance and allows for a more fruitful comparative study of international systems.

Qin’s key epistemological argument rests on contrasting Hegelian (‘thesis’ and ‘anti-thesis’) with Chinese zhongyong (yin and yang) dialectics. Zhongyong dialectics stresses a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” way of thinking and


rejects the dichotomous Hegelian ‘thesis’ and ‘anti-thesis’ in favor of ‘co-theses’.\textsuperscript{17} Whereas the Hegelian approach stresses individual rationality, the Chinese notion represents relational rationality. As he puts it, ‘while the Hegelian tradition tries to diagnose the key contradiction, which is key to crumpling the old and creating a new synthesis’, the ‘\textit{zhongyong} dialectics always tries to find the appropriate middle where the common ground lies’.\textsuperscript{18} Conflict exists but does not have any ontological status.\textsuperscript{19} In sum, \textit{zhongyong} dialectics:

agrees with the Hegelian dialectics in that both understand things as consisting of polarities and their developments through the interaction of such polarities. But it differs from Hegelian dialectics in that the \textit{zhongyong} dialectics interprets the basic state of the relationship between the two polarities as harmonious while the Hegelian dialectics sees conflict as the nature of such relationship. The difference is fundamental.\textsuperscript{20}

As noted at the outset, in developing his Relational Theory, Qin aims at ‘humanizing’ IR theory. But he dismisses the commonly held view that Confucianism or traditional Chinese culture generally, ‘values collectivity at the expense of individuality’. Instead, it values both. Relationality in Confucianism ‘holds that self-existence, self-identity, and self-interest are all related to other-existence, other-identity, and other-interest’.\textsuperscript{21} It is noteworthy that among IR theories familiar in the West, Constructivism also makes similar arguments. So, Qin’s is a contribution to Constructivism and resonates with Wendt’s structuration approach.

Qin does not say that Eastern (Chinese) relationality is superior to Western rationality. His point rather is that rationality—so often privileged in Western IR—without relationality fails to capture and explain a good deal of IR. But Qin’s theory appears to make a tight distinction between West and China, sometimes openly, sometimes implicitly. Yet, the West also has a middle ground that might resonate with Chinese ideas of harmony and the positive notion of power and inclusiveness. In highlighting the distinction between positive and negative dimensions of power, Qin implies that the West pays more attention to the negative dimension, or to ‘overcome and destroy’, China more to the positive dimension or to ‘empower and produce’.\textsuperscript{22} But one might argue that the West also has positive notions of power. Hence, Qin’s emphasis on the positive notion of power is not unique, although it does broaden our understanding of the relationship between power and IR.

Moreover, Qin argues that the salience of relationality is universal, rather than being a unique attribute of Chinese or Asian societies. Western IRTs have not paid sufficient attention to relationality, which also emphasizes process (here, Qin’s affinity with Constructivism reveals itself).

\textsuperscript{17} Qin, \textit{A Relational Theory of World Politics}, p. xvii.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., p. xii.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. xviii.
While relationality is a crucial determinant of world politics, the distinction between rationality and relationality is most meaningful when neither is seen as an absolute or a mutually exclusive but as complimentary and co-constitutive. While people cannot alter their family history or kinship bonds, they can disavow them and prefer to cultivate some relationships over others. This usually involves making rational calculations about what is most beneficial and practical to them. Societies such as China’s not just place value on relationality but also on pragmatism. While social relationality may affect people’s behavior toward each other, so would considerations of utility and gain. Qin’s assertion that “relationality” is perhaps to Chinese what rationality is to Westerners23 may seem extreme; relationality and rationality should not be seen in terms of an ‘either-or’, or ‘West-China’ way of thinking, but, using Qin’s own words, as a ‘both-and’ way of thinking. In this sense, Qin’s theory appears to speak to the ‘rationalism–constructivism synthesis’ in IR theory.

While Qin is a scholar of IR, Zhao Tingyang’s training is in philosophy, although he has interacted closely with leading Chinese IR scholars such as Qin and Yan. Zhao is most known for his work in applying the classical Chinese concept of Tianxia to IRT. Tianxia (in rough English rendition) means the earth or all lands under the sky, or ‘all under Heaven’. The historical backdrop of Zhao’s approach is the displacement of the Shang by the Zhou dynasty and the resulting challenge facing the Zhou in trying to control a number of other tribes, including the defeated Shang. Facing this challenge, the Zhou devised Tianxia system to maintain their symbolic legitimacy and manage the stability of the system. As Zhao sees it, the unit of the Tianxia system is the ‘world’, rather than the state (the Chinese sage Laozi, he reminds us, also viewed the world as a unit), and hence, the challenge of statecraft is world-building, not nation-building. Out of this, Zhao develops the notion of world sovereignty. Like Qin, Zhao has stressed relationality as a constitutional principle of the Tianxia system.

Zhao’s rendering of the Tianxia concept as he applies it to IR has four key elements:

(1) Non-exclusion: or the “exclusion of nothing and nobody” or the “inclusion of all peoples and all lands”.

(2) World Institution: ‘the Zhou Dynasty chose the world, and not the state, as the starting point for political thinking’.

(3) Democracy at international level: domestic democracy without international democracy might lead to imperialist hegemony. ‘[A]n institution is good if and only if it can be applied on all political levels, from the most basic to the highest, and from local to worldwide dimensions, thereby leading to a universal political system’.

(4) Harmony over sameness: harmony is ‘usually defined as reciprocal dependence, reciprocal improvement or the perfect fitting for different things, as opposed to the sameness of things’.24

23 Ibid., p. xi.
24 Zhao Tingyang, Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun (The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 2005). Zhao’s other writings
Zhao presents Tianxia as ‘a common choice made by all peoples in the world, or a universal agreement in the “hearts” of all people’; and as ‘a political system for the world with a global institution to ensure universal order’. He rejects the Westphalian model and blames it for problems of conflict and state failure. Tianxia takes the ‘whole world as a unit’ and expands the concept of international politics ‘by introducing the dimension of global politics’. Aside from being wedded to an unbridled universalism and inclusiveness, Zhao also associates Tianxia with fairness and impartiality to all, and openness to all peoples. As the scholar Zhang Feng describes it, for Zhao, ‘The central idea of Tianxia... is to reconstitute the world along the lines of the family, thereby transforming the world into a home for all peoples.’ Furthermore, ‘The Tianxia system envisions a world system characterized by harmony and cooperation without hegemony.’

To the extent that it can be fitted within existing IR theories, and at the risk of some oversimplification, Zhao’s approach is more idealistic, compared to Qin’s broadly constructivist and Yan’s broadly realist approach. Two points about the Tianxia order may be briefly noted. First, the Zhou Tianxia system reflected a time when China did not have a conception of the world beyond its immediate culture area, thereby giving a narrow empirical meaning to ‘all under heaven’. This was substantially about ‘all under the Chinese heaven’. A broader conception of the world beyond the Tianxia would come after the founding of the Silk Road under the Han and especially after the introduction of Buddhism via that Silk Road, although it did not fundamentally alter the Chinese conception that China was the center of the world and Tianxia still figured in the intellectual and public discourse till the 19th century when China begun to accept the modern Westphalian concept of the international system. The second point is that the Zhou solution to the problem of governance was not effective in the longer term. The Zhou dynasty declined, becoming a rather nominal system, with the Zhou king becoming a figurehead among more powerful neighboring rulers, and the Tianxia system’s aspired harmony degenerating into the anarchy of the Spring and Autumn periods and Warring states.

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Zhao Tingyang, ‘Yi tianxia chongxin dingyi zhengzhi gainian: wenti, tiaojian he fangfa’ (‘Redefining the Concept of Politics via “Tianxia”: The Problems, Conditions and Methodology’), Shiji jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics), No. 6 (2015), pp. 4, 22.

While Qin’s examines how relationality conditions and shapes interstate interactions, the central question posed by Yan’s Moral Realism is why some rising states can achieve their goal of becoming the hegemon, while others cannot, and why hegemony may sustain or decline. Here, Yan bases his analysis on an examination of the hegemony-aspiring state of Qi in the Warring States Period and the strategic approach of its Prime Minister, Xunzi, in the context of the collapse of Zhou primacy and the degeneration of its Tianxia model into anarchy.27 An underlying and related question, which draws Moral Realism closer to policy debates, is how a rising power can narrow the power gap vis-a-vis existing leading powers while adopting a policy of ‘leading by example’ that is conducive to international order while ensuring its rise into global power and leadership.

Yan’s approach is closer to Classical Realism, akin to Morgenthau who he believes allows space for moral considerations in foreign policy, rather than Mearsheimer’s Neorealism, which excludes any role for morality. As he puts it, Moral Realism is an ‘approach to understanding a major power’s behavior when morality is a contributing factor to its leadership’s strategic preferences’.28 The concept of morality is not an empty or vacuous slogan, but prescribes certain types of policy and behavior. In his 2011 book, Yan offers a very comprehensive discussion of these, and more generally of ancient Chinese thought that would be helpful to any scholar wanting to relate them to IR theory. In so doing, he also shows that ancient Chinese civilization and political thought is not singular and should not be stereotyped as such.29

27 Xunzi distinguishes different types of rulers: those who use military force, heavy taxation, and harsh punishment; those who provide efficient governance with capable administrators without imposing heavy taxation; and those who gain legitimacy without conquest through moral power, rituals and sagacity. It is the last type of ruler who becomes the true king. David Elstein, ‘Xunzi (Hsün Tzu, c. 310—c. 220 B.C.E.)’, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 22 July, 2019, https://www.iep.utm.edu/xunzi/#SH5c.
29 Analyzing the views on morality and violent force among seven leading thinkers of the pre-Qin period, Yan divides them into three groups: ‘Hanfeizi believes that only in special circumstances does morality play a role in upholding interstate order, whereas normally violent force is the sole factor in play. Guanzi, Laozi, Confucius, Xunzi, and Mencius believe that morality is a necessary condition for upholding interstate order, but they are not opposed to the use of violent force to maintain order. Mozi, in contrast, holds that morality alone is sufficient to maintain interstate order because to him, morality implies a rejection of violence’. Yan Xuetong, Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) p. 39. In his 2011 book, Yan had already outlined the components of governmental morality. These includes ideas such as ‘Humane authority’ of Xunzi (54), ‘Morality of leading state’ (64–65), ‘restraint’ (44–45), ‘non-use of force’ (42, 39), ‘mild force’ (50), ‘justice’ (Xunzi 49), ‘just war’ (41), ‘benevolence’ (54), ‘norms’ (54, 65), ‘multi-lateralism’ (65), ‘gentleness’ (65), ‘moral cultivation’ (51), Mencius’s call for reducing...
But two things qualify Yan’s notion of morality: (i) it is about ‘governmental morality’; and (ii) it is an instrumental notion of morality. As he puts it, ‘Moral Realism adopts an instrumentally-based approach’, which means moral concerns are used by a state ‘in making strategic decisions on how to achieve interest maximization’. While the formulations of Qin and Zhao are also hierarchical and top-down, Yan’s theory goes a step further. ‘Pre-Qin thinkers’ notion of construction of ideas is from top to bottom, from strong to weak.’ Yan talks of ‘governmental morality as the standard’. ‘Governmental morality refers to a government’s responsibility to the interests of the people it rules. Therefore, it is a public rather than a private morality, as well as a universal rather than a national morality.’ He further argues that for him, “morality” refers solely to government morality, whereby leaders’ actions will be judged according to the accepted codes of conduct pertaining to national interests and national capability.

But to this author, the distinction between public and private morality here is problematic; public morality is not same as governmental morality, since the former might also include moral norms espoused by citizens that differ from those presented by their government. For example, is Trump’s notion of morality the same as that of the American people? This also raises the question of repression and abuse of morality by governments.

Yan sticks to the basic tenet of realism that the international system remains anarchic, that power matters, and that the creation of international stability and provision of public goods rest on the shoulders of leading power/s. ‘Mankind has not transcended the fundamental nature of international relations. World politics is still characterized by the struggle between states for power, prestige, and wealth amid global anarchy.’ Thus, while Yan’s Moral Realism does speak of cooperation, institutions, norms, and values, these do not seem to have any independent effects on state behavior but are shaped and reshaped by the dynamic interaction between a rising and a declining power.

In managing global anarchy, Yan puts a premium on the role of what he calls ‘leading states’ or ‘leading powers’ (used interchangeably and sometimes in singular, other times in plural, as in ‘powers’). ‘When the leading power does not lead, the other states cannot follow, and the world boat will sink.’ ‘Global governance means distribution of international responsibility to reduce common threats to every country. If leading states are willing to undertake more responsibility in punishment, taxes, and exercising benevolence (54), support for liberation (66), no cheating on contracts (50).

31 Ibid., pp. 6–7.
32 Ibid., p. 6.
33 Ibid., p. 7.
34 Yan, Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power, p. 68.
36 Ibid., p. 7.
37 Ibid., p. 206.
38 Ibid.
global governance, lesser states will have more confidence in achieving the goal. Otherwise, they will lose interest in it because global governance is beyond their capability.\textsuperscript{39} At the apex of Yan’s notion of leading states/powers are the United States and China. Indeed, he foresees the emergence of a bipolar world (although at times, he also seems to want China to be leading state in the world, replacing the United States\textsuperscript{40}).

But this assertion can be disputed. While power is important for global governance, recent work has shown that it is not a sufficient condition. Weaker actors, including middle powers and non-state actors, increasingly play an important role in global governance despite the opposition from leading power/s.\textsuperscript{41} Yan argues that bipolarity need not mean a return to the Cold War, but his prediction of a Sino-US bipolarity replacing the ‘unipolar moment’ or US-led liberal hegemonic order is problematic, given the wider diffusion of power in the 21st century. One must also factor in the place of other global players such as Japan, Russia, the EU, and India, as well as the role of regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, and Nigeria in shaping many aspects of global governance and world order and non-state actors including corporations and non-governmental organisations and social movements. World politics is increasingly complex; there are many issues and dynamics shaping world order that cannot be explained solely in terms of the changing distribution of power or the leadership role of two nations.

If ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’ (emphasis in original),\textsuperscript{42} as Robert Cox famously put it, Yan’s theory seems to have a strategic purpose; it is particularly directed at US style of hegemony. A key element of Moral Realism is the notion of ‘Kingly way’ (\textit{Wang Dao}), which stresses righteousness and benevolence over Western notions of equality and democracy. While Yan concedes that Chinese values may not always compete with, but may also complement, Western liberal norms such as justice and fairness, they ‘can by all means transcend the hegemonic values of the United States’.\textsuperscript{43}

Despite sticking to his realist worldview, Yan also flirts with eclecticism. His theory also embraces liberal values. As he puts it, ‘Moral Realism is a kind of effort trying to innovate new theories by enriching liberalist values with Chinese traditional thoughts’.\textsuperscript{44} This raises the question: while Yan embraces Liberalism

\textsuperscript{39} Ib\textit{id.}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{40} Yan, \textit{Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power}, p. 66
\textsuperscript{44} Yan Xuetong, ‘Enriching Existing IR Theory with Traditional Thoughts’, paper presented to the conference on ‘Global IR and Non-Western IR Theory’, China Foreign Affairs University, 24 April, 2018, p. 9.
will Liberalism embrace him? Judging by the stubbornly Western-centric theories and theorists of Liberalism, this is unlikely.

Given Yan’s focus on leadership, his book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* is a very timely contribution, given the widespread global attention to and dismay over Donald Trump’s leadership of the United States, the West, and the world. At the same time, Yan’s thinking at times seems to be directed more at the Chinese government than at the US. He wants China to replace the United States as the ‘leading state in the world’, unlike Japan which failed.45 But this requires the Chinese government following the right policies. ‘If China’s foreign policy cannot improve the nation’s standing as a great and responsible state, China may follow in the dust of 1980s Japan, unable to replace the United States as the leading state in the world.’46 China’s greatness and benevolence depends on being seen as such by others. ‘Whether a state is a responsible major power is not something that state itself can decide; it is a matter of judgement by other states.’47 This concession to others’ judgment injects a subjective and even relational component to Moral Realism. But Moral Realism differs fundamentally from the normative or moral arguments that constructivism makes about world politics, which have found strong echoes in Qin’s Relational Theory.

Another point of debate about Moral Realism concerns the link between the domestic level on the one hand, and the international/global, on the other. Most pre-Qin Chinese political thinkers that Yan’s Moral Realism draws on were speaking to a domestic audience or to leaders and peoples within the proximate Chinese cultural area. Can their wisdom apply to relations among countries outside the Chinese culture area? Will the foreign policy principles and restraints prescribed by Moral Realism work for non-Chinese states who might not understand or share Chinese cultural concepts and practices?

Finally, one should consider Moral Realism’s link between ancient Chinese history and the present. While Western theories do draw from Greco-Roman and medieval European history, they derive bulk of their sources from modern European history. At the very least, while invoking ancient texts and practices, Western IR theories are able to find links and parallels with modern European history (i.e., the Peace of Westphalia and after). Thus, while the concepts of anarchy, balance of power, hegemony, or international law all are claimed to have a Greco-Roman ancestry, they are also mediated through the modern European state-system with the help of the writings of European thinkers and policies of European leaders. Moral Realism relies heavily on pre-Qin thought and practice but has very little to say about the later dynasties such as which were culturally more and more pluralistic. One might suppose that many of the pre-Qin ideas and practices survived into later periods but in the absence of a discussion of these continuities and linkages, the analytical gap between the two historical epochs that Moral Realism focuses upon: the post-Qin and post-Mao, appear to be too wide.

Contributions and Comparisons

Some similarities and differences among the three Chinese scholars discussed in this essay may be noted. First, they collectively point to a civilizational turn in Chinese IR. But they vary in terms of the core area of emphasis around which their central arguments are built; Yan’s focus is on causal ideas, Qin’s on epistemology, and Zhao’s on worldview. All three have policy relevance, but Yan’s contribution is most explicitly so, given the main historical sources of his Moral Realism. ‘What pre-Qin thinkers have to say about international relations is all grounded in policy. … Therefore to hold up what the pre-Qin thinkers say about the role of concepts in international relations as a mirror may help constructivism and international political psychology achieve success in the field of political policy.’

Ironically, Yan being a Professor at Tsinghua University articulates Moral Realism in a way that appears being self-consciously directed at generating policy implications. Qin, despite his position as President of China’s official Foreign Affairs University, has stressed that his theory does not serve policy interests of the government but helps to promote the ideas and culture of all Chinese before the world.

Moral Realism and Cultural Idealism overlap to the extent that they largely begin with domestic historical-cultural forces (values, norms, institutions, and practices) as their independent variable but apply them to the international/global level of interactions where China operates. They could and should more to take into consideration on the other side of the coin, i.e., how Chinese domestic politics and foreign policy approach are conditioned by outside or international norms and practices. While Yan rejects the Structural Realism of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer that stresses the impact of anarchy and distribution of material power, there is little in his work that looks at how the normative or even the material structure of world politics shapes China’s ideas and practices. Compared to Yan, Qin and Zhao pay more attention to normative forces, but they too underplay (although do not dismiss) the impact of external or systemic moral factors in constraining and re/shaping Chinese values and interests. A clearer and more comprehensive formulation of the two-way interactions of ideational and material forces between China and the outside world would enrich both Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism.

In terms of their respective outlooks on world politics, Yan, as might befit a realist, is more pessimistic than Qin for whom the zhongyong dialectic that defines international interactions results in cooperation and understanding, not contradiction and conflict. Yan sees the emerging world order as one of more competition than cooperation. Zhao’s theory, as already noted, comes across as more idealistic than those of the other two scholars.

There is serious disagreement between Yan and Qin as to whether there should be a ‘Chinese School’ of IR. Qin is a fervent proponent of such a school. Yan

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49 Comments at a seminar featuring this author hosted by the Chinese Foreign Affairs University (8 December, 2014).
Xuetong equally fervently objects to such a school on several grounds. Yan argues that China is too big and Chinese scholarship on IR too diverse to be classified under the rubric of any single school. Moreover, the development of a Chinese School of IR is premature because Chinese scholars ‘lack basic methodological training’ and ‘are yet to develop systematic explanations for international phenomena’, and that theoretical debates among Chinese scholars are too few. Chinese scholarship should first develop a theoretical hard core before giving it a name; hence, he calls for ‘giving birth before naming the baby’. In his view, IR theory should be universal. He also offers a stronger defense of the relevance of Western IR theory. He does encourage Chinese scholars to develop ‘an interest in rediscovering traditional Chinese IR concepts’, but the goal of this exercise should be to ‘enrich IR theories with traditional Chinese thought’ and to contribute to a universal discipline of IR, rather than to develop a distinctive Chinese School of IR.\(^{50}\)

Yan’s objection to the Chinese School of IRT reflects his broader skepticism of the idea of ‘non-Western International Relations Theory’ (NWIRT). Yan asserts that ‘The concept of “non-west (sic) IR theory” is in some way like the concept of “Chinese school of IR theory” … these two concepts mainly valued by non-Western scholars but have little impact on theoretical research’.\(^{51}\) One ground for Yan’s objection to NWIRT is that the distinction between ‘West’ and ‘non-West’ is not clear-cut and increasingly blurry. These are valid concerns. But one might say in response that the NWIRT idea was aimed at stimulating debate, and the West and non-West distinction has been used mainly for analytical convenience while fully realizing that neither is a coherent and unchanging category. Moreover, there is a growing body of scholarly literature inspired by NWIRT around the world.\(^{52}\) As Yan says: ‘In regard to further improvement of IR discipline, it is more important to create common assumptions and knowledge rather than diversified arguments, although theoretical diversification is also very helpful in stimulate thinking’.\(^{53}\)

Despite their differences, ultimately, the contributions of Yan and Qin are not that far from each other. Qin has clarified that the Chinese School of IR, while stressing relationality over rationality, does not seek to displace ‘other IRs’ and does not claim to be the only theory for China, but one of the theories to study China.\(^{54}\) Like Qin, Yan claims that his purpose is not to displace or even compete with but to enrich existing Western IRTs. Neither says that his stated purpose is to create a theory applying only to China. It is rather to develop a universal theory of IR.

51 Yan, ‘Enriching Existing IR Theory with Traditional Thoughts’, p. 1.
53 Yan, ‘Enriching Existing IR Theory with Traditional Thoughts’, p. 9.
54 Comments at a dialog hosted by the Chinese Foreign Affairs University (8 December, 2014).
Debates and Development

I argue that Chinese IRTs significantly enrich IR theory and discipline as a whole and especially to the quest for a GIR. In their present form, they might be seen more as mid-range theories than a whole new paradigm, although advancing a general ‘paradigmatic’ theory of IR might not be the intention of the Chinese theorists to start with. But the Chinese IRTs do provide an alternative worldview and conceptual toolkit to the dominant Westphalian IR.

To be sure, there is endless controversy about what theory means and what constitutes a theoretical contribution to IR. Acharya and Buzan have distinguished between ‘the harder, positivist, rationalist, materialist and quantitative understandings on one end of the theory spectrum, and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern on the other’. As such, they count something as a contribution to IR theory if it meets at least one of the following conditions:

That it be substantially acknowledged by others in the IR academic community as being theory;
That it be self-identified by its creators as being IRT even if this is not widely acknowledged within the mainstream academic IR community;
That regardless of what acknowledgment it receives, its construction identifies it as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalise about the subject matter of IR.

In my view, the Chinese contributions examined here meet the second and third criteria, but it is too early to say if they meet the first, especially as it remains unclear if the Western IR community is ready to accord them due recognition. But this may underscore the intrinsic and persisting parochialism of Western IR when it comes to following trends in non-Western writings.

Nonetheless, there are some areas of disconnect and discomfort between GIR and the Chinese IRTs discussed here. In this section, I look at some of the criticisms and challenges facing the Chinese approaches to IRT. Some issues are general, relating to transference and historicism. They confront any attempt anywhere to develop a new approach, especially one that draws upon classical traditions, i.e., can they be applied to contemporary IR? How to account for the discontinuities between the classical Chinese thought modern IR? No less important is the question: how can the Chinese concepts from these scholars originally used in a domestic setting be turned into international setting? While these questions are not exceptional to Chinese IRTs or debilitating, they do deserve more

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56 Ibid., p. 292.
attention and answers in the discourses around the Chinese IRTs. Other questions are more specific to the Chinese approaches to IRTs.

Will the Real Chinese Theory Stand Up?
How widespread is the following of the Chinese IRTs within China? To be sure, they are relatively new. But whether they will attract wider following remains to be seen. Many Chinese IR scholars do not identify with any particular indigenous school.58 Aside from the debate in China as to whether IR theory should be universally applicable or have a more local application with features related to the Chinese nation and its culture, this may have to do with the diversity of intellectual traditions within China. For example, Tang Shiping, a leading Chinese IR scholar at Fudan University, does not identify with any school but has developed his own social evolutionary theory of international relations, which is not tied to Chinese culture or history, unlike those of Qin, Yan, or Zhao.59 Some Chinese scholars argue that it is not possible to put different and conflictual opinions under one any camp or category.60 Others argue strongly against establishing any school of theory exclusively for China.61 There is occasional talk of a ‘Shanghai School’, which seeks to bridge Western and Chinese approaches to IR. Although, as noted before, major Chinese scholars such as Yan and Qin differ on the need for a distinctive Chinese School of IR, it will be hard to dispel the perception of Beijing-centrism in the three different Chinese IRTs discussed in this essay.

These differences are a useful reminder that Chinese IRTs can do well to shed their heavy reliance on traditional Chinese culture and deep history as their main source, and draw on other Chinese approaches, including the rich but under-acknowledged Chinese IR thinking before the revolution of 1949.62 These, such

58 This debate can be traced to the International Relations Theories Conference held in Shanghai in 1987 and continually become a topic for discussion in various conferences in subsequent years. See Shi Bin, ‘Guoji guanxi yanjiu “zhongguohua” wenti de lunzheng: yixiang xueshushi shijiao de huigu yu zongjie’ (‘The Disputes of Sinicization in the Research of International Relations: A Summary and Reflection from Perspective of Academic History’), 18 October, 2015, http://www.aisixiang.com/data/8941.html.


61 Aside from his other writings discussed in this essay, see Yan Xuetong, ‘Guoji guanxi lilun shi pushixing de’ (‘International Relations Theory Is Universal’), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), No. 2 (2006), p. 1.

as the nationalist and pan-Asian ideas of Kang Yuwei, Sun Yat-sen, and Liang Qichao, and the inter-war period of Western-influenced IR teaching and writing in China that have been forgotten in the communist era, can be revived and made to provide further support for Chinese contributions toward a GIR.

Which Chinese Tradition?
This leads to a related question. Do the Chinese IRTs discussed in this article represent Chinese culture and tradition in its historical totality? The arguments and supporting examples of Yan and Zhao draw almost exclusively from the pre-Qin dynasty period of Chinese history. What about Chinese worldviews, ideas, and practices of foreign relations in the subsequent epochs of Chinese history? Qin’s work is an exception as it gives a prominent place to the Tributary system. Yan argues that despite dynastic changes and the advent of other universal ideas, the pre-Qin dynasty ideas that are covered in his *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, have continued to be dominant forces shaping the Chinese worldview and politics.63

In all the three approaches discussed in this essay, philosophical ideas associated Buddhism are noticeably absent. This may seem especially odd, given the crucial role played by it in the political legitimation and foreign relations not only of ‘alien’ dynasties such as the Northern Wei or the Qing but also of the ‘indigenous’ Han Chinese dynasties, especially the Tang and the Song.64 Aside from its function as a legitimizing ideology, the introduction of Buddhism challenged the Chinese view of itself as the middle kingdom. Until then, the Chinese might not have had a conception of the existence of civilizations65 in other parts of the world. Buddhist cosmology expanded the traditional Chinese conception of space and time.66 This, along with the founding of the Silk Road, which Buddhism’s

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63 Yan Xuetong, comments at a seminar presented by the author Tsinghua University, 7 June, 2017. But one might ask whether and to what extent the dominance of the pre-Qin ideas was diluted or affected by historical changes after the Tang and Song dynasties, especially with the rule of Yuan and Qing Dynasties. It also raises the question of which among those pre-Qin ideas had more salience in shaping the Chinese worldview: Legalism? Confucianism? Taoism?

64 See, Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003). Although focused on China–India relations, Sen offers a wealth of insights into the role of Buddhism more generally in the political legitimation and diplomacy of Tang and Song dynasties.


66 Before the Tang dynasty, the Chinese used *Tianxia* to describe the concept of the ‘world’. After the introduction of Buddhism into China from the Eastern Han Dynasty, the word (世界, shì-jìe) was adapted from the Buddhism and was used in Buddhist scriptures and inscriptions, as well as classic Chinese novels, such as *Journey to the West* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Shi (世) means generations and the word ‘jie’ (界) means space. There is a relevant passage from the *Surangama Sutra* on the Buddhist conception of time and space, in which Shakyamuni Buddha tells his disciple Ananda: ‘Ananda, what is meant by
diffusion helped and thrived upon, introduced to China the idea of a world with multiple centers such as China, India, Rome, and the Kushan empire. In contrast to a singular ‘all under Heaven’ imagery with China at the center, Buddhist cosmology holds that the world is composed by four continents, and there are four rulers (rather than one ‘son of Heaven’) on each of these continents. (There have been variations of these; three Chinese maps contained in Complete Records of the Buddha and the Patriarchs, published before the Song Dynasty, show the world with three centers, which nonetheless projects a very different cosmology than the traditional Han view of China as the center of the world that underpinned the Tianxia concept.)

My point is not that the entry of Buddhism into China fundamentally changed the Tianxia worldview. It did not. The pre-Qin ideas continued to be influential in Chinese political culture. But the fact that other cultural conceptions (even if Sinicized) of world order have existed in China side-by-side with prior Chinese concepts for such a long time should not be ignored in the construction of Chinese IRTs. Just as Chinese political theory takes into account the conflicting ideas of Legalism and Confucianism, so should Chinese IRTs accommodate the clash between the homogenizing ‘all under Heaven’ and the more pluralist Buddhist worldview. Moreover, the transmission of Buddhism, a truly pan-Asian system of thought, into China through both overland and maritime ‘silk roads’ made China more interdependent with the outside world and simultaneously imported and exported ideas and innovations. A Chinese body of IRT that confines itself to pre-Qin concepts, no matter however important and enduring, without looking at how they were impacted upon by the introduction of ‘alien’ concepts and interactions, including Buddhism and foreign trade, is unnecessarily self-limiting. Addressing this neglect can only enrich Chinese IRTs and expand their reach beyond China.

Theories That Travel
There is a general expectation in the community of IR scholars that a ‘successful’ theory must travel outside of any national and regional milieu in which it was born and be applicable, at least to some degree, to other areas and to the world at large. This leads to the next challenge facing Chinese IRTs: how far can they travel? Are the Chinese IRTs mostly relevant to China and its immediate region? Or are they about world politics at large? As already noted, Yan, Qin, and Zhao each link Chinese cultural norms and practices to existing Western-derived IR theories that travel outside of the time and space of living beings? ‘Time’ refers to change and flow; ‘space’ refers to location. You should know by now that north, east, south, west, northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest, above, and below are space. Past, present, and future are periods of time. There are 10 directions in space and 3 periods of time. I am grateful to Claus Kao-Chu Soong for research and clarification on this point. See Hsuan Hua, The Shurangama Sutra – Volume 4 (California: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2002), pp. 170–71.

theories and concepts (instead of ignoring or dismissing them) and propose ideas that they regard as universally applicable. But this still leaves the question how far the writ of the Chinese IRTs extends beyond China? The English School, despite its name, has had non-British exponents and its narratives and concepts have been adapted and applied globally (albeit in a more limited scale than Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Marxism). Similarly, the Copenhagen School on Securitization Theory is not about Denmark. Does or will the Chinese School attract similar interest from outsiders? Will ‘Relational Theory’, ‘Moral Realism’, and ‘Tianxia’ find homes outside of China?

The Chinese IRTs do offer concepts and explanations that have relevance beyond China or East Asia. While there are some signs of this happening with the idea of ‘relationality’ (which has long been associated with Chinese approach to business), in general, Chinese theories and concepts are still viewed with skepticism in the West and are often criticized and dismissed. This may reflect the ethnocentrism and parochialism of Western IR but responding to it would require efforts by Chinese IR scholars at broader engagement and application of their concepts, and the emergence of courses, research projects (including doctoral projects), and agendas of scholars inside and outside China that apply Chinese IRTs to the world’s problems.

The Knowledge–Power Nexus

Both Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism beg the question of the relationship between knowledge and power and that between theory and practice. Part of the reason for the prevailing skepticism about Chinese IRTs concerns the relationship between the Chinese scholarship and Chinese official policy. The political philosophy of Confucius, Xunzi, Hanfeizi, or the idea of Tianxia is hard to delink from the need for justification of the stability of the ruling party and leadership in China. This perception is magnified by the fact that some of the core ideas of the Chinese IRTs that are drawn from its traditional history and culture have found place in the recent official foreign policy posture of the Chinese government and policy intellectuals.68 The idea of ‘harmony’ (or ‘harmonious world’) is one example. It was invoked by the former Chinese leadership under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, with the latter envisioning a world order in which countries could be ‘harmonious but different’ or achieve ‘harmony without uniformity’.69 The Tributary System, presented as a benign East Asian international order, is closely associated with claims about China’s ‘peaceful rise’ in academic


discourses. Drawing upon such historical concepts such as *Tianxia* and the Tributary system narrow the gap between theory and policy and creates the sense of the theorists losing their intellectual independence.

This knowledge–power nexus is hardly exceptional to China, especially when compared with the ‘revolving door’ between policy and academia in the US IR community. The Chinese IRTs would not be the first or the last IR concepts and theories to indulge in the legitimation of a nation and its regime. Many Western IR theories do this: the most striking example being Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST), which straddles both Realism (in terms of its emphasis on power) and Liberalism (in terms of its attention to provision of public goods), and offers a starkly self-serving justification for British and US global hegemony.

The HST and the English School show a tendency to universalize a particular national or civilizational experience and achievement. The English School’s initial version seemed to rationalize and glorify the era of British and European colonialism. The idea of a ‘Liberal World Order’ legitimizes the rise and global dominance of the United States (and that of the West more generally) and accentuates the positive side while downplaying the darker aspects of that dominance.70 But there is a difference. The English School was proposed when England (or Great Britain) was already in decline. The Chinese IRTs are coming up when China is a rapidly rising world power. Hence, it is legitimate to ask whether the Chinese IRTs follow the US path and end up legitimizing the policy of the government of the day. Some critics note that while the Chinese IRTs (especially Zhao’s *Tianxia* and ‘Moral Realism’) criticize US hegemony, they not have not provided similar attention to the danger of Chinese hegemony.71

Critics of Chinese IRTs may ask whether ideas such as relationality and *Tianxia*, as well as the normative underpinnings of Moral Realism have any practical value in the 21st century and whether one can really construct a world order based on these ideas. But no one can deny that they do help to understand the historical and contemporary domestic and foreign policy framings of a rising power and stimulate debate and discussion in the search for alternative world orders as the existing US-centric world order declines. A more serious issue concerns the emergence of Chinese IRTs that resonate with some aspects of official Chinese policy. This begs the question of whether China’s official pronouncements actually correspond with its foreign policy behavior and how large is the gap between policy statements that stress a universal, inclusive, egalitarian, and just world order, on one hand, and actions that seem geared to national interest, realpolitik, hierarchy, and territorial sovereignty, on the other. Do relational interactions prevail over hard-nosed strategic bargaining in Chinese negotiating behavior? While


these questions are not unique to Chinese IRTs, being on the forefront of non-Western theory-building, Chinese scholars have a special obligation to incorporate and address them in the academic literature.

Finally, on the knowledge–power nexus, although Chinese scholarship is often viewed in the West (and outside the West as well, albeit to a lesser degree) for their legitimizing role for official policy, they can also be seen as cautionary soundings to its leadership about the dangers of cruel, repressive rule in the name of stability and growth or an overly power political approach to China’s foreign policy. Yan’s work is especially noteworthy here, as it carries a message of avoiding strategic overreach that is geared as much to China leadership as to foreign powers such as the United States. Just as the ‘mandate of Heaven’ or the idea of benevolence in ancient China were a double-edged sword that could be used to either legitimize or to justify rebellion against a ruler, Chinese IR theory can serve a dual function.

Mimicry and Innovation

One criticism often leveled against the Chinese IRTs, or for that matter against much of the Global South scholarship on IR, is that they seldom make theoretical breakthroughs and rely too heavily on existing IR theories such as Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism, and Marxism. The close affinity between Relational Theory and Constructivism, as well as that between Classical Realism and Moral Realism, beg the question whether the Chinese IRTs are merely ‘mimicking’ Western theories or offering original, alternative contributions. I have elsewhere argued that it is too easy and simplistic to level the charge of ‘mimicry’ in dismissing non-Western concepts and theories. The development of IR Theory in many parts of the world often proceeds through adaptation and localization of Western theories at the outset while at the same time opening the door to novel and important insights and claims.72

Alastair Iain Johnston asks whether theoretical contributions to IR from or about Asia can ‘resolve major controversies, lead to breakthroughs, and drive the field forward’, whether as a Kuhnian ‘paradigm shift’ or a Lakatosian ‘research paradigm’ development.73 This is a challenge not just to the Chinese scholarship but also to the larger non-Western IR scholarship. I agree with Johnston that it is too early to say whether Asian (or Chinese and other non-Western) IR scholarship can make the kind of contribution that might meet the standards he specify. It remains to be seen whether the new contributions by Qin and Yan will satisfy him or dispel this perception of ‘mimicry’ in Chinese IRTs. Yet Johnston does not think one should leave current IR theories on their privileged pedestal. I also believe that one should not deploy a primarily Western criteria of rationality and progress for judging theoretical innovation in the non-West. The answer to Johnston’s question depends on what one means by ‘theory’ and theoretical progress, both of which

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remain contested. Must one apply existing Western standards of judging theoretical or epistemological breakthroughs to Asian or other non-Western contributions? Should ‘driving the field forward’ mean the ability of theories to provide causal explanations, and engage in deductive reasoning and hypothesis testing, that dominates the American approach to IR theory? As noted earlier, theoretical work can also mean, as it does in much of Europe, work that organizes a field systematically, structures questions, and establishes a coherent and rigorous set of interrelated concepts and categories. Here, the Chinese IRTs show considerable potential.

The idea of theoretical contribution or progress has two aspects. A necessary first step lies in challenging existing theories, especially their claim to universality. Here, Chinese IRTs do well in my view, like theoretical writings on Asian security, international political economy of development and regional institutions that have challenged Western Neorealist, Neo-liberal, and Constructivist explanations and predictions. A second aspect of theoretical innovation entails presenting new or alternative concepts that enrich the understanding and explanation of international developments beyond one’s own nation and region. Here, Chinese and other non-Western IRTs do less well, although they clearly have a potential to do better.

Global International Relations as a Facilitating Framework for Chinese IRTs

In this section of the essay, I consider how a GIR approach might help assess and address the contribution of Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism to IRT. The idea of GIR has been outlined elsewhere, so only a summary is warranted here. Despite its growing popularity worldwide, IR continues to privilege Western history, ideas, practices, and agency while marginalizing those of the Rest. The GIR aspires to level the playing field and contribute to a discipline that truly reflects the diversity of its scholars and intellectual concerns. While not a theory or method, GIR calls upon IR scholars to recognize the civilizations, ideas, practices, and contribution of states and societies, including but not limited to those of the Global South, that have been neglected or marginalized in the existing mainstream literature of the discipline. Briefly, the main elements of the GIR approach are:

1. Embracing ‘pluralistic universalism’.
2. Grounding in world (or ‘global’) history.

Broadening, rather than supplanting, existing IR theories and methods.

Integrating the study of regions, regionalisms, and area studies into IR.

Avoiding cultural exceptionalism.

Recognizing multiple forms of agency, including the agency of actors other than the West.

The GIR research agenda calls upon IR scholars to discover new patterns, theories, and methods from world histories; analyze changes in the distribution of power and ideas after centuries of Western dominance; explore regional worlds in their full diversity and interconnectedness; engage with subjects and methods that require deep and substantive integration of disciplinary and area studies knowledge; examine how ideas and norms circulate between global and local levels; and investigate the totality of interactions, including mutual learning, rather than just the clash, among civilizations.

Embracing ‘Pluralistic Universalism’

The dominant prevailing notion of universalism in world politics is about one set of ideas ‘applying to all’. This is a legacy of the European Enlightenment and may be called monistic universalism. A different notion of universalism is pluralistic universalism. It recognizes and respects the diversity of the world but seeks and builds common ground among different, even divergent, cultures, traditions, and intellectual perspectives. Monistic universalism applies one standard to all others, often on the back of superior power. Hence, the European Enlightenment has been criticized as a justification for European imperialism and colonialism. Pluralistic universalism rejects such homogenization and dominance and the marginalization of other cultures and systems. It does not articulate a singular idea of modernity but upholds multiple paths to modernity and progress.

Grounding in World/Global History

As noted earlier, dominant IRTs, especially Realism and Liberalism, IRTs draw heavily from Western history and civilization, beginning with the Greco-Roman civilization that has been falsely appropriated as ‘Western’. (Greece and Rome were Mediterranean civilizations with stronger African and Asian influences than that of western or northern European cultures that lie at the core of the modern concept of the ‘West’.) Western IRTs marginalize the traditions, ideas, and contributions of other civilizations. One major example of this is the concept of the ‘international system’. It is viewed primarily in anarchic, of Westphalian, terms. Other types of systems, such as those based on hierarchy (as with the Chinese Tributary system) and empire, are far less recognized in the Western IR literature. This approach is defended on the ground that the Westphalian system has expanded and become the global pattern and standard. But it obscures the variations and differences among regional orders due to the extension and erosion of Westphalian norms of international relations. Yet, there is much to learn from a closer examination of the non-Western antecedents of ‘international systems’ and regional orders. The Amarna diplomatic system of the Middle East in the mid-2nd millennium BC, the Maurya empire, the Chinese Tributary system, the Mandala system of Southeast Asia, the highly interconnected Islamic trading and
political centres before the rise of the West, and the political ideas and interactions developed by the Mayas, Incas, and Aztecs, offer some but not all the important examples.

Here, GIR calls for supplementing the nation-state perspective with insights from the study of classical civilizations. IR from a nation-state perspective covers the history of at most the last 400 years, whereas a civilizational perspective expands the scope of our understanding to some 5000 years. The nation-state perspective coincides with the rise of the West. A civilizational perspective offers multiple types and examples of political organization and interstate interactions, in which different civilizations have been ascendant. As the relatively short durée of European or Western dominance passes, it is not unreasonable to suppose that historical and indigenous patterns and practices of inter-state relations might remerge, if not completely, but sufficiently enough to induce consequential changes to world order.

Broadening, Rather Than Supplanting, Existing IRTs, and Methods
The GIR disagrees with the view that existing IRTs and methodologies need to be entirely discarded and displaced. This is neither possible nor desirable. Nor is it necessary. Instead, GIR argues that they need to be challenged and broadened with insights from the ideas and practices of non-Western societies and compared/contrasted with new or alternative concepts and theories developed out of non-Western contexts. Existing West-derived IRTs are hardly monolithic or unchanging when it comes to dealing with the non-Western world. Realism and the concept of balance of power have paid some attention to ancient Chinese and Indian thinkers and interactions. Constructivism is sensitive to the causal and constitutive effect of culture and identity. As such, it offers greater scope for bringing in the experience of cultures and societies other than that of the West. With growing economic interdependence, institutions, and democratization, Liberal theories could become more relevant to the non-Western world. Marxism has been enriched by Dependency theory, which reflected economic conditions in Latin America and other parts of the non-Western world.

However, these theories need to more to incorporate and adapt to the realities of the non-Western world. It is not enough for either Western or non-Western scholars to go about finding the equivalent of concepts like sovereignty, national interest, balance of power, multilateralism, norms, etc., in other cultures to justify the relevance of existing IR theories. It is not enough to ‘test’ existing theories in non-Western contexts and revise them if there is a mismatch. We also need to go beyond the existing theories. The GIR calls for developing whole new theories and perspectives from other societies on their own terms.

Integrating the Study of Regions, Regionalisms, and Area Studies
The juxtaposition between area studies and the IR discipline is a false distinction, found mainly in the United States. In many parts of the world, IR has evolved on the back of area studies. Today, a growing number of scholars pursue both disciplinary approaches and area specialization. The GIR strongly encourages this
symbiosis. From a GIR standpoint, regions, which are central to area studies, are not merely sites of production of new ideas and interactions. The ‘Regional World’ approach, originally developed by scholars in the area studies tradition, calls not just for analyzing regional structures and interactions within a given region but also for understanding how regions interact with each other to shape global order. Regions are neither islands nor inward-looking, but outward-looking and interlinked. Instead of merely applying global trends and concepts to regions, GIR calls for using ideas and interactions from the regional level for theorizing and examining their relevance to other regions or to the global level. Hence, a comparative turn in the study of regions and regional dynamics is an essential foundation of GIR. This kind of approach, grounded in area studies but strengthened by comparative and connected narratives, is vital for studying transnational issues such as climate change, migration, pandemics, etc., which increasingly define our world.

Avoiding Cultural Exceptionalism
Without a broader, interactive, and outward-looking view of regions and area studies, one risks falling into the trap of exceptionalism, which is a tendency to present the characteristics of a social group as homogenous, unique and superior to those of others. Exceptionalism in IR often justifies the dominance of the big powers over the weak. American exceptionalism, seemingly benign and popular at home, can be associated with its self-serving ideology of global dominance. One strand of Japan’s pre-war pan-Asian discourse, which was founded upon the slogan of ‘Asia for Asians’, or the more recent notion of ‘Asian values’, also illustrate this tendency of international hegemony and domestic authoritarianism, respectively. A key challenge for GIR is to reject such temptations while striving to develop concepts and approaches, which, though originally derived from some local cultures and contexts, can travel beyond them, applying to other contexts, as well as the larger global canvas.

Expanding the Sources and Forms of Agency
Last but not the least, GIR calls for a broader conception of agency. Agency is both material as well as ideational. Agency is not the prerogative of the strong but can manifest as the weapon of the weak. Agency can be exercised in the global or transnational space, as well as at regional and local levels. Agency can take multiple forms. It can describe acts of resistance to, and localization of, global norms and institutions. Agency also means constructing new rules and institutions at the local level to support and strengthen global order against great power hypocrisy and dominance. Agency means conceptualizing and implementing new pathways to development, security, and ecological justice. Contemporary examples of agency by non-Western actors include the extension of universal sovereignty at the 1955 Asia–Africa Conference at Bandung, the idea of international

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development proposed by Sun Yat-sen; the contributions to the development of the human rights idea by postcolonial states and more recently, the emergence of the ideas of Human Development, Human Security, and Responsibility to Protect from non-Western contexts, policymakers, and scholars.  

The Chinese IRTs discussed here contribute to GIR in several ways. A major source of GIR is the classical thought and practice of non-Western states and societies. The Chinese approaches support GIR’s quest for greater diversity in IRTs by drawing on the history, culture, and practices of one of the world’s most ancient and advanced civilizations. Moreover, they are consistent with GIR’s call for engaging with, rather than displacing, existing IRTs. Qin and Yan blend Chinese history and philosophy with Western IR theory (Constructivism and Realism, respectively). At the same time, all three present themselves as challenging and refuting Western IRTs. Yan critiques Mearsheimer’s Structural Realism, as well as Morgenthau’s Classical Realism, even though he is more sympathetic to the latter. Qin’s Relational Theory is a powerful attack on Western rationalist IR. Zhao’s Tianxia challenges the primacy of the Westphalian nation-state in Western IR and presents a less militaristic and more inclusive conception of world order.

In general, while Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism support the GIR project, there are also some areas of disjuncture.

(1) Pluralistic universalism? Yes. Although all three draw primarily from Chinese history and culture, they do allow for coexistence and common ground among different cultures. Yet, the Cultural Idealism of Qin and Zhao can do more to address criticisms that they present an essentialist and Sino-centric perspective.

(2) Grounding in world history? Yes, both Cultural Idealism and Moral Realism address Eurocentric and Greco-Romanocentric IR by bringing in ancient Chinese and East Asian history to IR theory.

(3) Subsuming/engaging, rather than displacing, existing Western IR theories? Here, Yan and Qin explicitly challenge Neorealism and rationalism respectively, while embracing classical Realism and Constructivism, respectively. While Zhao’s Tianxia perspective rejects Hobbesian Realism, more work is needed to ascertain how it relates to the Kantian universalism.

(4) Nexus with the study of regions and area studies? At they stand now, the empirical focus of all three is China, although they have a potential to be applied to East Asia and beyond.

(5) Cultural exceptionalism? Qin and Zhao are more susceptible to this. Although they claim a wider relevance of their ideas, the applicability of their theories across cultures remains to be seen. Yan, as discussed, is specifically critical of a culturally specific ‘Chinese School of IR’.

(6) Recognition of multiple forms of agency? Yes, but Yan lays greater emphasis on strategic and political agency; while Qin and Zhao stress cultural and ideational agency.

These ideas and approaches are comprehensively discussed in Acharya, *Constructing Global Order.*
Conclusion

China is a major emerging source of broadening and globalizing the discipline of IR. Chinese IRTs as discussed in this essay confirm the need for IR to look beyond its Western-centric narrative, enrich the diversity of IR as a field of study, and expand the historical base of IR theory. They furnish us with examples of non-Westphalian worldviews, state-system, and agency from a major non-Western civilization that can only enhance the theory and methodology of IR.

But the Chinese IRTs need to address a number of issues before they attract wider attention and recognition beyond China and claim the status of universal theories. In general, any new concepts or theories to attract universal recognition and acceptance should satisfy five conditions:

1. They should be able to travel beyond the country of their origin (in this case China) and its immediate neighborhood (East Asia) and offer a more general framework for analyzing world affairs.
2. They should attract a critical mass of scholars within and beyond the country of their origin.
3. They should generate a vibrant research agenda, meaning they should be taken up and applied by other scholars, especially students and new generation of scholars to develop their own research and theoretical contribution.
4. They should enjoy some longevity and not turn out to be a passing fad.
5. They should maintain some distance from official policy of the country of their origin.

These challenges confront any effort to develop a new theory of IR, even a mid-range theory, from any national or regional vantage-point, whether Western or non-Western. As noted, the point about distancing from official policy applies especially to US academics who advise governments and whose intellectual stance sometimes turns out to be apologies for the President and the administration of the day or for aspiring political leaders. At the same time, contrary to the perception that Chinese scholars are a uniform lot supporting the government, there is a range of different views on IRT among Chinese academics. Moreover, the ideas of their leading scholars have a potential to travel beyond China or East Asia. While one should not minimize the challenges mentioned above facing Chinese IRTs, they are a welcome, important and timely contribution to the ideal of a GIR and the ongoing efforts towards globalizing IR.

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