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The Shift of the World Centre and its Impact on the Change of the International System

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Abstract The shift of power engendered by the rise of China will not only change the current international configuration, but will likely lead to a shift of the power centre of the world from Europe to East Asia. Nevertheless, neither the change of the international configuration nor this transfer of the power centre of the world will inevitably bring about the change of the international system. The international system consists of three components including international actors, international configuration and international norms. If a qualitative change of one of these components were treated as a qualitative change of the system, it would not be possible to distinguish the difference between the components and the system nor to determine the relationship between them. A minimum of a qualitative change of at least two components must be observed to be defined as a qualitative change in the system. Because the rise of China is the main engine changing the international configuration, it will be faced with increasing pressure from the system. Thus, China has to adopt a foreign strategy in accordance with its international status and policy for winning more strategic partners and constructing new international norms.

Keywords Shift of power · International system · Categories of systems · Centre of world the the rise of China

The shift of the world power centre has been a topic of international relations studies for a long time. In the early 1980s, some scholars from the East Asia presented the idea that the world's centre was shifting to the Asian-Pacific. This idea was based on the rapid economic development of Japan and the 'Four Asian Tigers' (Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong). Thirty years after the idea was proposed, many of these scholars have passed away with nothing happened to what they predicted. Upon the commencement of the twenty-first century, the topic of the shift of the world's centre has attracted the attention of the academic world again with the rise of China. This article will discuss the

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following questions: Where will the centre of the world shift towards in the twenty-first century? Will this shift in the power centre lead to a change in the international system? What policy should China adopt with this shift of the world's centre?

Where will the Centre of the World Shift to in the Twenty-first Century?

With the identification of the 'BRIC' and the establishment of the G20 summit, the discussion about the shift of the world's centre is gaining momentum. However, people's ideas of where exactly the world's centre will shift vary considerably. For example, an Argentinian scholar (Tokatlian, 2011) deems that the world's centre is shifting from the Eastern to the Western, from the Northern to the Southern. Some Chinese scholars [41] think that the centre of the global economy is moving to the Asia region. Conversely, Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi, answering questions from Mexican reporters, stated that: 'there is indeed a kind of thinking which considers the world's centre of power to be shifting to the East from the West, but I don't agree with this opinion' [7]. It is the opinion of the author that the main reason for a lack of correlation between people's different ideas regarding the direction of the shift of the world's centre is the lack of clear standards with which to judge the perceived centre of the world objectively.

The Criteria for Identifying the World's Centre

The geographic centre of international politics is decided by the respective power of the countries within this area, rather than their natural geographic positions. According to his experiences from World War I, Mackinder, the British geopolitical scientist, published his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality* in 1919 and stated that: 'who rules Eastern Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world' ([21], p. 134). However, historical evidence does not support this view. During World War II, Nazi Germany once dominated Eastern Europe, but it lost the war and was ultimately divided into two countries itself; East Germany and West Germany. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union had control of Eastern Europe, but it also collapsed into 15 countries rather than going on to govern the world. Following this, Eastern Europe was assimilated by the European Union, where, yet again, it did not make the European Union more powerful, but instead brought about many problems, such as a backwater in the integration process of Europe, the crisis of the disintegration of the Eurozone, and even the trend in which the world's power centre has shifted away from Europe. After the Cold War, the United States enhanced its control over Eastern Europe with the benefit of the eastern expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), but this could not be attributed as the reason for America becoming the sole superpower in the world after the Cold War. Actually, the immediate cause for the world becoming unipolar was the collapse of the Soviet Union. If the Soviet Union did not fall, the bipolar structure would have continued to be highly resistant to becoming unipolar, even if America could have somehow dominated the whole of Eastern Europe via NATO admitting all of the Eastern European countries.

Specifically, there are two conditions that must be met if a region aims to become the centre of the world. First of all, this area must contain the most influential countries in the world; that is to say, there should be one or few countries possessing material force (especially military force) and cultural force at a level that exceeds the reach of other nations and acts as a model for others to imitate. Secondly, the centre of the world should be a place where international conflicts are the most intense. The conflicts are mainly embodied by a scramble for power from central countries in this area and others. From a historical viewpoint, the world's centre has two such kinds of situations: one is the strategic scramble for power by the central countries in the region, principally occurring in the area in which they are located; the other one is the scramble for power that expands out to marginal regions. The position of the world's centre would be more clearly defined when the main part of any such strategic scramble for power occurs in the area where the central countries are located. With regards to these two conditions above, the precondition to decide whether a region could be the centre of the world or not is the existence of internationally influential countries.

During the nineteenth century, while European powers were striving to establish overseas colonies until the time of the Second World War, Europe was still the acknowledged centre of the world. During this period, Europe was both the place where those contenders were located and it was also the place that was itself being contended. With the continuous development of colonialism, the strategic competition between the European powers began to spread to areas of outer Europe [33], but Europe was always the area being fought over by the dominant powers of the time. Examples of this are provided by the Crimean War, which was launched by Britain, France, Russia and some other countries in order to gain control over the Balkans peninsula; Hitler's aggressive expansion into Europe; and so on. Because of this, Europe was always the centre of the world within the 150-year period before the end of the Second World War. Despite Africa, as a former colonial region, being one of the hottest regions in which European powers vied for supremacy, it did not become the centre of the world because of the lack of influential powers within the region.

Starting after the Second World War until the end of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were the two strongest countries in the world, as well as the two main strategic competitors in the international system. The Soviet Union, as one of the 'two poles', was located in Europe, in addition, the fierce competition between the two powerful countries was also focused in Europe at the same time, so that still left Europe as the centre of world during the Cold War period. In 1946, Churchill made a famous speech in Fulton: 'from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent' ([9], p. 47). This statement was made because both the United States and the Soviet Union had placed the focus of their competition on Europe; hence, the 'iron curtain' was formed in Europe rather than in some other places around the world. Except for the United States and Canada, of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and Warsaw Treaty Organisation, which represented West and the East respectively, members were all located in Europe. This situation is the direct consequence of the struggle for supremacy between the United States and the Soviet Union in the European area.

The Concepts of ‘the Asia-Pacific Region’ and ‘the Orient’ are too Vague

Based on the analysis above, we must first ascertain whether there are influential powers emerging in an area whilst attempting to judge where the centre of the world would likely transfer. This also means the centre of the world should refer to an area with clear geographical boundaries.

Therefore, these two concepts of ‘the Asia-Pacific region’ and ‘the Orient’ are obviously too vague on the basis of this standard. The concept of ‘Europe’ refers to a continent with a definite geographical position and specific constituent countries. This region covers an area of 1016 square kilometres, west facing the Atlantic Ocean, north fronting the Arctic Ocean, across the Mediterranean Sea and the Strait of Gibraltar from the African continent in the south, and bordering the Asian continent in the east. There are now 45 country-states and around 739 million people accounting for about 10.5 % of the world's population existing in Europe. In contrast, the Asia-Pacific region is a geographic concept that could neither be defined with strict geographic boundaries, nor through a list of certain constituent countries. According to the definition of the Asia-Pacific region on Baidu's encyclopaedia, ‘there are a few different understandings of the constituent countries and regions currently regarded as making up this region’. The concept of the Asia-Pacific region includes one ocean (the Pacific) and four continents (Asia, North America, South America and Oceania) accounting for two-thirds of the continents on earth which house 71 % of the world's population. In this case, where any ‘centre’ is defined which occupies more than two-thirds of the whole world, there is hardly any difference between the so-called ‘centre’ and the ‘whole’.

The East is even more of a fuzzy concept in terms of geographic ranges and constituent countries. During the time of the Cold War, ‘the Orient’ referred to the group of nations pursuing the socialist ideology; after that it was used to mean countries that shared an oriental culture. These days, it is very difficult to identify which countries may be defined as belonging to the oriental culture. In a narrow sense, countries with an oriental culture could be identified as belonging to East Asia, namely the Confucian cultural circle. However, the whole area from the Middle East to East Asia, including the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, could all be treated as regions of oriental culture in a broad sense.¹

The reason why there are some fuzzy arguments emerging recently, such as ‘the world's centre is transferring from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region’ or ‘the centre of the world is shifting from the West to the East’, is probably because the researchers who promoted these ideas could not determine another specific region which was in possession of world-class influence without any dependence upon North America. This phenomenon reflects the fact that these participants are actually lacking in confidence in the developmental prospects of the East Asia region.

¹ The generalized appellation of ‘the Orient’ is a cultural concept with doctrines from Euro-centrism, it is a collective name of the area to the east of Europe, based on the main routes to Asia taken by main countries in the Western Europe as a basic point. The appellation of ‘the Orient’ was created in the early time of European colonial countries' external expansion, and prevailing in the nineteenth Century. Because the involved area is too vast, the Western European countries, afterwards, further divided ‘the Orient’ into the Near East (Eastern Europe, Turkey), the Middle East (Arabic Area, Middle Asia) and the Far East (the East Asia), according to the geographical distance from them.

In the 1980s, there was no country or any international institute in East Asia possessing a global strategic competitiveness in the short term when East Asian scholars proposed the eastward shift of the world's centre. At that time, Japan was still far from being a country having a global strategic competitiveness because it is not a state of comprehensive power. Thus it could not significantly affect the international political structure, even though it had become the world's second-largest economic entity ([4], p. 160). Meanwhile, the Soviet Union still maintained its influence as a superpower in the world. In this case, on the one hand, East Asian scholars hoped that their region could become the centre of the world, but they could not find a country with a solid prospect for international influence in East Asia. As a result, they had to use the concept of 'the Asia-Pacific region' with wide denotation to support their hypothesis. One of the advantages of using the term of 'the Asia-Pacific region' is that the United States, the country with indisputable power and influence at a world-class level, could be involved in this concept. Nevertheless, when the U.S. is the only superpower in Asia Pacific, it is impossible to state that the world's centre has moved to the Asia-Pacific region from Europe. Because the geographic location of the U.S. is a constant, it cannot bring about changes.

The Current Shift of the World's Centre Mainly Hinges on Europe and the East Asia Rather Than the United States.

The United States is both a Pacific country and an Atlantic country; its geographic position will not change objectively. Thus, as long as America keeps its national power at a world-class level, it can hardly be the main cause of the world centre's shift. Since the Second World War, the United States has always been the most influential country in the world and always been a part of the centre of the world. The reality of the U.S. being a part of the world's centre is not only maintainable at present, but is very likely to continue for at least 20 more years. Since the U.S. will be a global strategic competitor for the next two decades, it should not be regarded as a major factor in the analysis of where the world's centre is transferring to from Europe. After controlling America as a constant, we can see clearly that the key variable which will truly determine the shift of the world's centre is the relative growth and decline of strength between Europe and East Asia.

Affected by the economic crisis since 2008, Europe and America have both experienced a decline to a certain degree. Nevertheless, the natures of their declines are different and the impacts of their declines on the shift of the world's centre are also different. Within the next decade, the decline of the United States will not change its superpower status in the world; that is to say, America's decline is limited to a certain extent. The United States will still be the most influential countries and one essential part of the centre of the world, at least able to maintain a comparative influence against the international impact of East Asia. However, the relative decline of Europe will decrease its influence to a point that is less than that of East Asia, which will lead to East Asia replacing Europe as a component of the world's centre. Thus, the relative decline of Europe - with Russia included - is one of the causes resulting in the shift of the world's centre. Besides, another important reason for the East Asia replacing Europe is that, there is no European country possessing the potential to become the next superpower around the world, but China in East Asia

has this possibility. All in all, the current transfer of the world's centre this time is driven by the contrastive conversion of power between Europe and East Asia.

When we are talking about 'the decline of the United States', we have to be clear that the 'decline' is relative rather than absolute. In other words, the absolute power of America is still increasing, but its relative advantages against China are shrinking as China has a faster developmental speed. The 'decline' of the United States will not change its superpower status for at least 20 years in the future. Conversely, the fact that the U.S. will be able to maintain its superpower status does not mean that it will be able to maintain its solo superpower position. China is growing into a new superpower.

This new trend of power distribution maintains the world-class strategic competitive status of the United States, as well as making the growth and decline of power between Europe and East Asia a new decisive factor affecting the shift of the world's centre.

East Asia Becoming the World's Centre will Depend on China's Rise

As has been mentioned above, East Asia needs to overtake Europe in terms of overall power and influence if it would like to be the centre of the world, and this will mainly depend on the rise of China. In the next 10 years, Japan's power position will go through a downtrend because of the difficulties of domestic political reform. Other countries in East Asia, restrained by their limited national strength, can only have a minimal impact on advancing the power position of the whole region, even if they could maintain a fast growth rate. By contrast, the scale of China's economy has been equivalent to 46 % of the European Union's economic aggregate. In the next decade, the average annual growth rate of the European economy will have difficulty exceeding 2 %, while China's economic growth rate is going to remain at 7.5 % prospectively; this means China's economic scale will outnumber 80 % of the 27 EU countries' economic aggregate after 10 years. Moreover, when Japan, South Korea and other East Asian countries are factored in, the whole economic scale of the East Asian region will inevitably surpass that of Europe.

The reason why the rapid economic growth of Japan and the 'four Asian tigers' failed to lead to East Asia exceeding Europe in the 1980s, apart from the influence of the Soviet Union as a superpower, is because Japan is not a country of comprehensive strength. China's rise has been built upon the basis of its comprehensive strength, but Japan's rise depended solely on its economic strength. As a result, the United States has to regard China as its chief rival for power in the twenty-first century due to China's comprehensive national power. It means that America's biggest strategic competitor has transferred from Europe to East Asia. China, in the coming decade, will gradually become another superpower with global strategic influence ranking second only to America; in other words, there will be a country in East Asia that is finally competitive in terms of global power and influence. In conclusion, China's rise will make the international influence of East Asia exceed that of Europe.

One of my articles published in the *Global Times* during the 2012 London Olympics discussing the dilemma of China's Rise [42] suffered a lot of criticism on the internet. Many critics argued that China's per capita GDP still ranks lower than 100th in the world, and consequently disputed the author's viewpoint that China is likely to become a superpower. In fact, Chinese people's understanding of China's

power status stands in stark contrast with the perceptions regarding this issue amongst the international community. For example, the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, once said: “Chinese people are probably not aware of how powerful their nation is in others' eyes sometimes. I think, therefore, the differences in cognition caused by different points of view between China and other countries will likely need to be solved by more communication” [16]. These differences influenced Chinese scholars to some extent to make more accurate judgments on the role of China in the shift of the world's centre, such that most scholars still tend to use the phrase ‘Asia-Pacific’ instead of ‘East Asia’.

China's rise will not only provide East Asia with a superpower with world-class influence, but will also make this region a hot-spot area of strategic competition in the world. As previously mentioned, the other important condition for a region becoming the world's centre is that this region should be an area over which the world's major powers jostle for supremacy. In the wake of the execution of America's strategy called ‘pivot to Asia’ (also known as the ‘rebalancing strategy in Asia-Pacific’), the East Asia region is becoming an increasingly contentious focus in international politics and a centre of strategic rivalry among great powers. The purpose of America's pivot strategy is to maintain its influence and predominance in the power centre of the world. However, given the current situation, in which America's strength is in relative decline, the U.S. will definitely focus its global strategy increasingly on the central area of the world in order to meet the challenge from powers whose relative (or indeed absolute) strength is increasing. Furthermore, the action that America has taken in order to transfer its strategic core from the Middle East to the East Asia has also served to confirm East Asia's position as the new centre of the world.

If East Asia becomes the world's centre, the ‘rebalancing strategy’ of the U.S. would inevitably regard preventing China's rise as a primary task and its global strategy will give the first priority to strategic competition in the coming world centre. In addition, if the situation is regarded without intervening oceans, then the United Kingdom and Japan would become neighbouring countries to the United States, and Europe and East Asia would be in front of America. It is based on this understanding that the United States always claims itself to be an East Asian country. In a geopolitical sense, China and America could be both world-class strategic competitors in the East Asia area, and if so, their competition would spread throughout this region and be fiercer than similar competition in other regions. In the history of East Asia, there have been a great deal of power struggles between an empire based within the central area and another great power in this region, such as the Han Dynasty versus the Huns, the Song Dynasty against the Jurchen Empire, the Ming Dynasty versus the Manchus and so on, and these strategic competitions are always very intense [8]. If history repeats, it means the power struggles in the East Asia region between China and the United States will be fiercer than similar conflicts in other regions.

The Shift of the World Centre to be at Different Sequence in Various Strategic Fields

Historically, the shift of the world's centre was always accomplished through warfare, so military supremacy was always intensely pursued for strategic competitiveness [11,24,30]. The collapse of the Soviet Union created suitable conditions for a shift in

the world's centre in the twenty-first century, but China has chosen to prioritise its economic development; this strategy has effectively induced the Sino-American strategic rivalry to start in an economic rather than a military context, although it does not rule out the possibility for a military conflict.

The global strategic rivalry consists of two aspects: the material aspects and the cultural aspects. The material aspects encompass economic and military power. China is the world's largest exporter, maintains the largest reserve of foreign currencies, is the second largest economic entity, but its military power is still substantially less than America's. In addition, although China's expenditure on national defence is now the second largest in the world, China's practical military ability is still inferior to Russia, because military power is directly related to experience in battle. Furthermore, the mathematical measure of military might cannot be treated in the same way as corresponding physical estimates, because the physical measure refers to the estimate made in terms of military potential for destruction and defence, while the mathematical measure is merely an estimate of the monetary value of a nation's military assets.

Taking a panoramic view of various factors involved in China's comprehensive national power, it is obvious that China's prior strategy of economic development has determined that any strategic conflicts occurring during the process of shifting the world's centre will take place in economic terms first, then in military terms, and finally in cultural terms. The centre of the world must also be an area that has a huge impact on the cultural trends and ways of thinking in the world. This region ought to be in possession of a world-class material force as well as a world-class cultural force, especially in terms of ideological influence. It is because of this that the world's centre is always the model imitated by countries in the periphery of the world. America, as a part of the world's centre, has a great influence on the main trend of the World's way of thinking [2,22,27–29]. At present, China's influence on the world in terms of ideology is still far from equal to the United States, but has begun to appear [43]. For instance, foreign scholars usually only focused their studies on the writings of deceased Chinese ideologists, such as Tao Tzu, Confucius, Zeng Guofan, Liang Qichao, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and so on. In last few years, they developed interest in the strategic thoughts of contemporary Chinese scholars. In 2008, the British scholar Mark Leonard published the book *What Does China Think?* [17], which is the first work published by a foreign author researching China's contemporary strategic thinking since entering the twenty-first century, and this book has been translated into 17 languages. Additionally, the South Korean scholar Chung-in Moon published a similar work in Korean called *The Great Strategy of China's Rise – In Depth Dialogue with Leading Chinese Intellectuals* [25] in 2010. When a country's contemporary thinking has been attracting external attention, it could indicate that this country has started to exert an ideological influence on the world, because the success or failure of a rising power largely relies on its contemporary thought rather than that of its deceased citizens.

Will the Shift of the World's Centre Lead to a Transformation of the International System?

Another academic issue relating to the shift of the world's centre is the transformation of the international system. Facing the possibility of a shift in the world's centre in the

twenty-first century, some people have concluded that the international system has already begun to change; some even label this as ‘the third great transformation in the last 500 years’ [50]. To analyse whether the international system has changed or not, we should elucidate all the component components, in order to facilitate correct analysis of the relationship between these components and the change in the system’s classification. In particular, the question is whether a change in system types will be precipitated by a change in any particular element or whether such a change would necessitate changes to few components simultaneously? According to this standard, the judgement of whether the international system has undergone a transformation or not should be based on observing changes in components of the current international system.

The Standard Used to Judge Whether the International System has Changed is Ambiguous

In many essays and articles concerning the study of international relations, a great variety of systems were observed, with names such as the ‘Five-service System’², the Tributary System, the Westphalia System, the Vienna System, the Versailles-Washington System, the Yalta System, the Post-Cold War System, and so on. Furthermore, in Barry Buzan and Richard Little’s work, *The International System in World History*, they reviewed different interpretations of international systems from scholars including David Singer, Kenneth N. Waltz, and Alexander Wendt. Their work reflects the divergences and contradictions of opinion existing in the understanding of the concept of international systems. Since 2005, the author has conducted research about the difference between the two international systems of the ancient Huaxia region, respectively in the Spring and Autumn Periods and the Warring States Period. One of the outcomes of this research is the author’s realisation that the lack of a common standard for classifying the qualities of international systems has caused serious differences of opinion to arise in academic research.

In general, the international system is made up of three components, which are the international actors, international configuration and international norms. However, no conclusion has yet been reached by academia as to which element (or combination of components) among the three may be used to judge whether or not a transformation has occurred. To date, most essays about the evolution of the international system are arguing about a change in international configuration [18,19,32]. Some researchers posit that international systems in the Cold War era and the Post-Cold War era were two different types ([12,13]). Whilst in both periods, the main actors in the international system were all sovereign states, the international norms were mainly the norms of sovereignty based on the Charter of the United Nations, only the international configuration changed from bipolar to unipolar. In other words, only the international configuration has changed among the three constituent components. However, if the change of international configuration were treated as a change in the international systems, the meaning of these two things would then become a tautology. Furthermore, in addition to the semantic reason above, the primary cause of why these two things cannot be treated

² According to Wang Xianqian’s *Xun-zi Commentaries*, the Five-service system is an international system including a central area which is the city of Emperor Zhou and the extended peripheral area.

equally is mainly due to logical reasons. As mentioned previously, the international system consists of actors, international configurations and international norms. If a change to any one factor among them could be regarded as a typological transformation of the international system, the concept of the necessity of the current definition of the international system would be negated. Therefore, as long as we propose to employ the hypothesis of the system transformation, a comprehensive perspective considering changes to the three components together should be used to analyse whether the international system has undergone transformation.

In ancient times, because the world was divided into several independent international systems, this essay will consequently take regional international systems as examples for analysis as well. The constituents of the international systems - the actors, configurations and norms which were frequently referred to by scholars - are listed in the table below. It is necessary to note here that the character of the national actors could vary, even within the same historical period. For example, in the Huaxia area of East Asia, the royal family of the Zhou Dynasty once coexisted with many vassal states, such as the states of Qin, Chu, Qi and so on. In Europe, the Holy Roman Empire once existed simultaneously alongside various kingdoms, such as the Prussian Kingdom, the Kingdom of Bavaria, the Saxon Kingdom, the Dukedom of Wurttemberg, the Grand-Duchy of Baden, the Hessian Emirate, the Principality of Anhalt, the Elector of Mainz, and the Liberty of Bremen. Also, the United States, the Saudi Arabian monarchies and the Papal state of the Vatican all exist at the same time nowadays. Table 1 only refers to the main state actors in history.

The concept of 'system' refers to a hierarchy formed by the interactions of constituent components [39]. Whether the change of one element will lead to changes to other components should be the standard used for judging transformational effects on international systems. The categories of state actors have experienced an evolutionary process of 'city-states – vassal states – kingdoms – empires – nation states'. The Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648 could be regarded as the starting point of the appearance of nation states, but this change was limited to Europe only. Accompanied by the emergence of nation states, the norm of sovereignty appeared in international systems in Europe, namely states possessing independent sovereignties ([14], p. 139). If the formation of the Westphalia System is regarded as a one-time transformation of the international system, we can find that the types of both of international actors and international norms have qualitatively changed. Since the treaty of Westphalia was issued international actors in Europe have always been nation states. Unfortunately, academics have generally held the opinion that the international system in Europe changed from the Vienna System to the Versailles-Washington System. Besides this, another phenomenon is that the actors in medieval Europe once changed from city-states to kingdoms, but academics do not think that the international system of Europe underwent transformation as a result of this phenomenon. There are two kinds of hypothesis provided: one is that the international system changed while the types of actors did not change; the other is the international system did not change, even though the types of actors had changed. It seems to indicate that the change of actors has no decisive cause-and-effect relationship with the change of international systems. There are three basic forms of international configurations: the unipolar, the bipolar and the multipolar. If we examine international history, we would find that the transformation of international

Table 1 Comparison of the components of international systems

International system	Main actors	International patterns	International norms
Huaxia Area			
The Western Zhou Dynasty (1046 – 771 B.C.)	The royal state, vassal states	Unipolar	enfeoffment
The Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 476 B.C.)	The royal state, vassal states	Unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar	Strove for hegemony but no annexation
The Warring States Era (475 – 221 B.C.)	Monarchies	Multipolar	The norm of annexation
The Qin Dynasty (221 – 206 B.C.)	Empire	Monopolar	The norm of annexation
European Area			
The Roman Era (27 B.C. – A.D. 395)	Empire	Multipolar, dipole	The norm of annexation
The Middle Ages (around A.D.476 – 1453)	The pope and kingdoms	Multipolar	The norm of magisterium
The Westphalia System (A.D.1648 – 1791)	Nation states	Multipolar	The norm of sovereignty
The Anti-France Alliance (A.D.1792 – 1813)	Nation states	Multipolar	Interference in internal affairs
The Vienna System (A.D.1814 – 1913)	Nation states	Multipolar	Interference in internal affairs
Muslim Region			
The Post-Caliphate Times (the eighth – the fourteenth Century)	City-states	Multipolar	The norm of annexation
The Ottoman Period (the fourteenth – the sixteenth Century)	Empire	Monopolar	The norm of annexation
Globalization			
The Versailles-Washington System (A.D.1919 – 1939)	Nation states	Multipolar	The norm of occupation and annexation
The Yalta System (A.D.1945 – 1991)	Nation states	Bipolar	The norm of non-interference and non-annexation

systems sometimes took place concurrently with a change to the international configurations, but failed to do so at other times. For instance, during the process of the Versailles-Washington System changing into the Yalta System, the international configuration changed into a bipolar structure from a multipolar structure. However, in the Huaxia area during the thirteenth century, the international system did not change while the international configuration changed from a bipolar structure between the Southern Song Dynasty and the Jurchen Empire into a unipolar structure under the grand unification of the Yuan Dynasty. Such historical evidence has caused scholars to doubt whether a change of international configurations will lead to the transformation of international systems.

The change of international norms is always used as the most common standard in academia with which to judge whether any typological change has occurred in the

international system. However, whether the change of international norms will definitely bring about the international system's transformation is still a question in need of further research. For example, an ancient issue of international norms is whether it is legal to annex other countries. Scholars in China's academic circle of historiography deem that the biggest difference of international norms between the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Era is the legality of annexing other countries, which was illegal in the Spring and Autumn Period but legal in the Warring States Era (Yang, 2003). Although actions of annexation were legal in both the Vienna System and the Versailles-Washington System, academics still treat these two systems as being different. Besides this, annexation of the territory of other countries was illegal in both the Yalta System and the Post-Cold War System, but some scholars still think that the systems in the Cold War and Post-Cold War eras are two different ones while they exhibit the same international norms [5,6]. This suggests that a simple change to the international norms is not enough to be regarded as a standard with which to determine whether a transformation of an international system has occurred.

The Transformation of the International System Requires at Least Changes to Two Components

If we take typological changes to both actors and norms happening at the same time as the standard used to determine whether transformation has occurred in an international system, it is easy to find several transformations of international systems which accord with this standard. During the transformation from the Western Zhou System to the Spring and Autumn System, the international norm changed from enfeoffment to the pursuit of hegemony; simultaneously, the actors changed from vassal states authorised by the Son of Heaven to independently authorised monarchies. During the Middle Ages in Europe, feudalism replaced the civilization of Rome; following this, Europe experienced a transformation from feudalism to the Westphalia System after 30 years of warfare from 1618 to 1648 [20]. During the transformation which occurred at this time, the actors changed from feudalist kingdoms into nation states, and the international norm changed from the norm of magisterium to the norm of sovereignty [15]. There was no typological change of international configurations in either of these two transformations of international systems.

In addition, if we took typological changes of international configurations and international norms as the standard of international systems' transformation, it would also be easy to find a series of examples of international systems' transformations corresponding to that standard. After the Second World War, the world underwent a deep global transformation of its international systems, namely the change from the Versailles-Washington System to the Yalta System. In this process of the system's transformation, the international configuration changed from multipolar into bipolar between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the international norms changed from the norm of preoccupation and annexation to the norm of non-interference and non-annexation. In this change of international systems, nation states did not have any typological change as the main actors.

Aside from the two situations described above, we can also find many examples of international systems' changes if we take coincidental character changes of actors and

international configurations as the standard. In 221 B.C., the state of Qin annexed the other six monarchies and the ruler of Qin changed his title from ‘monarch’ to ‘emperor’ and then established the first empire in the history of this region. This made actors change from monarchies into an empire, and the international configurations change from the multipolar into unipolar. Besides this, there was a similar change of international systems in the Muslim world of the fourteenth century. The Caliphate Empire in Arabia had been in decline since the middle of the eighth century and had split into many city-states, bringing about a multipolar configuration to the Muslim world at that time. In the late fourteenth century, international actors changed from city-states into an empire with the rise of the Ottoman Empire, in addition, there were two other empires (the Safavid Empire in Persia and the Mughal Empire in India) emerging in the Muslim world. Thus, the international configurations consequently changed from the multipolar into the unipolar [20]. Neither of the two transformations of international systems happened with any change of international norms.

The examples illustrated here have certain limitations because the author cannot provide an exhaustive list of all the examples of international systems’ transformations that have occurred in the course of human history. Therefore, it is not conceivable to unequivocally state that an international system would definitely undergo a transformation as long as typological changes occur in any two of its components. However, there is already the logical framework in place through which to deduce three principles according to the various points above: first, the type of international system is bound to change if three components change at the same time. Secondly, it is highly likely that the type of international system has changed if two of its three components have changed. The examples above could support this principle at least, but as to the probability of changes to any two of the components causing the system’s transformation, an accurate judgment could only be made after searching all the different cases in which transformations of international systems have occurred throughout history. Thirdly, it is inadvisable to treat the international system as having changed if there is only one element changing, as it will lead to inequalities between the part and the whole, the components and the system, to changes in their scope and nature. One typical example is that, in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union only changed the type of international configuration, specifically from a bipolar structure to a Unipolar structure, but did not lead to changes of the categories of international actors or norms. That is also why most scholars refer to the changes of international politics in that period as ‘the change of international configurations’ but few call it ‘the change of international systems’. Additionally, in 2006, some scholars strongly argued that there was only a change of international configurations but not a change of systems after the Cold War [47].

Taking the change of two components as the standard with which to determine international systems’ transformation, there would be some doubts about the judgement that the Vienna System and the Versailles-Washington System are two types of international systems. According to Table 1, there is no difference among the types of actors, configurations and norms in these two international systems. The main distinction is that the Vienna System is a European local system but the Versailles-Washington System is a global system. This was due to the expansion of European powers in the global arena, which caused the international systems in Europe to become globalised. Therefore, the main differences of these two systems are in their geographic sizes, specific countries

included and the quantity of countries, instead of in the types of systems to which they belong. In fact, observing from a perspective of international configurations, these two systems are both multipolar; it was merely the specific countries that constituted their 'poles' that changed because of a redistribution of power.

A more controversial question of the transformation of systems is whether the evaluative process from the Westphalia System, the system of the Anti-France Alliance to the Vienna System could be regarded as a transformation of the international system or not. As was shown in Table 1, the actors and international configurations of the three systems are all the same, and their international norms hardly exhibited any change to their characters. However, some scholars deem that the international configuration during the seven wars of the Anti-France Alliance from 1789 to 1814 is bipolar, and international norms changed from the principle of secret diplomacies of monarchies to the principle of universal peace and justice [20]. It could be regarded as a kind of transformation of international systems that took place while the Anti-France Alliance System was changing into the Vienna System, if the judgements mentioned above are reasonable.

The Change in International Norms is a Crucial Factor

To assess whether the international system will undergo qualitative changes in the twenty-first century, the key point is whether the types of international norms will change or not. Obviously, the shift of the world's centre will undoubtedly bring about typological changes to international configurations. However, current opinions differ on the question of whether the unipolar world dominated by the American hegemony will change to a bipolar or a multipolar structure. Scholars who think highly of the E.U., India, Brazil and Russia predict that the international configuration will become multipolar. They believe that these organisations or nations would be able to possess similar international influence equating to that of the U.S. within the next 20 years. Conversely, scholars who think that the international configuration will change into a bipolar structure believe that there will be no other country, except for China, which could narrow the gap of comprehensive strength with America within the next 10–15 years, and moreover, China and America will widen the gap with other powers in terms of comprehensive strength. The author is holding this idea as well [46]. All in all, scholars agree that the shift of the world's centre will change the type of international configurations, regardless of whether it will change to a multipolar or bipolar structure.

It is hardly unique to this century that the shift of the world's centre has occurred concurrently with a typological change to the main international actors. Shortly after the Cold War, some scholars, in particular some liberalist scholars in Europe as well as in China, supposed international actors would be about to change. They criticised China as a country with backward and rigid ideas of sovereignty and thought that international organisations represented by the E.U. would replace sovereign states to become the main international actors. The history of the last 20 years does not support this hypothesis. Despite the number of international organisations has increased from around 20,000 to 50,000, especially with the rapid establishment of many NGOs, sovereign states still take the role as the main international actors [52].

In the situation where the type of international actors is constant, the key point with which to judge whether the transfer of the world's centre in the twenty-first century will lead to character changes to international systems is whether the international norms will change or not; clearly this is a question that necessitates further observation. What is already known is that the prime mover in this shift of the world's centre is the rise of China, but whether China's rise will bring forth world-wide changes to people's thoughts and perceptions is still unknown. The current international norms are based on western thoughts of liberalism; for this reason, western countries are unlikely to be the main force to challenge the existing international norms. At present, China's rise is mainly manifested in the aspect of material forces. The increase of material forces can change international configurations and the distribution of the power structures, but may not definitely change international norms. Thus, China's influence at the level of international political thought is still limited at present. It is difficult to make a judgment right now about whether China would be able to provide the world with sufficiently compelling thoughts and ideas with which to build new type of international norms.

However, there has been an inconspicuous indication that Chinese government has clearly put forward Chinese traditional culture as the focal point for its major strategies. In the white paper 'China's Peaceful Development' [34] published in 2011, the Chinese government has affirmed Chinese traditional culture as one of three components constituting China's peaceful development strategy. The author also believes that China's foreign strategies should borrow from ancient Chinese political ideas, considering the thoughts of human authority as principle guiding China's strategies of rising up and constructing new international norms [46]. Moreover, many Chinese scholars believe that China's rise would rely on the enhancement of its soft power [5,6,10,23,51]. However, this has not been convincing enough to enable one to declare that China's rise will inevitably bring about qualitative changes to international norms.

It can be seen that the frequency of the qualitative change to international configurations is higher among the three components of the international system. In the last 500 years, international configurations have changed many times, international norms have changed 3-4 times and the international actors have only changed once. The insight brought by this phenomenon is that the speed of change with regards to international systems is slower than that of international configurations. Historically, it is common for international configurations to change twice within 100 years, but extremely rare to see international systems changing at the same speed. Since the First World War, the international system has only changed once, in 1945, which is only 67 years ago; this implies that there should still be a great many years until the next time a transformation of the international system will occur. In consideration of this, in the author's opinion, at present, it is more objective to describe the shift of the world's centre in the twenty-first century 'a change of the international configuration' rather than 'a transformation of the international system'.

How Should China React to the Shift of the World's Centre?

The rise of China is the main engine of the shift of the world's centre. The process of the shift will generate huge system-pressure and uncertainty to China. The theory of 'rising dilemma' is that the faster the speed of a country's rise, the stronger the

reaction from the international system [35]. The fear in China's rise from Western academia has grown from concerns regarding the development of China's material forces to issues regarding challenges to the dominance of Western civilizations launched by Chinese civilizations [44]. Many western scholars have begun to conduct research into this topic [49]. How can China overcome the system-pressure and succeed in its final rise? This is both a strategic and a theoretical question.

China Needs to Reconsider the Consistency Between its Policies and International Status

In the process of the shift of the world's centre in the twenty-first century, China is on the rise and is internationally considered the second greatest power in the world. Nowadays, under the principle of keeping a low profile, the Chinese government insists on the identity of a developing country. However, this makes China faced with increasing pressure of international responsibility. This pressure comes not only from developed countries, asking China to take on more international responsibility [53], but also from developing countries. Some developing countries hope China to undertake more economic responsibility as well as more international security responsibility, especially security protection for them. Therefore, the place of the second great power and the identity of a developing country have formed a contradiction; the political target of being a responsible great power and the principle of keeping low profile has formed another contradiction; the principle of non-interference in other's domestic affairs and the requirements of upholding international justice has formed a contradiction as well. Solving these contradictions would be beneficial in improving China's international influence and would bring about a change in international configuration in favor of China's rise.

China Needs to Shape Strategic Relationships During the Change of International Configuration

International configurations are determined by two components, which are the comparison of major powers' strength and strategic relations among them. Currently, the trend of comparison of great powers is favourable to China's rise, but the strategic relations among major countries are not. The United States is still the country with the most allies, with more than 40 at present, although the increase of its material strength has been in relative stagnation. By contrast, China follows a nonalignment principle and does not have any formal allies. The lack of allies has become a major obstacle to China's efforts improving strategic relations with surrounding countries. Since President Obama took office, the American government began adopting the 'Smart Power' diplomacy [26], namely the strategy of broadening the united front, which consolidated and enhanced its strategic cooperation with other countries [36]. In this case, if China could adjust the principle of nonalignment, it would be able to increase the number of strategic allies which would make the change in international configurations favourable to China's. Conversely, if China cannot improve its strategic relations, the speed of change in international configurations would be relatively low.

China Needs to Push for Establishing new International Norms

Liberalism possesses the dominant position in the current international system, but it does not mean that there is no space for China to promote the establishment of new international norms. Taking the environmental issue as an example, China put forward the norm that “common but different responsibilities” and it got support from many other countries. Qualitative change of international norms is based on the change of thoughts and ideologies. The core thought of liberalism contains freedom, equality and democracy, which is also the basis of current international norms as well. However, there is possibility for international community to develop ideas to transcend liberalism. Based on the Chinese traditional thoughts of “benevolence”, “righteousness” and “etiquette”, the Chinese government could put forward “fairness”, “justice” and “civility” as the principles to guide constructing new international norms. If China would like to promote new values around the world, these values should be practiced domestically first. Any kind of societal norms without domestic practice will be difficult to be accepted by international community. The author argues that the types of international system may change only when China’s rise brings about changes in both international configurations and international norms.

The problems of the shift of the world’s centre and the transformation of international systems will be more closely examined by academia along with the acceleration of China’s rise. Reinforcing the research in this field will be helpful to promote the theoretical studies of international systems. Chinese scholars have their own unique advantages in this aspect; hence it is possible for them to create a new theory of international systems if they can make the best of their advantages.

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