



The Chinese School of IR Theory: Ignored Process, Controversial Progress, and Uncertain Prospects

Peng Lu *

Professor, School of Government, East China University of Political Science and Law, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 3080@ecupl.edu.cn

Abstract

This article reviews issues relevant to the Chinese School of International Relations (IR) theory. After 20 or more years of relentless effort, the Chinese School has achieved concrete breakthroughs, evident in the emergence of Relational Theory, Moral Realism, and Symbiosis Theory. The Chinese School has thus entered a new stage, its primary task having been upgraded from theory innovation to theory development. But to proceed further, the Chinese School needs critical responses from its Western counterparts. Owing primarily to the language barrier, as well as to the non-confrontational academic tradition within Chinese IR, and the ethnocentrism that both sides practice, the few dialogues that have taken place between the Chinese School and Western theories have tended to be problematic, with important issues either ignored or misrepresented. In order to further study a comprehensive and intensive exchange of ideas between the Chinese School and Western theories, this article categorises issues relevant to the Chinese School into three areas. They are: process of evolution; progress in theoretical studies; and the Chinese School's future relationship with other theoretical entities (in particular, Global IR). Predominantly reliant upon the discourse analysis of Chinese School publications, this contribution seeks to provide a foundation for further exchanges between Western theories and the Chinese School.

Introduction

Collective efforts to construct the “Chinese School of IR theory” have persisted since the year 2000,¹ when two Chinese scholars first coined the term. Defined as an academic

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¹ Mei Ran, “Gaibugai you gouji zhengzhi de zhongguo xuepai—jianlun meiguode guoji zhengzhi lilun (Should there be A Chinese School of International Politics Theory—also on American International Politics Theory),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (Journal of International Studies)*, No. 1 (2000), pp. 63–7; Ren Xiao, “Lilun yu guoji guanxi lilun: yixie sikao (Theory and IR Theory: Some Thoughts),” *Ouzhou Yanjiu (Chinese Journal of European Studies)*, No. 4 (2000), pp. 19–25.

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enterprise addressing the “poverty of Chinese IR theoretical studies,”² to which the image of Chinese International Relations (IR) as a discipline without its own theory is attributable, the Chinese School has now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, reached the stage of theoretical innovation. Chinese School scholars initially spent around 10 years justifying the necessity, possibility, and approach of a Chinese School.³ The ensuing 10 years was invested in theory construction, drawing on such traditional Chinese cultural concepts as morality, relationality, and symbiosis to answer questions pertinent to China’s rise in a Western-dominated international society. As a result, three branches of the Chinese School, namely, moral realism, relational theory, and symbiosis theory, respectively, have been observed in recent years.⁴

Having achieved theoretical breakthroughs, the Chinese School is entering new stage and addressing a primary task that has been updated from that of theory innovation to theory development.⁵ This change is determined by factors both within and outside of Chinese IR. On one hand, the Chinese School must address its intrinsic requirements for improvement.⁶ Differing from the “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” of the late twentieth century, which was an ideological advocacy in scholarly disguise.⁷ The Chinese School is, in the twenty-first century, predominantly an academic initiative following the logic of scientific knowledge making. The academic pursuit of theoretical progress thus becomes the primary impetus for the Chinese School’s advance. On the other hand, the Chinese School faces pressure from Western IR to improve. In contrast with the “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” that was operational within Chinese IR, but largely ignored by Western IR, the Chinese School attracted Western IR’s attention soon after its nascence, and frequently interacted with leading Western IR theorists.⁸ Such academic feedback from Western theories has incentivised the Chinese School to improve itself.

² Su Changhe and Peng Zhaochang, “Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de pinkun—dui jin ershi nian guoji guanxi xue zai zhongguo fazhan de fansi (Poverty of Chinese IR theory—Reflection on the Development of IR in China in the Past 20 Years),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 2 (1999), p. 15.

³ Lu Peng, “Guanyu zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de renshilun gongshi jiqi wenti (Epistemological Consensus on Chinese IR Theory and Its Problems),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 12 (2010), pp. 101–19.

⁴ Qin Yaqing, “A Relational Theory of World Politics,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No.1 (2016), pp. 33–47; Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Shih Chih-yu, “Balance of Relationships,” in Shih Chih-yu et al., eds., *China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 17–77; Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Ren Xiao, “Lun dongya gongsheng tixi yuanli—duiwai sixiang he zhidu yanjiu zhiyi (On the Principles of the ‘System of Symbiosis’ in East Asia—Studies of Diplomatic Thought and Institutions),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 7 (2013), pp. 4–22; Su Changhe, “Gongsheng xing guoji tixi de keneng—zai yige duoji shijie zhong ruhe goujian xinxing daguo guanxi (The Possibility of a *Gongsheng* International System: How to Build A New Type of Big Countries Relations in A Multi-polar World),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 9 (2013), pp. 4–22. I intentionally leave Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia*-ism out of my definition of the Chinese School. I will explain why in the following discussion.

⁵ Lu Peng, “Lijie zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de liangzhong tujing (Understanding the Two Approaches to Chinese IR Theory),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 1 (2018), pp. 73–93.

⁶ Qin Yaqing, “Guoji guanxi de hexin wenti yu zhongguo xuepai de shengcheng (Core Problematic of International Relations Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School),” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (Social Sciences in China)*, No. 3 (2005), p. 174; Qin Yaqing, “Guoji guanxi lilun zhongguo xuepai shengcheng de keneng yu biran (A Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Inevitability),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 3 (2006), p. 10; Yan Xuetong, “Jiejian xianqin sixiang chuaxinxin guoji guanxi lilun (Use the Pre-Qin Thought for Reference to Innovate IR Theory),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, No. 3 (2009), p. 150.

⁷ Song Xinning, “Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics,” *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26 (2001), p. 69; Wang Yizhou, “Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun: dui chengjiu yu qushi de jidian ganshou (Theories of International Relations in China: Several Points of View on Achievements and Deficiencies),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 4 (2003), p. 12.

⁸ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and Beyond Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Peter Katzenstein, “The Second Coming? Reflections on a Global Theory of International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), pp. 373–90; Amitav Acharya, “From

The intrinsic and extrinsic factors discussed above underscore the imperative that the Chinese School engage in a dialogue with Western IR theories—a necessity that arises from the Chinese School's limited feedback from within the Chinese IR realm since its inception in 2000. Over the past two decades we have observed only one formal exchange of ideas concerning symbiosis theory and its critiques on the symbiotic nature of the international system.⁹ Additionally, there has been a singularly critical evaluation of Qin Yaqing's relational theory that challenges its dichotomous treatment of Chinese culture and Western culture, but which, however, has elicited no formal response.¹⁰ Compounding this issue is the inadequate critical feedback from Chinese IR. The situation is exacerbated when certain Chinese scholars attempt to reorient the Chinese School into becoming an ideological instrument of the ruling party. For instance, Wang Yiwei recently advocated the Chinese School's reversion to the “zhengdao (the correct direction)” of theory innovation by “fully exploring the academic, theoretical, and discourse system of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy.” He posited that “the leadership of the CCP and the Chinese socialist institution are the base and guidance for the birth of Chinese IR theory.”¹¹ Regrettably, however, such an approach may be of limited assistance to the Chinese School's quest for further improvement.

Dialogue between Western theories and the Chinese School is, by contrast, academic-oriented, and hence more serious and constructive. In 2016, Barry Buzan, Peter Kristensen, and Nele Noesselt exchanged views about the Chinese School with Chinese School scholars Ren Xiao and Shih Chih-yu in a book edited by Zhang Yongjin and Zhang Dengji.¹² In 2018, Chinese School scholars Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuotong discussed the Chinese School and Global IR with Barry Buzan, Amitav Acharya, and Peter Katzenstein in a workshop on Global IR and non-Western IR theories sponsored by China Foreign Affairs University. Their discussions led to a book titled “Globalizing IR Theory: Critical Engagement.”¹³ In 2019, Cambridge Review of International Affairs published a special issue on relational theory, having invited Chinese School scholars Qin Yaqing and Shih Chih-yu to engage in a dialogue with such Western theorists as Patrick Jackson and post-colonialist scholar L. M. Ling. These dialogues introducing the Chinese School to Western IR received Western feedback from various theoretical perspectives, thus considerably helping the Chinese School's endeavours to improve its theoretical products.

However, there have been shortcomings to Western theories' dialogues with the Chinese School. First, compared with the frequent debates between Western IR theories, interactions between the Chinese School and Western theories constitute neither sufficient nor serious debates. Second, theoretical branches on either side demonstrate different degrees

Heaven to Earth: ‘Cultural Idealism’ and ‘Moral Realism’ as Chinese Contributions to Global International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2019), pp. 467–94.

⁹ Chen Xuefei, “Zhongguo ying jianli wenming daoxiang de shijie zhixuguan—jian yu Su Changhe, Ren Xiao xiansheng shangque (China Should Establish A Civilization-oriented View of the World Order—and Discuss with Su Changhe and Ren Xiao),” *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 41–4; Xiong Lili, “Gongsheng xing guoji tixi haishi jinghe xing guoji tixi—jianyi yatai diqu guoji tixi de lishi yu xianshi (Symbiotic International System or Competitive-Collaborative International System—and on History and Reality of Asia-Pacific Regional International System),” *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 4 (2014), pp. 36–40; Ren Xiao, “Gongsheng tixi de cunzai yu chiji xing—dui Xiong Lili, Chen Xuefei xiansheng de huiying (The Existence and Continuity of Symbiotic System—A Response to Xiong Lili and Chen Xuefei),” *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 11 (2014), pp. 32–5; Su Changhe, “Yi xin pubian zhuyi goujian shijie zhixu—dui gongsheng wenti de jinyibu sikao (Construct World Order with New Universalism—Further Thought about the Symbiotic Issue),” *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 11 (2014), pp. 35–8.

¹⁰ Shang Huipeng, “Guanyu guoji zhengzhi ‘guanxi lilun’ de jige wenti—yu Qin Yaqing jiaoshou shangque (Several Issues about Relational Theory of International Politics—Discussion with Professor Qin Yaqing),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (The Journal of International Studies)*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2017), pp. 134–43.

¹¹ Wang Yiwei, “Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de sanda misi (Three Myths of Chinese International Relations Theory),” *Meiguo Yanjiu (Chinese Journal of American Studies)*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2022), pp. 9, 20.

¹² Zhang Yongjin and Chang Teng-chi, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations: Ongoing Debates and Sociological Realities* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

¹³ Qin Yaqing, ed., *Globalizing IR Theory: Critical Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

of involvement in dialogues. Regarding the Chinese School, relational theory is proactive in its interaction with Western theories, closely followed by moral realism, but symbiosis theory is often absent. By contrast, with the notable exceptions of Marxism and Feminism, Western theories reflecting on Western academic hegemony are keen to hold dialogues with the Chinese School, but positivist-oriented Western theories, such as neo-realism, display scant interest in that regard. Third, owing to language barriers, Western understanding of the Chinese School is far from comprehensive. Western scholars mainly study English language translations of the Chinese School,¹⁴ which constitute a small part of a large elephant. Misunderstandings and misrepresentations thus frequently occur. A notable example is the effort to evaluate Chinese IR theoretical studies from the works of Xu Jilin, a Chinese philosopher with negligible impact on Chinese IR scholarship.¹⁵ Fourth, the ethnocentrism practiced by both sides makes mutual learning difficult; Western theorists evaluate the Chinese School through Western theories, while Chinese School scholars embrace cultural essentialism or cultural idealism.¹⁶ Neither is willing to take the other's positions seriously.

The issues mentioned earlier, however, can be effectively addressed through constructive dialogues between the Chinese School and Western IR theories. To prioritise these dialogues, we categorise the relevant issues into two groups, based on the difficulty in addressing them. The first group comprises issues that can easily be tackled by efforts from either or both sides of the dialogue. For instance, interactions may significantly expand by encouraging the Chinese School and Western theories to engage more proactively with each other. A comprehensive understanding of the Chinese School may thus be achieved through Chinese scholars' introduction of their theories to Western IR. And as more branches of the Chinese School and Western theories enter these conversations, a balanced involvement in dialogues between the Chinese School and Western theories may gradually be achieved. The second group includes issues requiring constant cooperation from both sides. For instance, mitigating the misjudgements of the Chinese School and overcoming mutual reluctance to accept each other's feedback necessitate serious reflections on both sides' ethnocentric tendencies. This calls for ongoing constructive interactions in the long run—a process that both sides must maintain.

This article specifically addresses the first group of issues. Often associated with language barriers or a lack of knowledge about the Chinese School, these are of relatively minor difficulty. Relatively unaffected by theoretical bias, such issues may be resolved through concerted efforts to introduce the Chinese School to Western IR. For this purpose, the article relies on Chinese IR discourses to trace the evolution of the Chinese School, discuss its theoretical achievements, and speculate on its future relationship with other theoretical enterprises. This entails discussing the Chinese School under three topics. The first topic is process, focusing on the evolution of the Chinese School. In this section, I clarify two teleological concerns, indicate four self-images adopted by Chinese School scholars, generalise the knowledge models adopted for the school's construction, and concentrate on its theory-building practices. The second topic is progress, which reviews the Chinese School's knowledge products and discusses controversies about its contributions. The third topic considers the Chinese School's prospects in regard to its future development, discussing interactions between the Chinese School, Western theories, and Global IR, and tentatively suggesting possible directions. These efforts deconstruct the collective, consistent, and

¹⁴ For example, Barry Buzan confessed, in debate with Qin Yaqing on China's rise, that he can neither read nor speak Chinese, and that his analysis of the topic is hence based on his reading of English language materials, and from the English School theoretical perspective. See Barry Buzan, "China in International Society: Is 'Peaceful Rise' Possible?" *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2010), p. 6.

¹⁵ Chu Shinan, "Whither Chinese IR? The Sinocentric Subject and the Paradox of Tianxia-ism," *International Theory: A Journal of International Politics, Law and Philosophy*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2020), pp. 57–87.

¹⁶ Katzenstein, "The Second Coming?" p. 382; Acharya, "From Heaven to Earth," p. 6.

progressive—yet oversimplified—image of the Chinese School,¹⁷ replacing it with one that is more discursive and fuller of diversities, controversies, and uncertainties.

The Ignored Chinese School Process

In this section, I review the Chinese School's evolution over the past 20 years to demonstrate that it is an academic enterprise characterised by complexity, inconsistency, and controversy. My story begins with the fundamental transition that Chinese IR underwent at the beginning of China's Reform and Opening-up, and which observers of Chinese IR have often overlooked. That ignorance has prevented us from identifying the profound connections between the status of Chinese IR and the emergence of the Chinese School, and from evaluating the Chinese School's concrete theoretical outputs through its original teleological concerns.

Owing to scholars' differing attitudes towards theoretical studies, Chinese IR in the late twentieth century fell into two groups. One consisted of senior scholars that, in common with their Mao-era predecessors, sought to convince the ruling communist party of their loyalty, thus maintaining the pattern of embedding power in academic knowledge. It was at a national IR theory conference in 1987, the first of its kind in Chinese IR history, that these senior scholars collectively proposed the ambitious "IR theory with Chinese characteristics" approach, stating explicitly their determination to accomplish it according to Marxist principles and their commitment to "stick to the historical materialism and dialectical materialism of Marxism that was the fundamental methodology of IR theory with Chinese characteristics." Their goals included: (1) discovering the objective laws of world politics; (2) supporting China's foreign policy decision; and (3) forming components of China's national ideology.¹⁸ The most successful exemplar of such efforts is Liang Shoude, the then head of the Department of International Politics at Peking University. He relied predominantly upon Chinese leaders' discourse to rebuke the Western-dominated international order and advocated replacing it with a Chinese one.¹⁹

The other group consisted of junior scholars that were both reluctant to follow the ruling party's instruction on academic research,²⁰ and disgruntled about the academic privileges that their senior fellow scholars enjoyed.²¹ Direct resistance, however, in such a highly

¹⁷ Ren Xiao, "Growing from Within: Building a Chinese School of International Relations," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2020), pp. 386–412; Qin Yaqing, "Zhishi hanhua yu shehui zhishi zai shengchan—yi zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun fazhan lujing weili (Knowledge Acculturation and Social Knowledge Reproduction: Taking the Development of Chinese IR Theory as an Example)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 1 (2023), pp. 10–8.

¹⁸ Yu Zhengliang, Zhao Xiaochun, and Chu Shulong, "Guanyu jianli you zhongguo tese de guoji guanxi xue tixi—Shanghai guoji guanxi lilun taolun hui jiyao (On Establishing an IR System with Chinese Characteristics—Summary of Shanghai Conference on IR Theory)," *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)*, No. 4 (1987), pp. 3–4.

¹⁹ Liang Shoude, "Guanyu zhongguo wajiaoxue de zhongguo tese de tantao (Discussion about the Chinese Characteristics of China's Science of Diplomacy)," *Wajiaoxue Xueyuan Xuebao (Journal of the China Foreign Affairs College)*, No. 4 (1993), pp. 51–55; Liang Shoude, "Lun guoji zhengzhi xue de zhongguo tese (On the Chinese Characteristics of International Politics)," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (Studies of International Politics)*, No. 1 (1994), pp. 15–21; Liang Shoude, "Guoji zhengzhi xue zai zhongguo—zaitan guoji zhengzhi xue lilun de zhongguo tese (International Politics in China—Again on the Chinese Characteristics of International Politics Theory)," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (The Journal of International Studies)*, No. 1 (1997), pp. 1–9.

²⁰ Ren Xiao confesses that, "IR with Chinese characteristics' is more or less a replica of the political discourse of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics.' This political baggage is problematic." See Ren Xiao, "The Chinese School Debate: Personal Reflections," in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*, p. 36. And Wang Yizhou expresses similar concern about the ideological implication of "IR theory with Chinese characteristics," see Wang Yizhou, "Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun: dui chengjiu yu qushi de jidian ganshou (Theories of International Relations in China: Several Points of View on Achievements and Deficiencies)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 4 (2003), p. 11.

²¹ Wang Yizhou thus recalls his personal experience of this situation, "Upon entering this research field I felt constrained by the extreme authoritativeness of senior scholars, which more or less precluded any chances for younger scholars to

politicalised and hierarchical discipline, was out of the question, due to its unthinkable consequences. Junior scholars thus adopted a strategy of indirect challenge. It consisted in gradually replacing senior scholars' political discourse with Western IR theories, which these elders were unfamiliar with and hence reluctant to accept. The academic authority of seniors, achieved through interpreting/justifying Chinese leaders' thought and China's foreign policy, would consequently undergo a gradual erosion. Although not openly articulated, this strategy was substantiated by one junior scholar's bold and somewhat optimistic expectation at that time. His anticipation was that Chinese IR would witness substantial theoretical progress once its senior figures had retired and the younger generation had matured.²² In following strategy, junior scholars introduced Western IR theories into Chinese IR, and in the late twentieth century, propelled the discipline to the phase in China, as summarised by Qin Yaqing, of "theory-learning," wherein Chinese scholars learnt Western IR theories through translation.²³

Qin Yaqing provides a detailed review of how Western IR theoretical works were translated into Chinese IR in the "theory-learning phase," viewing it as preparation for reflection on Western IR theories and pursuit of the Chinese School of IR theory.²⁴ The "theory-learning" phase, however, is more than merely transferring Western theories into Chinese IR. It signifies a fundamental change in the character of the discipline in China from that of an ideological instrument to an academic enterprise. Since 1949, Chinese IR had been ideology-oriented, insisting on the class attributes of knowledge, and defining IR as an instrument of the ruling Chinese Communist Party.²⁵ Rivalry between Chinese socialist IR and Western capitalist IR was established in the early 1950s, by dint of the former's copying of Soviet Russian IR and de-legitimising of pre-1949 Chinese IR.²⁶ This ideological approach—whereby such Western IR concepts as "national interest" were either denounced as capitalist jargon geared to capitalist interest, or dichotomised as capitalist national interest and socialist national interest—persisted through to the early period of Reform and Opening-up.²⁷ Western theories were thus criticised for ignoring the class attributes of

express their ideas in conferences." See Wang Yizhou, "Zhongguo guojia guanxi xue: jianyao pinggu (IR Studies in China: A Briefing)," *Ouzhou Yanjiu (Chinese Journal of European Studies)*, No. 4 (2004), p. 143.

²² Song Xinling suggested that, "Due to the implementation of the enforced retirement system, those conservative, senior university professors will eventually withdraw from their dominant positions in IR studies," and "more and more junior scholars who have received academic training in foreign institutions of higher education are taking over important academic and administrative posts." See Song Xinling, "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 10, No. 26 (2001), p. 73.

²³ Qin suggests two phases regarding Chinese IR theory-related research in the late 20th century. The first phase is the "pre-theory phase" (1953–1989) in which scholars have "no consciousness about theory," and the second is the "theory-learning phase" (1990–2000), in which scholars learn Western theories through translation. See Qin Yaqing, "Why is there no Chinese International Relations Theory?" in Acharya and Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, pp. 32–5. This division, however, ignores the introduction of Western theory into Chinese IR in the 1980s, and the exploration of "IR theory with Chinese characteristics" since the late 1980s. Qin recently redefines these two phases as "the early stage of uni-acculturation" and "the developing stage of uni-acculturation." See Qin, "Knowledge Acculturation and Social Knowledge Reproduction," pp. 10–5. I borrow Qin's term "theory-learning phase" to refer to the two "uni-acculturation" phases, because they are both dominated by a one-way theory transfer process from Western IR to Chinese IR through learning Western theories.

²⁴ Qin, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" pp. 29–32.

²⁵ Lu Peng, "Chinese IR Sino-centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2019), pp. 156–57.

²⁶ Lu Peng, "Pre-1949 Chinese IR: An Occluded History," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (2014), pp. 148–51.

²⁷ Chinese scholars in the late 1980s still insisted on the fundamental differences between socialist national interest and capitalist national interest. See Guo Xinling, "Ruhe renshei shehui zhuyi guojia de guojia liyi (How to Define the National Interest of Socialist Countries)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 7 (1989), p. 67. This situation gradually changed in the 1990s, when the national dimension of national interest was recognised. See Yu Zhengliang, "Bianrong zhong de guojia liyi yu guojia liyi guan (National Interest and View of National Interest in Transition)," *Fudan Xuebao (Fudan Journal Social Sciences)*, No. 1 (1994), pp. 40–2.

states,²⁸ and pre-1949 Chinese IR was either degraded as discursive and unsystematic, or simply ignored in discourse about Chinese IR history.²⁹

The ideological nature of Chinese IR was gradually deconstructed in the “theory-learning” phase, when junior scholars learned Western IR theories and also came to embrace Western definitions of the discipline. Yan Xuetong introduced “national interest” into Chinese IR through unprecedented analysis of China’s national interest,³⁰ and also the positivist definition of IR as an academic enterprise based on causality, prediction, and scientific methods.³¹ Qin Yaqing introduced constructivism into Chinese IR through translating Wendt’s work, and constructivist definition of the discipline as a socially constructed academic enterprise.³² In the early twenty-first century, as Western concepts such as “national interest” and “social construction” became popular in Chinese IR discourse,³³ Chinese scholars also shared the Western image of academic IR, disagreeing solely only on what counts as academic. A small number of Chinese IR scholars adopted the positivist position, but the majority were inclined towards a broader view of the discipline. The two groups of scholars debated over the character of IR as either a state science or art, though both abandoned its ideological aspect.³⁴ The “theory-learning” phase thus signifies an important re-starting point for Chinese IR’s resumption, after being ideologised for 40 or more years, of its academic character.³⁵

Having come to consider IR as an academic enterprise, at the turn of the twenty-first century the then junior Chinese IR scholars began comparing the academic performance of Western IR and Chinese IR in theoretical studies. The obvious absence of Chinese IR theory led to their reaching consensus on the backwardness of Chinese IR theoretical studies.

²⁸ Qin Yaqing, “Xifang guoji guanxi xue de xianshi zhuyi yu xin xianshi zhuyi lilun (Realism and Neo-realism of Western IR),” *Waijiao Xueyuan Xuebao (Journal of the China Foreign Affairs College)*, No. 2 (1996), p. 45.

²⁹ In Wang Yizhou’s words, “From a general point of view, pre-1949 IR was discursive and sporadic, insofar as there were no specific institutions for international studies or their comprehensive arrangement, the research quality was comparatively poor, teacher/student recruitment activities were discursive, there were few discussions on the concept of IR and its methodology, and seldom any communication or dialogue with foreign colleagues.” See Wang Yizhou, “Guodu zhong de guoji guanxi xue (IR Studies in China: A Discipline in Transition),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 4 (2006), p. 8.

³⁰ Yan Xuetong is among the first Chinese IR scholars to view national interest as a universally applicable concept and to discuss it scientifically. See Yan Xuetong, “Guojia liyi de panduan (On Evaluation of National Interest),” *Zhanlue yu Guanli (Strategy and Management)*, No. 3 (1996), pp. 35–43. Moreover, he is the first Chinese scholar to systematically analyse China’s national interest. See Yan Xuetong, *Zhongguo Guojia Liyi Fenxi (Analysis of China’s National Interests)* (Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Publishing House, 1996).

³¹ Yan points out, “We have to make clear that a social science research method takes account of neither class nor nationality, even though a social science research object embraces both.” See Yan Xuetong, “Dui guoji guanxi yanjiu fangfa de jidian kanfa (Some Views on IR Research Methods),” *Guoji Guancha (International Survey)*, No. 4 (1998), p. 47. In order to introduce Western scientific methods into Chinese IR, Yan invited junior Chinese scholars from various Chinese universities to annual methodological training workshops. See Yan Xuetong, “Guoji guanxi lilun yu daguo guanxi yanjiu (IR Theory and Studies of Big Power Relations),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 5 (2003), p. 37.

³² Qin Yaqing, “Guoji zhengzhi de shehui goujian—Wen Te jiqi jiangou zhuyi guoji zhengzhi lilun (Social Construction of International Politics—Wendt and His Constructivism Theory),” *Ouzhou Yanjiu (Chinese Journal of European Studies)*, No. 3 (2001), pp. 4–11.

³³ Yan Xuetong, “Gaige kaifang sishi nian de guoji guanxi xueshu yanjiu (IR Research Forty Years after Reform and Opening-up),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, No. 4 (2018), p. iv.

³⁴ Wang Yiwei, “Zai kexue yu yishu zhijian—zhiyi guoji guanxi lilun (Between Science and Art—Questioning IR Theory),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 9 (2002), pp. 4–10; Sun Xuefeng, “Xueshu pipan butong yu daoyi qianze—ping zai kexue yu yishu zhijian—zhiyi guoji guanxi lilun (Academic Critique is Different from Moral Condemnation—Review of “Between Science and Art—Questioning IR theory),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 1 (2003), pp. 31–4; Wang Yiwei, “Pipan de wuqi buneng tidai wuqi de pipan (Critical Weapons cannot be Replaced by Critiques on Weapons),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 5 (2003), pp. 68–9.

³⁵ For pre-1949 Chinese IR, see Lu, “Pre-1949 Chinese IR: An Occluded History.”

Over the ensuing 20 years, they attributed the absence of Chinese IR theory to certain features of Chinese culture, and to Chinese IR's shortcomings.³⁶ These diagnoses corresponded to an academic strategy of catching up with Western IR theories through Chinese theoretical innovations. However, Chinese factors were not the sole culprits of absent Chinese IR theory. Another issue that Chinese IR scholars frequently raised was that of the Western academic hegemony that had colonised Chinese IR since the Reform and Opening-up drive, and hindered its theoretical development.³⁷ They held that the postcolonial strategy of creating Western IR theories' advantageous position stemmed from Western academic colonisation, and hence advocated its deconstruction and replacement with Chinese IR theories. Understandably, when diagnosing the absence of Chinese IR theory Chinese scholars seldom blame political interference, even though it had indeed interfered with the discipline in China since 1949, notably by deleting political science from the university curriculum in 1952 and re-establishing three IR-relevant departments in 1964, their main function being to justify Mao Zedong's view of world revolution.³⁸

Interestingly, however, learning from Western IR theories ceased to be the primary task of either strategy. Regarding the academic strategy, given that its ultimate aim was the progress of Chinese IR theoretical studies through Chinese theoretical contributions, learning from Western IR theories was insufficient. As to the postcolonial strategy, learning from Western theories was unnecessary, and even harmful, because it deepened the degree of colonisation by virtue of Western academic hegemony, and further obstructed emancipation from Western academic colonisation.³⁹ The two strategies existed at the beginning of the Chinese School. Although Mei Ran from Peking University and Ren Xiao from Fudan University simultaneously called for the Chinese School in the year 2000, their underlying motivations in this regard were completely different. Mei Ran espoused the postcolonial discipline whereby the Chinese School was viewed as a banner under which Chinese IR would fight against Western theories' academic hegemony. He claimed that the Chinese School would be meaningful even if it achieved no concrete theoretical breakthrough in the future.⁴⁰

³⁶ Qin Yaqing blames the lack in traditional Chinese thinking of "international" awareness. Qin, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" pp. 26–50. Wang Yiwei and Han Xueqing nominate five cultural features—among them, reluctance to accept universalism, and preference for harmony over fundamentalism—as the reasons. See Wang Yiwei and Han Xueqing, "Why Is There No Chinese IR theory: A Cultural Perspective," in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese school of International Relations*, pp. 90–113. Su Changhe cites the lack of criticism and debate in Chinese IR, see Su Changhe, "Weishenme meiyou zhongguo de guoji guanxi lilun (Why is There No Chinese International Relations Theory)?" *Guoji Guancha (International Survey)*, No. 4 (2005), pp. 27–30; and Yan Xuetong puts the blame on the absence of scientific training for Chinese scholars, see Yan Xuetong, "Why Is There No Chinese School of International Relations Theory?" in Yan Xuetong, ed., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 256.

³⁷ Qin, "Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?" pp. 37–9; Wang and Han, "Why Is There No Chinese IR theory," pp. 58–9.

³⁸ Textbooks and curriculums used in these three IR department exemplify the starkly different academic quality of Chinese IR scholarship before and after 1949. See Lu, "Pre-1949 Chinese IR," pp. 144–7.

³⁹ A typical expression of this concern is expressed by Wang Yiwei and Ni Shixiong, who warn of the danger of learning Western theory, holding that "the more we follow Western IR theories, the more we trouble ourselves, and by the time we finish reading them we will become slaves of Western theories." See Wang Yiwei and Ni Shixiong, "Bijiao guoji guanxi xue ji guoji guanxi lilun de zhongguo xuepai (Comparative IR and the Chinese School of IR Theory)," *Kaifang Shidai (Open Times)*, No. 5 (2002), p. 21.

⁴⁰ Mei Ran's argument was mainly based on his opposition to American "academic hegemony." He quoted Steven Smith and Ken Booth to demonstrate that American IR theories inherently embodied the political science of a hegemon. According to Mei, the aim of establishing a Chinese School was specifically to challenge the hegemony of American IR. This conceptualisation of the Chinese School, Mei explained, held symbolic significance. Mei observed that, "International Politics is a new discipline in China. What is more important, the US is in the dominant position in this discipline." A Chinese School is hence important in playing the "China card" because it could "highlight the unreasonable situation in contemporary global International Politics academia, emphasise the meaning to change this situation, and demonstrate Chinese scholars' courage to participate in this change." In conclusion, Mei declared that, "a Chinese School is not only a label, but also a banner. A banner cannot be used as guns to capture territory. However, nobody can deny its symbolic meaning." See Mei Ran, "Gai bu gai you gouji zhengzhi de zhongguo xuepai—jianlun meiguoguo de guoji zhengzhi lilun

By contrast, Ren Xiao, though similarly concerned about American academic hegemony, was largely academic-oriented. He acknowledged the academic progress demonstrated by Western IR theories, and unequivocally proposed the Chinese School as an academic enterprise that would offer concrete Chinese theoretical contributions.⁴¹

In the two decades that ensued, the academic and the postcolonial disciplines co-existed in the Chinese School, with Chinese School scholars standing somewhere between the two. On the one extreme was Yan Xuetong, whose positivist understanding of scientific knowledge prevented his denunciation of the academic achievements of Western IR theories.⁴² Instead, he has consistently rejected the postcolonial implication of the Chinese School,⁴³ his pursuit of Chinese theoretical innovation being one compatible with the academic discipline of the Chinese School.⁴⁴ At the other extreme were scholars sharing Mei Ran's postcolonial concern about Western academic colonisation, and that hence unequivocally denounced Western IR theories. After the year 2000 Mei Ran never mentioned the Chinese School again. Ten years later, Shanghai-based scholars began blaming Western theories for the tragedies resulting from Western international practices, and advocating Chinese IR's academic independence and replacement of Western theories with the Chinese School.⁴⁵ Standing between the two extremes were scholars that acknowledged the academic value of Western IR theories but were dissatisfied with Western academic hegemony, and that hence looked to the Chinese School as an alternative. Qin Yaqing, for example, regards Western IR theories as highly developed academic knowledge, but geared specifically to the vested interest of Western countries.⁴⁶ He proposes the Chinese School in order to explain China more clearly and expand the plurality of IR theory.⁴⁷

(Should There be a Chinese School of International Politics Theory? —also on American International Politics Theory),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (Journal of International Studies)*, No. 1 (2000), p. 65.

⁴¹ Ren Xiao, “Lilun yu guoji guanxi lilun: yixie sikao (Theory and IR Theory: Some Thoughts),” *Ouzhou Yanjiu (Chinese Journal of European Studies)*, No. 4 (2000), p. 24. Further evidence of Ren's academic concern about the Chinese School is his clear prioritisation of the English School as an instructive precedent. He recalled, three years later, that “in my article in 2000, when I proposed the ‘Chinese School’ as our target...I had the English School as a frame of reference.” See Ren Xiao, “Xiang yingguo xuepai xuexi (Learn from the British School of International Relations),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 7 (2003), p. 70.

⁴² Yan Xuetong, “Guoji guanxi lilun shi pushi xing de (IR Theory is Universal),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 2 (2006), p. 1.

⁴³ The postcolonial implication of the Chinese School, which interprets it as the nationalist ambition to act as China's national theory, is thus wholeheartedly rejected by Yan Xuetong. See Yan Xuetong, “Why Is There No Chinese School of International Relations Theory?” in *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, pp. 252–9; Yan Xuetong, “Zailun weihe meiyu zhongguo xuepai (Again on Why Is There No Chinese School),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, No. 1 (2018), pp. iv–vi; Yan Xuetong, “Up-grading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024).

⁴⁴ Yan, “Use Pre-Qin Thought as a Reference when Innovating IR Theory,” pp. 150–65; Yan Xuetong, “Xianqin guojia jian zhenzhi sixiang de yitong jiqi qishi (Pre-Qin Thought on Inter-State Relations and Its Implications),” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (Social Sciences in China)*, No. 3 (2009), pp. 87–108.

⁴⁵ Su Changhe blames Western IR theories for the historical cycles of renewed war after peace in modern international relations. See Su, “The Possibility of a *Gongsheng* International System,” pp. 6–8. His stated aim in this regard is to “substitute, displace, and block concepts from the West with Chinese concepts” for “a Chinese social science language system”. See Su Changhe, “Yi xin pubian zhuyi goujian shijie zhixu—dui gongsheng wenti de jinyibu sikao (Building World Order with New Universalism—Further Thinking on the Symbiosis Issue),” *Tansuo yu Zhengming (Exploration and Debate)*, No. 11 (2014), p. 36.

⁴⁶ Influenced by the Marxist interpretation of IR theories, Li Bin claims that American IR theories are expressly geared to the maintenance of American hegemony. See Li Bin, “Guoji guanxi lilun yu bentuhua wenti (Theories of International Relations and Nativisation),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 3 (2003), p. 70. Adopting and extending Li Bin's critical interpretation of American IR theories to Western IR theories in general, Qin unequivocally states that American IR theories are solely for the maintenance of American hegemony, and that the aim of the English School has been to promote Britain's international status since WWII. See Qin, “Core Problem of International Relations Theory and the Construction of a Chinese School,” pp. 170–74.

⁴⁷ For a better understanding of China's logic of international practice through the Chinese School, see Qin Yaqing, “International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities and China's Peaceful Rise,” *Chinese*

The Chinese School is thus an enterprise encompassing both academic and postcolonial concerns, aiming to improve Chinese IR through Chinese theoretical contributions, and to resist Western academic hegemony through the Chinese postcolonial movement. The two concerns, however, are inconsistent in their attitudes towards Western theories and academic hegemony. The academic concern takes Western IR theories as a role model, thus accepting the views of specific Western IR theories and learning theory building from Western theories in general. By contrast, the postcolonial concern unequivocally denounces Western IR theories, rejecting not only the academic value of Western theories but also their mode of striving for and maintaining academic hegemony. The challenge here is that the postcolonial concern may only be addressed academically; otherwise, neither the postcolonial nor the academic concern can be successfully dealt with. Ideally, when a Chinese theoretical breakthrough is achieved and recognised, the postcolonial concern about academic independence is also addressed. However, since theoretical innovation does not occur easily or overnight, in choosing to address their postcolonial concern when there is no academic breakthrough on the horizon, Chinese School scholars are likely to render the Chinese School academically unsound.

In practice, Chinese School scholars navigate between the academic and postcolonial concerns. This results in the Chinese School's multiple images (Figure 1). When Chinese School scholars make an either-or choice between the two concerns, the Chinese School may be either a purely academic enterprise focused solely on theoretical contributions, or a staunch postcolonial movement striving for academic independence at any cost. Yan Xuetong and his Tsinghua Approach represent the pure academic Chinese School, while Shanghai-based scholars such as Jin Yinzong align with the extreme postcolonial Chinese School.⁴⁸ In cases where Chinese School scholars make a both-and choice between the two concerns, the Chinese School manifests as either an academic-postcolonial enterprise prioritising theoretical contributions while still seeking academic independence, or as a postcolonial-academic movement striving for academic independence but operating under academic disguise. Qin Yaqing and Ren Xiao, given the prominence of Western theories in their academic discourse, fall under the academic-postcolonial Chinese School category, whereas Su Changhe exemplifies the postcolonial-academic Chinese School. This categorisation reflects my judgement and is open to debate. What is certain, however, is that the Chinese School is an enterprise with dual concerns and diverse images. Consequently, it cannot be defined simply as an academic venture for theoretical process, nor as a postcolonial movement against Western academic hegemony,⁴⁹ nor as another political conspiracy between the ruling communist party and Chinese IR scholars.⁵⁰

Journal of International Politics, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2010), pp. 129–53. Qin suggests here the distinctly Chinese both-and logic—as opposed to the Western either-or logic—which will guarantee China's peaceful rise. And for Qin's modest postcolonial concerns about the Chinese School, see Qin, "Knowledge Acculturation and Social Knowledge Reproduction," pp. 3–24. Here, Qin repeatedly states that the aim of Chinese IR theory innovation is not to replace Western academic hegemony but to deconstruct it through theoretical diversity.

⁴⁸ Jin Yinzong is the figure that connects "IR theory with Chinese characteristics" with the Chinese School. Active in the former, he was one of the first to introduce the symbiosis concept to the Chinese School. See Jin Yingzhong, "Weishenme yao yanjiu guoji shehui gongsheng xing—jianyi heping fazhan shidai guoji guanxi lilun (Symbiosis of International Society and IR Theory of Peace and Development)," *Guoji Zhanwang (global review)*, No. 5 (2011), pp. 1–17.

⁴⁹ Hwang Yih-Jye, "Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations: A Postcolonial Perspective," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2021), pp. 311–30; Peter Kristensen, "Navigating the Core-periphery Structures of 'Global' IR: Dialogues and Audiences for the Chinese School as Traveling Theory," in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*, pp. 226–52.

⁵⁰ Nele Noesselt, "Revisiting the Debate on Constructing a Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 222 (2015), pp. 430–48.

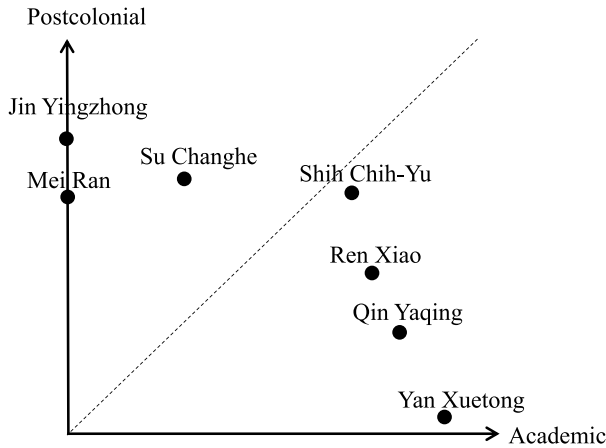


Fig. 1. Images of the Chinese School

Alt text: Line graph displaying postcolonial image and academic image of the Chinese School respectively held by individual Chinese School scholar.

These teleological concerns both signify the expectations of Chinese IR scholars regarding the Chinese School and go towards justifying its necessity. However, in light of the pressing need for the Chinese School to clarify its approach to successful theory innovation, teleological concern alone does not present a promising tactic. The Chinese IR self-image having shifted from ideological instrument to that of an academic enterprise, the Chinese School cannot adopt the ideological approach to theoretical construction proceeding from “IR theory with Chinese characteristics.” It instead seeks an approach that is compatible with its image either as an academic enterprise or a postcolonial movement, or both. Chinese School scholars began discussing possible approaches immediately after the Chinese School was proposed in 2000. Ren Xiao suggested the English School as a specific role model.⁵¹ Based on the philosophy of science, particularly Immanuel Lakatos’s theory of scientific revolution, Qin Yaqing proposed an approach to IR theory innovation that started with a central question and arrived at a new paradigm. Qin tentatively designed his central question for the Chinese School by asking about socialist China’s peaceful rise in international society, and encouraging Chinese School scholars to answer by theorising three types of Chinese experience, namely: (1) the Tianxia worldview and the practices of the tributary system; (2) modern ideas of sovereignty and China’s revolutionary practices; and (3) ideas of Reform and Opening-up, and China’s efforts to integrate into international society.⁵²

Qin Yaqing’s Chinese School approach received immediate recognition. It was viewed not only as “the most detailed elaboration of the Chinese School,”⁵³ but also—by dint of the consensus reached among Chinese IR scholars—dispelled any doubts about the

⁵¹ Ren Xiao, “Xiang yingguo xuepai xuexi (Learn from the British School of International Relations),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 7 (2003), p. 70.

⁵² Qin Yaqing, “Guoji guanxi lilun zhongguo xuepai shengcheng de keneng yu biran (A Chinese School of International Relations Theory: Possibility and Inevitability),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 3 (2006), pp. 10–2.

⁵³ Ren Xiao, “Guanjian zaiyu zhongguo texing—yetan yingguo xuepai ji qita (The Chinese Characteristics are Critical: On the English School and Beyond),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 1 (2009), p. 70.

feasibility of the Chinese School.⁵⁴ The later-known Tsinghua Approach is, in predominantly concentrating on pre-Qin Chinese thought for theory innovation, a specification of Qin's.⁵⁵ While unanimously following Qin's instruction, Chinese School scholars defined their China-relevant central questions and explored answers based on their preferred Chinese experiences. Qin Yaqing relies upon traditional Chinese ways of thinking, which he defines respectively as the Chinese both-and logic,⁵⁶ the Chinese zhongyong dialectic,⁵⁷ and Chinese relationality.⁵⁸ He used these concepts to explain China's logic of international action that enables a peaceful rise process.⁵⁹ Yan Xuetong addressed the transition of the centre of the world system,⁶⁰ returning to ancient Chinese thought for an understanding of hegemonic competition, and suggesting a peaceful power transition process through "healthy" competition between the hegemon and the rising power over morality-based world leadership.⁶¹ Shanghai-based scholars asked for alternatives to the Western liberal international order, proposing a symbiotic international order based on ancient Chinese thought and practice of the ancient tributary system.⁶² These efforts lead to the three branches of the Chinese School: relational theory, moral realism, and symbiosis theory.

The preceding discussions reveal certain features of the Chinese School's evolution of over the past two decades. First, the Chinese School's primary impetus is addressing the underdeveloped state of theoretical studies in Chinese IR. The limitations of Western IR theories, as underscored in the Chinese School's recent retrospective introductions, are, at best, of secondary importance.⁶³ Second, owing to differing diagnoses regarding the absence of Chinese IR theory, the Chinese School employs various strategies and presents diversified images of varying significance. The two academic images clearly hold mainstream status, while the two postcolonial images occupy a marginal position. Third, despite its diverse images, the Chinese School adheres to Qin Yaqing's approach to theory innovation, and

⁵⁴ Lu Peng, "Guanyu zhongguo guojia guanxi lilun de renshilun gongshi jiqi wenti (Epistemological Consensus on Chinese IR Theory and Its Problems)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), No. 12 (2010), pp. 101–19.

⁵⁵ Zhang Feng, "The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 73–102.

⁵⁶ Qin, "International Society as a Process," pp. 138–9.

⁵⁷ Qin Yaqing, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2014), pp. 285–314.

⁵⁸ Qin Yaqing, "A Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2016), pp. 33–47; Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, pp. 195–238.

⁵⁹ Qin claims that, "It is *Zhongyong* that guides, consciously or unconsciously, Chinese thinking and doing and which, should thought or action go inappropriately astray towards the extreme, pulls back to the middle ground range, thus restoring the balance necessary to pave the way for further and healthier growth." See Qin, "Continuity through Change," pp. 293–95.

⁶⁰ Yan Xuetong defines the central question of moral realism as "how can the rising power replace the dominant power, and this is about the principle of world power centre transition," see Yan Xuetong, *Shijie Quanli de Zhuanxi—Zhengzhi Lindao yu Zhanlue Jingzheng* (Transformation of World Power—Political Leadership and Strategic Competition) (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2015), p. 2. And he reiterates this question later as "how a rising state, one that has significantly less material capability than the dominant state, is able to surpass that state and become the new world leader." See Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 25.

⁶¹ Yan Xuetong, "From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), p. 172.

⁶² Ren, "On the Principles of the 'System of Symbiosis' in East Asia," pp. 4–22; Su, "The Possibility of a *Gongsheng* International System," pp. 4–22.

⁶³ In fact, Chinese School scholars in the early 2000s specified very few Chinese anomalies within Western IR theories when they tried to justify their academic ambitions. Stanley Hoffmann's allegation of IR as an American social science, Steve Smith's critiques of American positivist mainstreams, and Robert Cox's argument that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" are the three evidences often adopted by Chinese scholars to justify their pursuit of the Chinese School. See Mei, "Should there be a Chinese School of International Politics Theory," p. 63; Qin, "A Chinese School of International Relations Theory," p. 4. However, these are Western reflections on Western IR theories rather than Chinese anomalies.

has steadfastly followed an academic trajectory for the past two decades. This commitment facilitates the potential for dialogues and collaborations between the Chinese School and Western theories.⁶⁴ Fourth, the Chinese School demonstrates a selective use of Chinese experience in theory construction. Despite Qin's suggestion of three potential sources, Chinese School scholars consistently return to ancient Chinese experiences, particularly those deemed morally commendable and historically successful, to formulate theoretical responses to central questions about China in the twenty-first century. These aspects define the Chinese School through its distinct process, which has a clear starting point in the year 2000, of underlying discursive concerns, a shared theory-innovation approach, and three theoretical outputs. Notably, Chinese IR theoretical studies, such as Tang Shiping's international system theory and Chinese philosophical discussions on world order, often referred to as *Tianxia*,⁶⁵ are not part of this process and hence do not belong to the Chinese School.

Controversial Progress

Having reviewed the process whereby the Chinese School was initiated and constructed, I will now discuss the theoretical progress it has achieved. This encompasses both the concrete theoretical products that Chinese School scholars have developed and their academic contributions to Chinese IR theoretical studies and to IR theoretical studies as a whole. In doing so, I will explore issues regarding the Chinese School in general—including terminology, epistemological position, and theoretical contributions—and each specific branch of the Chinese School. None of the aforementioned issues having achieved any consensus between observers and Chinese School scholars, I will demonstrate the progress of the Chinese School by discussing such controversies.

Terminology is the foremost issue in this regard. Certain Chinese School scholars reject the title “Chinese School” due to its implied validation of a national approach to IR. Yan Xuetong, for instance, insists on a scientific enterprise with universal validity.⁶⁶ A national label is thus deemed unacceptable due to its limited capability to explain the world beyond China. Yan also observes the erroneous translation of the title “English School” into Chinese language IR that implies a national UK theory, thus precluding its use to justify Chinese scholars' use of the term “Chinese School.”⁶⁷ However, this judgement is based on a mistaken linkage of the “Chinese School” of the twenty-first century to the “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” of the late twentieth century.⁶⁸ As earlier discussed, the Chinese School has multiple images, but for most Chinese School scholars the two academic

⁶⁴ Western IR plays a very positive role here. The friendly and productive interactions between Western theorists and Chinese School scholars since 2005 prevents the Chinese School from being an extreme postcolonial movement. This is repeatedly mentioned by Chinese School scholars even today. See Yan Xuetong, “Xiwang zhongguo xuezhe huifu guoji guanxi lilun yanjiu reqing (My Hope that Chinese Scholars Renew Their Passion for IR Theoretical Studies),” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Wang (Chinese Social Sciences Net)*, 20 June, 2023, https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/tt/202306/t20230626_5662872.shtml; Qin Yaqing, “Guoji guanxi lilun fazhan de xianzhuang (Current Development of IR Theory),” *Guoji GuanCha (International Review)*, No. 1, 2016, p. 3; Qin Yaqing, “Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de fazhan yu gongxian (Development of IR Theory in China: Contributions and Challenges),” *Waijiao Pinglun (Foreign Affairs Review)*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (2019), p. 3.

⁶⁵ Chinese IR theoretical studies such as Tang Shiping's evolutionary theory of international system and Chinese philosophical discussions on world order, most often known as *Tianxia*, and which include Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia*-ism, Xu Jiling's Neo-*Tianxia*-ism, and Liu Qin's neo-cosmopolitanism, are not involved in the Chinese School process and hence not part of the Chinese School. For a comparative work on these different Chinese versions of *Tianxia*, see Yun Tang, “The State of the Field Report X: Contemporary Chinese Studies of *Tianxia* (All-Under-Heaven),” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2023), pp. 473–90.

⁶⁶ Yan, “IR Theory is Universal,” p. 1.

⁶⁷ Yan, “Again on Why is There No Chinese School,” p. iv.

⁶⁸ Yan Xuetong obviously treats the Chinese School and “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” as the same thing, having claimed in 2008 that “during the past thirty years, Chinese scholars have developed a variety of views about the

ones are the primary choices. Chinese School scholars are aware that, in an authoritarian regime like China, an academic theory cannot double as a national theory. None, therefore, has expressed any such unrealistic expectation of a national Chinese School. In fact, the term “Chinese School” is the best choice whereby to represent Chinese scholars’ constant and collective efforts to theorise Chinese experience with a view to theory innovation. We can think of no alternative term that could more aptly express this academic phenomenon. The term “Chinese IR theories” is, as with “Western IR theories,” a general description of theoretical studies in an academic community, whereas the term “IR theory with Chinese characteristics” is used to justify the ruling Communist Party’s global political vision. Furthermore, Western IR theories have encountered similar controversies regarding terminology,⁶⁹ but as Western theorists are more concerned about theory construction they have achieved theoretical progress.

Despite the above controversies, the term “Chinese School” signifies important progress in Chinese IR theoretical studies. It was under this title that Chinese IR theorists unprejudicedly proposed and maintained the academic direction of Chinese IR theoretical studies. Chinese IR may otherwise have either carried on in its ideological direction of theoretical studies, or remained in the self-contradictory state of both complaining about Western academic hegemony while being guided by Western IR theories. It is by virtue of the exchange of positive and negative positions on this specific term that Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong have articulated and justified the academic approach to theory innovation through theorising ancient Chinese experience. And it is thanks to this approach that Chinese IR scholars have gradually achieved consensus on the possibility and procedure of a Chinese theoretical enterprise⁷⁰ that they may otherwise have continued to debate, rather than construct. The term “Chinese School” also carries significance for IR theoretical studies in general. It is by dint of this specific term that Chinese and Western IR theorists have organised their constructive dialogues and productive collaborations sufficiently to exemplify successful cooperation between Western IR and non-Western IR.⁷¹ It is no coincidence that the English School was the earliest and keenest branch of Western IR theories to hold dialogues with the Chinese School.

The Chinese School’s epistemological position, or more specifically, its Sinocentric assumption that the Chinese experience is more credible than the Western experience in regard to theory construction, is its second attendant controversial issue.⁷² Despite a wide range of different choices regarding the Chinese School between the academic and post-colonial concerns, Chinese School scholars nevertheless unanimously adopt Qin Yaqing’s approach to theory innovation, which invariably relies upon Chinese experience, and which

establishment of a Chinese School, yet created nothing that merits such a title.” See Yan, “Why Is There No Chinese School of International Relations Theory?” p. 252.

⁶⁹ “Idealism” is a problematic label used in the similarly problematic First Debate myth. See Peter Wilson, “The myth of the ‘first great debate,’” in Brian Schmidt, ed., *International Relations and the First Great Debate* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 16–33. The term “English School” was first coined by Roy Jones. See Roy Jones, “The English School of International Relations: A Case for Closure,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1981), pp. 1–13; moreover, in the Chinese translation “English School” is interpreted to mean “British School,” which further emphasises the perceived national theme of the theory. See Wang Jiangli and Barry Buzan, “The English and Chinese School of International Relations: Comparisons and Lessons,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), p. 10.

⁷⁰ Lu Peng, “Guanyu zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun de renshilun gongshi jiqi wenti (Epistemological Consensus on Chinese IR Theory and Its Problems),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* (*World Economics and Politics*), No. 12 (2010), pp. 101–19.

⁷¹ Barry Buzan, for example, points out that “the major current project attempting to build IR theory on historical and philosophical foundations other than Western ones is the so-called Chinese School of IR,” and that “they might well become major sources of a more multicultural and world-historically based IR theory in the coming decades.” See Barry Buzan, “How and How Not to Develop IR Theory: Lessons from Core and Periphery,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), p. 406.

⁷² Lu, “Chinese IR Sino-centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement,” p. 154.

is efficient in making concrete theoretical breakthroughs. Qin's point of view, however, does suggest a Sinocentric epistemological inclination to dominate, with varying degrees of intensity, the three Chinese School branches. Among them, moral realism seems the least Sinocentric. Yan Xuetong resorts to ancient Chinese thought on hegemony to revise the power transition model in an anarchical international system—a research agenda set by realism. And he testifies moral realism through both the Chinese and Western foreign experience for universal validity.⁷³ By contrast, symbiosis theory is the Chinese School branch with the most pronounced Sinocentric inclination because: (1) the symbiotic international order is predominantly based on the Chinese experience; and (2) Western international experience having been rejected out of hand, it cannot be used to testify the Chinese theory. Notably, Chinese scholars in the thrall of Sino-centrism look in unison to ancient China's positive culture for theory innovation as a way of reinforcing their Sinocentric assumption as to the superiority of the Chinese experience. The Chinese School thus demonstrates cultural fundamentalism, cultural essentialism, and cultural idealism.⁷⁴

Sino-centrism becomes controversial when Chinese School scholars deny its existence in the Chinese School. As observed earlier, the Chinese School is justified on the strength of the shortcomings of Western IR theories, including that of disproportionate reliance upon Western experience for theory construction. Chinese School scholars nevertheless take exception to allegations of Sino-centrism in their construction of the Chinese School which Qin Yaqing, for one, refutes by citing Chinese theoretical contributions that expand the diversity of IR theory as a whole.⁷⁵ Sino-centrism, however, is an epistemological inclination of knowledge practices, while theoretical diversity is a result of knowledge products. We cannot explain away the flaws of knowledge practice through the value of its products. Chinese School scholars are cognisant of this, acknowledging as they do the academic contributions of Western IR theories, while criticising Western theories' ignorance of Chinese experience in regard to theory construction. We can, however, both confirm the existence of Sino-centrism and recognise Chinese theoretical contributions. Yan Xuetong denies any trace of Sino-centrism in his theory innovation by correctly pointing out his use of both ancient Chinese philosophy and modern Western IR as references, and purposeful expansion in his works of the weight of foreign literature.⁷⁶ However, Sino-centrism does not necessarily set out to reject all non-Chinese experience in knowledge practices. This extreme epistemological position is observed only in certain Shanghai-based scholars' insistence on the postcolonial image of the Chinese School. In most circumstances, Sino-centrism is either moderate or implicit, and distinct for its symptomatically deliberate, albeit unnecessary, reliance upon Chinese experience for theory innovation.⁷⁷

Ren Xiao is probably the sole Chinese School scholar in the Chinese School that worries about Sino-centrism. He admits to the risk of disproportionate reliance upon Chinese experience for theory innovation, whereby “the things observed by China and recorded in Chinese historical books might be facts, but might also be distorted or imagined scenarios that did not exist at all.”⁷⁸ He thus warns that “if the countries and ethnicities that had interacted with the Chinese Middle Kingdom had kept their writings scripts till today,

⁷³ Yan Xuetong thus uses both ancient Chinese cases in the Spring and Autumn period and in the Warring States period as well as modern Western international cases since WWI to testify his moral realism. See Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, pp. 173–89.

⁷⁴ Katzenstein, “The Second Coming?” p. 382; Acharya, “From Heaven to Earth,” p. 6.

⁷⁵ Qin, “Knowledge Acculturation and Social Knowledge Reproduction,” p. 4.

⁷⁶ Yan, “Up-grading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis.”

⁷⁷ For example, if the definition of morality based on ancient Chinese thinker Xun Zi's thought shows no fundamental difference from that of classical realism or normative theories, why take the trouble to resort to ancient Chinese thought instead of directly using Western concepts for theory innovation? A similar question may be posed regarding Qin Yaqing's highly controversial differentiation of Western rationality and Chinese relationality. See Shang, “Several Issues about Relational Theory of International Politics—Discussing with Professor Qin Yaqing,” pp. 135–7, 140–1.

⁷⁸ Ren, “On the Principles of the ‘System of Symbiosis’ in East Asia,” p. 10.

most stories about foreigners in the orthodox Chinese books *The Twenty-Four Histories* would need to be rewritten. That is to say, official Chinese history books contain much wishful thinking and flights of fancy, and thus cannot be treated as ‘historical facts,’ otherwise, (we) will be inevitably misled.”⁷⁹ Interestingly, despite such clear awareness of the negative impact of Sino-centrism, Ren Xiao nevertheless continues to construct an ancient symbiosis system, based solely on Chinese records, that depicts mutual respect and satisfaction between China and its neighbouring small countries about their positions in a hierarchical order.⁸⁰ In fact, similar to Euro-centrism in Western theories, although Sino-centrism enables the Chinese School to achieve concrete theoretical achievements, it also hinders gaining of a comprehensive understanding of the world. Addressing this issue for the further development of the Chinese School remains the task of Chinese School scholars.

The third contentious issue concerning the Chinese School is that of its theoretical achievements. The three branches of the Chinese School effectively address the absence of a Chinese IR theory, a source of embarrassment to Chinese IR since the late twentieth century. What remains unresolved is the Chinese School’s overall achievements in general, and the specific accomplishments of its three branches. A theory can be evaluated through such criteria as internal logic consistency and explanatory capability.⁸¹ The theoretical achievements of the Chinese School—an important topic, albeit doomed by controversy—I leave to Western and Chinese theorists engaging in discourse about the Chinese School using their respective theoretical criteria. Instead, I suggest a narrower and more concentrated starting point that primarily evaluates the Chinese School from the perspective of Chinese School scholars’ expectations of theory innovations—an aspect which the observers of the Chinese School have often overlooked. Before making a broader examination of the Chinese School’s achievements, as many observers have done, this involves discussing whether and to what degree the knowledge products of the Chinese School align with the academic ambitions of Chinese School scholars.

Since Chinese School scholars have diverse concerns about their collective pursuit of the Chinese School, evaluating their theoretical achievements through a single method is inappropriate. Such diversity explains controversies between Chinese School scholars and their critics. Yan Xuetong is dedicated to expanding the explanatory capability of the realist paradigm.⁸² Therefore, moral realism should first be discussed by virtue of its successful improvement of the realist paradigm’s capability to explain power transitions between great powers, although it is also relevant to observe its absence of concept innovation and failure to go beyond Western Newtonian cosmology.⁸³ Similarly, Qin Yaqing and Shih Chih-yu aim to transform the IR discipline from that dominated by Western paradigms to one of the cultural diversification. Their relational theory should be primarily evaluated as a paradigm with distinctly Chinese ontological, cosmological, and epistemological positions. However, considering its internal logical consistency and explanatory capability is also extremely important.⁸⁴ The symbiosis theory of Ren Xiao, who shares Qin Yaqing’s academic and postcolonial aims, should be evaluated in the same way as the relational theory. Certain Shanghai-based scholars, such as Jin Yingzhong, are determined to challenge

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁸⁰ Ren, “On the Principles of the ‘System of Symbiosis’ in East Asia,” p. 14.

⁸¹ Justin Rosenberg, “Uneven and Combined Development: A Defense of the General Abstraction,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (2022), pp. 269–70.

⁸² Yan, “Use the Pre-Qin Thought for Reference to Innovate IR Theory,” pp. 151–52; Yan, “Upgrading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis.”

⁸³ Toni Erskine and Liane Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory: Locating (and Deciphering) the ‘Moral Realism’ of the Tsinghua Approach,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024); Peter Katzenstein, “Is There a Chinese School of IR Theory?” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, forthcoming.

⁸⁴ Stefano Guzzini, “Relationism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin’s Theory of World Politics,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2024).

Western academic hegemony with a Chinese alternative.⁸⁵ Their symbiosis theory should be primarily evaluated according to its successful replacement of Western theories with a Chinese one, an approach, however, that renders any evaluation of its academic value less meaningful.

The achievements of the Chinese School become more controversial when considering its acceptance into the IR discipline. Yan Xuetong incorporates Chinese moral arguments into realism, and shares with it the Newtonian cosmology regarding an objective world with certainty, the ontological assumption about an anarchical international system, and the positivist epistemological position regarding scientific knowledge. His moral realism is thus both a branch of realism and a branch of the Chinese School, easily recognised by both Western scholars that acknowledge the legitimacy of realism and Chinese scholars that expect Chinese theoretical innovations. Qin Yaqing insists that there is rivalry between Chinese relational logic and Western rational logic.⁸⁶ He shares with social constructivism the Newtonian cosmology regarding a relational world with certainty, the ontological assumption of a socially constructed international society and the epistemological position regarding socially constructed knowledge. His relational theory is thus close to constructivism, and hence belongs to the Chinese School. It is accepted, therefore, by Western scholars that acknowledge the legitimacy of constructivism and by Chinese scholars that support the Chinese School. The symbiosis theory proposes a Chinese symbiotic order in opposition to the Western liberal international order, and rejects Western theories as no more than tools to maintain Western academic hegemony. Symbiosis theory is consequently ignored by Western theories and has only limited acceptance in Chinese IR, which has supposedly been colonised by Western theories. Such varying degrees of acceptance of the Chinese School's branches signify the difficulty and controversiality entailed in evaluating the achievements of the Chinese School as a whole.

Uncertain Prospects

The future of the Chinese School depends on how effectively it can address the controversies discussed earlier. Given the uncertainty about how Chinese School scholars will navigate these challenges, however, the Chinese School's future trajectory remains unpredictable. Speculation regarding the Chinese School's possible prospects over the next few years calls for consideration of its development and interactions with other theoretical entities, including Western IR theories, non-Western IR theories, and Global IR. Prior to discussing these speculative prospects, however, we must examine factors that are likely to play significant negative or positive roles in the Chinese School's development.

What is certain about the Chinese School is that the next generation of Chinese School scholars will encounter difficulties as regards making theoretical innovations. Contrary to Qin Yaqing's optimistic prediction that the next generation will achieve many theoretical contributions and have a far better chance than their elders ever did of becoming prominent IR theorists,⁸⁷ I suggest that the likelihood of theory innovation is lower now for Chinese School scholars than what it has ever been over the past 20 years. The Chinese School has effectively capitalized on the advantages of the underdevelopment of non-Western IR theories by theorising ancient Chinese experiences previously overlooked by Western theories.

⁸⁵ Jin Yingzhong, "Weishenme yao yanjiu guoji shehui gongsheng xing—jianyi heping fazhan shidai guoji guanxi lilun (Symbiosis of International Society and IR Theory of Peace and Development)," *Guoji Zhanwang (Global Review)*, No. 5 (2011), pp. 1–17.

⁸⁶ Qin, "International Society as a Process," pp. 138–9.

⁸⁷ Qin Yaqing, "Zhongguo nianqing yidai biding hui chuxian guoguan dashi (The Chinese Young Generation Will Have Masters of IR Theories)," *zhongguo shehui kexue wang (Chinese Social Sciences Net)*, 1 February, 2023, https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/gjgc_gldd/202302/t20230201_5585551.shtml.

What have been left untouched are three types of Chinese experiences unsuitable for theorisation. The first type includes morally undesirable experiences, such as the ancient Legalist thought that advocates power maintenance through ruthless rule and the ancient diplomatic practices of Sinicising neighbouring countries through military occupation, political subjugation, economic exploitation, and cultural deconstruction.⁸⁸ The second type consists unsuccessful experiences, such as China's historical defeats at the hands of Mongolians, Manchurians, and Westerners, and ancient Chinese thinkers' reflections on the Chinese political tradition after these defeats.⁸⁹ The third type involves politically sensitive experiences, such as the pursuit of Western democracy in the early twentieth century, close cooperation between China and the USA before 1949, and radical foreign policies during the Mao era. As these experiences pose challenges to the Chinese School, it consequently ignores them, and as few positive experiences remain, theory innovation based on Chinese experiences becomes even more difficult.

When facing the challenge of theory innovation, junior Chinese scholars may opt either to enhance the Chinese School or to pursue research agendas irrelevant to it. Collaborators of Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University concentrate on enhancing the explanatory capability of moral realism through case studies of hegemonic competition during the Warring States Period—more than 2000 years ago—and of competition between China and the USA in the twenty-first century.⁹⁰ Followers of Shih Chih-yu apply relational theory to such issues as ancient China's efforts to construct and maintain the Tianxia system, as well as contemporary China's efforts to manage its relationship with others in the twenty-first century, thus

⁸⁸ For example, the famous ancient Legalist thinker Shang Yan (商鞅) notoriously claims in his classical work *Shangjun Shu* (*The Book of Lord Shang*), that “when the people are weak, the state is strong; when the people are strong, the state is weak. Hence, the state that possesses the Way devotes itself to weakening the people.” To achieve this, Shang Yan suggests, the ruler should undertake actions to humiliate the populace as “when the government does whatever the people detest, the people are weak, when the government does whatever the people delight in, the people are strong.” See Shang Yang, *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in early China*, edited and translated by Yuri Pines (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), pp. 143–6. Interestingly, despite Shang Yang's extreme Legalist thought having profoundly influenced ancient Chinese rulers since the Qin Dynasty, Yan Xuetong's 2009 book, which provides a comprehensive review of pre-Qin thinkers, overlooks it. See Yan Xuetong et al., *Wang Ba Tianxia Sixiang ji Qidi* (*Thoughts of World Leadership and Implications*), Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe (World Affairs Press, 2009). Another notable example of China's attempts to Sinicise its neighbour is that of the Ming occupation of Vietnam from 1407 to 1427. For a Vietnamese account of this occupation, particularly detailing how the Ming rulers attempted to replace Vietnam local culture with a Chinese one, please refer to Trần Trọng Kim, *Việt Nam Sử-Luợc* (*Outline History of Vietnam*) (NXB Văn Hóa—Thông Tin, 2012). And for studies of the peripheral polities in the tributary order, see Inho Choi and Minju Kwon, “Ontological Complexity of Interpolity Orders: The Encounter between Chosŏn and Tibet in Qing,” *European Journal of International Relations*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661241228470>, 2024.

⁸⁹ Ancient Chinese Confucians reflected on Chinese politics when China was defeated by foreign tribes. One notable example comes from Huang Zongxi (黄宗羲), a prestigious Confucianist in the late Ming dynasty, who rebuked Chinese absolute monarchy for having plundered *Tianxia* since the Qin Dynasty and made *Tianxia* the private property of the emperors for their reckless enjoyment. See Huang Zongxi (calibrated by Sun Weihua), *Mingyi Daifang Lu* (*Memorandum Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*) (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House, 2010), p. 8. Tan Sitong (譚嗣同), a renowned late Qing dynasty Confucian thinker and reformist, executed at the age of 33 years following the failure of the Hundred Days Reform in 1898, made an audacious and radical assertion. He expressed gratitude for China's comparatively weak military force, contending that if China possessed naval strength akin to Great Britain and France, and an army as formidable as Russia and Germany, the calamities unleashed by China's absolute monarchs would be unimaginable. Tan Sitong envisioned widespread devastation, encompassing the world's white, red, black, and blue-skinned populations, reminiscent of the fate suffered by the Juun'gar tribe: “Fortunately China's military force is not strong. If China's navy force were as strong as that of Great Britain and France, and its army as strong as Russia and Germany, then disasters wrought by China's absolute monarchs on the world would be unthinkable. The white-skinned, red-skinned, black-skinned and blue-skinned would be extinguished just as in the case of the Juun'gar tribe.” See Tan Sitong, *Renxue* (*An Exposition of Benevolence*) (Shenyang: Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1994), p. 79.

⁹⁰ Qi Haixia and Sun Zhaorui, “Quanli zhuan yi, tixi yan hua yu Chunqiu shiqi de baquan gengdie (Power Transition, System Evolution and Hegemonic Change in the Spring and Autumn Period),” *Dangdai Yatai* (*Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*), No. 4 (2022), pp. 99–133; Qi Haixia, “Wangba zhidao, zhongmei jingzheng yu xinde shijie zhixu (The Way to Benign Hegemony, Sino-US Competition and a New World Order),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue* (*Quarterly Journal of International Politics*), No. 1 (2024), pp. 1–5.

demonstrating its explanatory capability.⁹¹ Students of Qin Yaqing either apply relational theory to China's foreign policy, or promote it to a more ambitious and systematic theoretical entity.⁹² By contrast, students of Shanghai-based symbiosis theorists display disinterest in their supervisors' postcolonial-oriented theoretical studies. Ren Xiao's pioneering work on the ancient symbiosis system in East Asia, meanwhile, remains a theoretical hypothesis awaiting validation through empirical studies of interactions between ancient China and its neighbours. Although these young Chinese IR scholars' efforts are meaningful for improving the Chinese School, they were, without exception, carried out within the theoretical frames proposed by Chinese School scholars in the recent decade, and are hence unlikely to yield new theoretical innovations in the foreseeable future.

Whether or not Chinese IR scholars will continue to adopt the term "Chinese School," therefore, becomes uncertain, bearing in mind the limited scope it offers for theoretical innovations. In fact, Chinese School scholars' previous acceptance of the term "Chinese School" have over time become growingly reluctant to use it. Qin Yaqing, formerly the leading Chinese theorist supporting the "Chinese School" in the early twenty-first century, has seldom used the term in his recent academic writings. Instead, he either discusses only relational theory, or uses the phrase "Chinese IR theories" to introduce moral realism, Tianxia theory, and relational theory.⁹³ Whether or not this signifies the prestigious Chinese School scholar's change of attitude remains uncertain.⁹⁴ What is certain, however, is that Ren Xiao remains one of the few that continues to use this term in theoretical discussions.⁹⁵ When considering the recent relevant changes in Chinese social sciences, the prospect is rather dim. When proposed in the year 2000, the title "Chinese School" initially referred to Chinese IR theoretical innovations. In recent years, it has been widely used by other branches of Chinese social sciences to justify the CCP's control of these research fields.⁹⁶ Therefore,

⁹¹ Hou Changkun, "Zhanlue wenhua shijiaoxia de zhongguo gudai Tianxia zhuyi (Tianxia-ism in Ancient China from the Perspective of Strategic Culture)," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu (Journal of International Studies)*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (2023), pp. 110–35.

⁹² Wei Ling, "Guanxi pingheng, dongmeng zhongxin yu diqu zhixu yanjin (Balance of Relations: ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving Regional Order)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 7 (2017), pp. 38–64; Ji Ling, "Lun guanxi zhuanxiang de bentilun zijue (On the Ontological Consciousness of Relational Turn)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 1 (2019), pp. 78–97; Ji Ling, "Guanxixing anquan yu dongmeng de shijian (Relational Security and ASEAN's Practices)," *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 9 (2020), pp. 101–22.

⁹³ Qin Yaqing, "A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2018), pp. 415–34.

⁹⁴ Qin's shift in position regarding the term "Chinese School" can be attributed to two main reasons. The first is to avoid potential controversies that may arise from directly categorising moral realism and other branches of the Chinese School under the same label. This concern is notably influenced by Yan Xuetong's consistent rejection of such categorisation. The second reason stems from a shift in focus from theory innovation to theory improvement. Qin correctly points out that there will be multiple Chinese Schools rather than a singular entity. See Qin Yaqing, "Goujian guoji guanxi lilun de zhongguo xuepai (Constructing Chinese School of IR Theories)," *People's Daily*, 15 February, 2016, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0215/c40531-28123694.html>. When individual branches of the Chinese School are successfully established, the primary task for each Chinese School scholar becomes the improvement of his/her theory rather than that of other Chinese School scholars. Interestingly, Zhang Yongjin similarly cites these cases as examples of "the Chinese School of IR." Despite acknowledging that Zhao Tingyang is a philosopher and that his work is a philosophical critique of Western worldview, however, Zhang provides no evidence to demonstrate interactions between Zhao Tingyang and other Chinese School scholars. See Zhang, "Constructing a Chinese School of IR as Sociological Reality: Intellectual Engagement and Knowledge Production," in Zhang and Chang, eds., *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations*, pp. 204–07.

⁹⁵ Ren Xiao recently suggested four branches of the Chinese School, namely, those of moral realism, relational theory, the *Tianxia* system, and symbiosis theory. See Ren Xiao, "Gongsheng lilun de chengzhang yu jin yingzhong de zuoyong (The Growth of Symbiosis Theory and the Role of Professor Jin Yingzhong)," *Guoji GuanCha (International Review)*, No. 6 (2023), p. 61. And this makes the intrinsic/extrinsic issue regarding the Chinese School even more controversial.

⁹⁶ In recent years, the title "Chinese School" has been used by research fields that include political science, art, comparative literature, film, and journalism, among others. See Pan Wei, "Ruhe jianshe zhengzhixue de zhongguo xuepai (How to Construct a Chinese School of Political Science)," *Wenhua Zhongheng (Beijing Cultural Review)*, No. 6 (2020), pp. 124–32; Li Weifang, "Wenhua zixin yu bijiao wenxue zhongguo xuepai de chuangujian (Cultural Confidence and

in order to distinguish it from the many “Chinese Schools” in Chinese social sciences, now could well be the time to consider a new term for the Chinese School, such as the Chinese Cultural School of IR theory.

The Chinese School’s future direction is the second uncertainty. The Chinese School scholars that prioritised academic concern about theoretical progress over the postcolonial concern of replacing Western academic hegemony with a Chinese one have achieved theoretical breakthroughs over the last 20 years. But whether or not Chinese scholars will make the same choices in the future is another uncertainty. Should they continue to do so, the Chinese School will maintain its status quo as an academic enterprise anticipating further theoretical progress through interactions with Western IR theories. But if not, the Chinese School will become a postcolonial movement that rejects Western critics as promoters of Western academic hegemony, thus rendering communication between the Chinese School and Western theories meaningless, and any progress on the part of the Chinese School somewhat difficult. The Chinese School, therefore, has at least two possible futures—as an academic enterprise or as a postcolonial movement—and hence two completely different outcomes. Chinese School scholars must hence determine which direction the Chinese School will take. Should they fail to reach consensus on this decision or collectively choose the postcolonial path, the academic image of the Chinese School—so tenaciously and admirably maintained by such scholars as Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong, and Ren Xiao over the past 20 years—may cease to exist.

We can speculate on the future direction of the Chinese School by discussing Chinese School scholars’ possible responses to comments and suggestions from Western theorists. The Chinese School receives extensive feedback from Western theorists. Although Chinese School scholars, like their Western counterparts, may not agree with all critiques, and be averse to certain suggestions, they may nonetheless deal with Western suggestions through different strategies. Judging from the criteria of necessity and feasibility, we can categorise Western suggestions into four types: (1) unnecessary and impossible; (2) unnecessary but possible; (3) necessary but impossible; and (4) necessary and possible. The Chinese School may adopt the rationale of giving priority to suggestions that are both necessary and possible, while reserving the necessary but impossible ones and the unnecessary but possible ones for future consideration, and rejecting the ones both unnecessary and impossible (Figure 2). For example, the suggestion to address internal logic inconsistency is both extremely necessary and highly possible for any theory, including the Chinese School. The suggestion to replace the Newtonian cosmology with the quantum cosmology theory is possible, due to Western theorists’ valuable pioneering work in this regard.⁹⁷ However, this may not be feasible in a discipline that features low scientific spirit, high postcolonial ambition, insufficient scientific training, and growing political pressure to embed power in academic knowledge.⁹⁸

the Establishment of a Chinese School of Comparative Literature,” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (Social Sciences in China)*, No. 9 (2020), pp. 135–59; Yu Xiyun, “Lishi weiwulun yu zhongguo kaoguxue lilun tixi (The Characteristics, Style a-nd Appeal of Chinese Archaeology in the New Era),” *Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (Social Sciences in China)*, No. 9 (2021), pp. 115–124; Wang Lina and Hou Yi, “Shengtai piping: zhongguo xuepai de xingcheng yu fazhan (Ecocriticism: Emergence and Development of the Chinese School),” *Fudan Xuebao (Fudan Journal Social Sciences)*, No. 6 (2020), pp. 114–9.

⁹⁷ Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science: Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Alexander Wendt, “Why IR Scholars Should Care about Quantum Theory: Part I. Burdens of Proof and Uncomfortable Facts,” *International Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2022), pp. 119–29; Alexander Wendt, “Why IR Scholars Should Care about Quantum Theory: Part II. Critics in the PITs,” *International Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2022), pp. 193–209; Pan Chengxin, “Enfolding Wholes in Parts: Quantum Holography and International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, No. 26, No. 1 (2020), pp. 14–38; Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁹⁸ For reflections on Chinese IR, including the lack of scientific training and the low degree of academic standards, please refer to Yan Xuetong, “Gaike kaifang shisnian de guoji guanxi xueshu yanjiu (IR Research Forty Years after Reform and Opening-up),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (2018), pp. v–vi; Yan Xuetong, “Guoji guanxi yanjiu de zhuanke yishi (The Sense of Professional Research in Chinese International Studies),” *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2020), p. iv; Yan Xuetong,

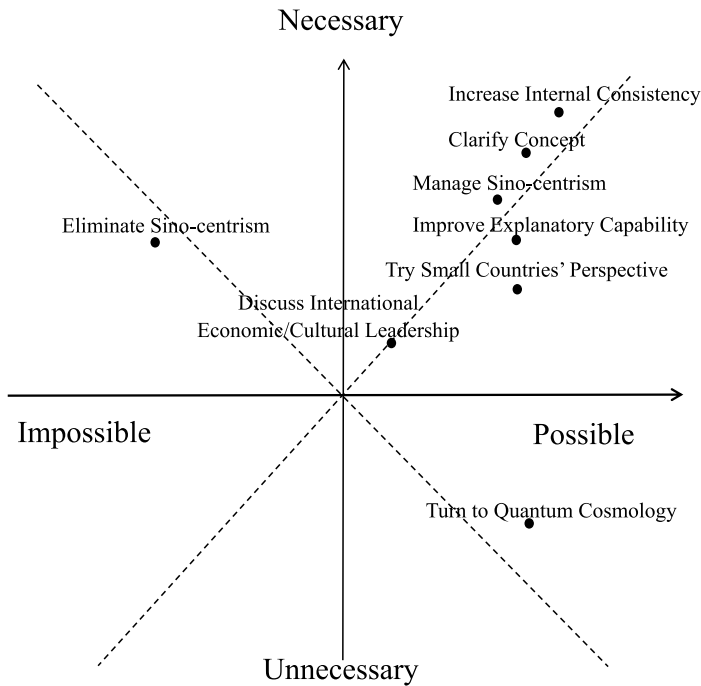


Fig. 2. Necessity/Feasibility of Western Suggestions

Alt text: Line graph indicating necessity and feasibility of Western suggestions for the Chinese School.

Regarding Sinocentric epistemology, the suggestion to manage it is valid, in view of its negative impact on the Chinese School's explanatory capability, and also feasible, thanks to Western scholars' provision of good examples through their reflections on Euro-centrism.⁹⁹ However, eliminating Sino-centrism from the Chinese School is impossible, because it is a byproduct of the logic of practicality that makes sense of the world through the knowledge maker's background knowledge.¹⁰⁰

The third uncertain aspect of the Chinese School is its relationship with other theoretical enterprises, including Western IR theories, non-Western IR theories, and global IR. The current relationship between the Chinese School and Western theories is certain. As illustrated in previous discussions, the Chinese School was simultaneously initiated by Ren Xiao and Mei Ran in 2000, albeit incorporating academic and postcolonial concerns, respectively. Different teleological concerns signify varying attitudes towards Western IR theories, ranging from that regarding them as a model to emulate of scientific research, as an academic authority to compete with, or as an academic hegemony to revolt against. The relationship between the Chinese School branches and Western theories thus varies from collaborative (such as between moral realism and realism), to competitive (such as between relational theory and Western theories), to antagonistic (such as between symbiosis theory and Western

"Kexuehua shi tisheng guoguan yanjiu zhuanke shuiping de yitiao chulu (Science is An Approach to Improve the Level of Professionalisation of Chinese International Studies)," *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue (Quarterly Journal of International Politics)*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2021), p. vi.

⁹⁹ John Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conceptions of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁰⁰ Vincent Pouliot, *International Security in Practice: The Politics of NATO-Russia Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 11–55.

theories). The collaborative relationship between moral realism and Western realism may continue due to their shared ontological assumption and epistemological position. And the antagonistic relationship between symbiosis theory and Western theories may persist due to Chinese scholars' strong postcolonial sentiment in regard to Western academic hegemony. What is uncertain is the relationship between relational theory and Western theories, which was collaborative at the early stage of the Chinese School, but became competitive in recent years with the achievement of concrete theoretical breakthroughs, and which might hence be either collaborative or antagonistic in the future.

By contrast, the relationship between the Chinese School and non-Western IR theories is far more uncertain than that between the Chinese School and Western IR theories. Cooperation between the Chinese School and non-Western IR theories can be traced back to 2005, when Qin Yaqing was invited to join the Possibility of a Non-Western IR theory in Asia project, initiated by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan.¹⁰¹ In the ensuing years, Chinese School scholars frequently cited the “non-Western IR theories” project to validate their commitment to Chinese theoretical innovation.¹⁰² Consequently, the Chinese School emerges as the most successful embodiment of this project. At first glance, the relationship between the two appears mutually supportive. However, it is crucial to note that the “non-Western IR theories” project does not signify concrete non-Western IR theories. Despite regular and intensive interactions between the Chinese School and the “non-Western IR theories” project, communication between the Chinese School and other non-Western theoretical studies remains infrequent. This is primarily because non-Western IR theoretical breakthroughs other than those of the Chinese School are yet to be achieved,¹⁰³ but the Chinese School's lack of motivation to engage with non-Western IR is also obvious. Owing to these reasons, whether or not non-Western IR theories based on various non-Western experiences will be compatible with the Chinese School, which is based on ancient Chinese experience is somewhat uncertain, as is the relationship between the Chinese School and non-Western IR theories.

The same uncertainty applies to the relationship between the Chinese School and Global IR. Similarly initiated by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, Global IR is a research agenda that attempts to transcend the dichotomous treatment of the West and the Rest, as observed in the “non-Western IR theories” project and may lead to competition and even rivalry between Western and non-Western theoretical studies. With theoretical inclusiveness and cultural diversity as its primary concerns,¹⁰⁴ Global IR is founded on what Amitav Acharya refers to as “a genuinely global history,” which is reconstructed according to a long-term, 5000-year perspective of interactions among peoples, societies, and states, as opposed to the mere 500-year history of the expansion of Western international society.¹⁰⁵ The Chinese School may not only thrive within the theoretical framework provided by Global IR, but also make contributions to it. Theoretical breakthroughs that the Chinese School has achieved, such as the relational theory linked to the Chinese relational worldview and the symbiotic international system—often interpreted as the Chinese arrangement of international order—serve to enrich Global IR. These contributions add a distinct and indispensable Chinese element to the vast global jigsaw. Global IR scholars welcome the Chinese School, and

¹⁰¹ Qin, “Current Development of IR Theory,” p. 3.

¹⁰² Qin, “Development of IR Theory in China: Contributions and Challenges,” p. 3.

¹⁰³ Qin Yaqing recalls that Southeast Asian participants of the “non-Western IR theories” project failed to provide theoretical outputs when the project concluded in 2007. See Qin, “Current Development of IR Theory,” p. 3.

¹⁰⁴ Amitav Acharya, “Global International Relations (IR) and Regional Worlds: A New Agenda for International Studies,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (2014), pp. 647–59; Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *The Making of Global International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). For critics of Global IR, see Felix Anderl and Antonia Witt, “Problematising the Global in Global IR,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2020), pp. 32–57.

¹⁰⁵ Amitav Acharya, “Before the Nation-State: Civilizations, World Orders, and the Origin of Global International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 265–6.

Chinese School scholars express empathy towards Global IR.¹⁰⁶ Both sides have optimistic expectations of their collaborative relationship.

However, the relationship between the Chinese School and Global IR extends beyond collaboration, primarily due to the challenge that the Chinese School faces in achieving theoretical advancements within Global IR. While non-Western theories seek alternatives to Western IR theories, Global IR aspires to surpass Western IR theories. Consequently, the Chinese School's task is not just to provide distinct Chinese theoretical innovations that enrich non-Western IR theories, but also to align itself with Global IR in order to avoid standing in opposition to it. One example of this difference is that of backward projection, whereby modern concepts are applied to the past to justify modern theories. This is a method accepted by non-Western IR theories but rejected by Global IR.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately, however, it is a method to which the Chinese School firmly adheres, reconstructing as it does enduring Chinese wisdom through applying modern political concepts to ancient Chinese experiences.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, despite a shared concern about deconstructing Western academic hegemony, the Chinese School and Global IR, at least at the current stage, pursue theories in different ways, which results in inconsistent outputs between Sinocentric theoretical knowledge and decentralised theories. The Chinese School hence faces the choice of either: (1) aligning with Global IR at the expense of its theoretical achievements; or (2) maintaining theoretical achievements at the cost of Global IR recognition. Different choices may yield different relationships between the Chinese School and Global IR.

Challenges to Global IR may prevent it from establishing a stable relationship with the Chinese School. Despite its insistence on inclusiveness and diversity, Global IR must make choices between Western and non-Western IR theories in order to avoid becoming a collection of incompatible and contradictory theoretical perspectives. The selection process inevitably leads to controversies, particularly when choosing among theories from the same cultural background. For instance, controversy arises when Global IR discusses the Chinese world order based on Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia-ism rather than the Chinese School.¹⁰⁹ This choice may stem from concern about the Chinese School's cultural idealism¹¹⁰; however,

¹⁰⁶ Chinese scholars' positive attitude towards the relationship between the Chinese School and Global IR, see Qin Yaqing, "Quanqiu guoji guanxi xue yu zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun (Global IR and Chinese IR Theories)," *Guoji Guancha (International Review)*, No. 2 (2020), pp. 35–6; Cheng Duowen, "Quanqiu guoji guanxi xue shiyezhong de zhongguo xuepai goujian (The Implication of Global International Relations for Building Chinese School of International Relations Theory)," *Guoji Guancha (International Review)*, No. 2 (2021), pp. 1–30.

¹⁰⁷ Acharya, "Before the Nation-State," p. 267.

¹⁰⁸ For example, upon Jin Yingzhong's initial introduction of it into Chinese IR theoretical studies the term "symbiosis" originated in Marxist works, particularly the *Communist Manifesto*, and whose definition illustrated the expansion of symbiotic conditions from the international economy to various aspects of international society. See Jin Yingzhong, "Guoji shehui de gongsheng lun—heping fazhan shidai de guoji guanxi lilun (Symbiosis Theory of International Society—IR Theory in the Era of Peace and Development)," *Shehui Kexue (Journal of Social Sciences)*, No. 10 (2011), p. 13. Subsequently, symbiosis was redefined by integrating ancient Chinese thinkers' discussions on symbiotic social relations and the ancient Chinese symbiotic way of life. This exploration extended to its implications with regard to China's proposal to build a community with a shared future for mankind. See Jin Yingzhong, "shi lun renlei mingyun gongtongti yishi—jianlun guoji shehui gongsheng xing (On the Sense of a Community with Shared Future for Mankind—Also on the Symbiotic Nature of International Society)," *Guoji Guancha (International Review)*, No. 1 (2014), pp. 38–41. In 2017, symbiosis underwent yet another redefinition, this time drawing inspiration from the ancient Chinese classic *Yijing (The Book of Changes)*. This reinterpretation emphasised the dialectic nature of a being in order to illuminate the nature of China's diplomatic thought in the twenty-first century. See Jin Yingzhong, "Lun dangdai zhongguo waijiao zhanlue sixiang de luoji yuanchu xing (On the Logic Originality of Contemporary Chinese Strategic Thought)," *Guoji Guancha (International Review)*, No. 2 (2017), pp. 3–5. This method also plays a decisive role in Chinese School scholars' reconstruction of the morality-regulated hegemony transfer process and relational thinking, and the relational world.

¹⁰⁹ Acharya, "Before the Nation-State," p. 277.

¹¹⁰ Acharya, "From Heaven to Earth," pp. 472–5.

Tianxia-ism is similarly idealistic,¹¹¹ and unlikely, in all reality, to re-emerge in the twenty-first century.¹¹² Disputes over theory selection bring criticisms from those feeling ignored, who then accuse Global IR of misalignment with the Western view of global history.¹¹³ A potential resolution to this controversy is a multilingual Global IR that could deconstruct Western linguistic hegemony—identified as “the long-observed core hegemony in International Relations” that Global IR continues to overlook.¹¹⁴ However, until this ambitious prospect is realised, the relationship between the Chinese School and Global IR will remain unstable due to uncertainty as to how the latter will perceive and incorporate the former.

Conclusion: Ongoing Dialogues with the Chinese School

The Chinese School has been an academic phenomenon observed since the year 2000. Over the last 20 years, it has undergone a complex developmental process, characterised by dual concerns, discursive images, and a shared Sinocentric approach to theory innovation. This process diverges from the retrospective story of theory innovation based on the “learning-reflection-innovation” process recounted by Chinese School scholars,¹¹⁵ and the similarly progressive process of experiencing epistemic optimism, epistemic scepticism, and epistemic reflexivity, respectively.¹¹⁶ Nor is it compatible with the Western pattern of theory revolution that is based on reflection on anomalies in the dominant paradigms and has made concrete theoretical achievements before that of self-image. Thanks to leading Chinese School scholars’ collective choice of academic concern and academic images, the Chinese School largely remains an academic enterprise with moral realism, relational theory, and symbiosis theory as its theoretical breakthroughs. Progress of the Chinese School is debatable in regard to its terminology, epidemiological position, and theoretical achievements. However, controversies over theoretical progress should not constitute any reason to refute the existence of the Chinese School. The development of the Chinese School is primarily determined by how Chinese School scholars address these controversies. Critical comments and constructive suggestions regarding the Chinese School, therefore, are extremely valuable. The Chinese School should learn from Western theories how to carry out critical self-reflection. This is particularly applicable to the Sino-centrism allegation. In fact, just as reflections on Western theories’ underlying Euro-centrism should not detract from their admirable theoretical contributions, nor should acknowledgment of Sino-centrism in the Chinese School amount to refuting the pioneering theoretical contributions of this Chinese academic enterprise.

In addition to comments and suggestions from Western IR theories, the Chinese School also requires feedback from non-Western theoretical studies. This is primarily because, as Chinese School scholars have accurately pointed out, Western experience has its limits as regards comprehending the world. Although the Chinese–Western dichotomy has separated

¹¹¹ For a social, political, and ideological interpretation of the re-emergence of the *Tianxia* concept in contemporary Chinese academic discourses, including Zhao Tingyang’s efforts to rethink and to reconstruct China through *Tianxia*-ism, and for a comprehensive review of the various interpretations of this concept by contemporary Chinese scholars, please refer to Liang Zhiping, *Xiangxiang Tianxia: Dangdai Zhongguo de Yishi Xingtai Jiangou (Tianxia under Imagination: Ideological Construction of Contemporary China)* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Company, 2023). And for a historical review of the *Tianxia* concept in the history of ideas, see Liang Zhiping, “*Tianxia* de Guannian (the *Tianxia* Concept),” in Liang Zhiping, *Weizheng: Gudai Zhongguo de Zhizhi Linian (To Govern: Ancient Chinese Ideas About Good Governance)* (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2020), pp. 10–85.

¹¹² Acharya, “Before the Nation-State,” p. 279. And this observation makes efforts to reconstruct the Chinese world order on the basis of *Tianxia* meaningless because it is unlikely to work today.

¹¹³ Shi Bing, “Quanqiu shi yanjiu yu guoji guanxi lilun chuangxin: kunjing yu chulu (Global History and IR Theory Innovation: Dilemma and Way Out),” *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics)*, No. 1 (2024), p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Ersel Aydinli and Julie Aydinli, “Exposing Linguistic Imperialism: Why Global IR has to be Multilingual,” <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210523000700>, *Review of International Studies* (2024).

¹¹⁵ Qin, “Why is there No Chinese International Relations Theory?” pp. 32–5; Qin, “Knowledge Acculturation and Social Knowledge Reproduction,” pp. 10–8.

¹¹⁶ Zhang Yongjin, “Constructing a Chinese School of IR as Sociological Reality,” pp. 193–209.

the Chinese School from Western IR theories along ethnic, cultural, and political boundaries, one can discern the attention commonly focused on big powers which overwhelmingly concentrates on great power competition, and treats small countries as either the context or subject of such games.¹¹⁷ However, China was a victim of power politics and was still struggling for survival before the end of WWII. The Chinese School should and could provide an alternative to Western theories if it were to go back to China's modern experiences, a suggestion once raised by Qin Yaqing but that was, however, soon ignored. Owing to this big power theoretical perspective, Hedley Bull's concern about the explanatory capability of Western IR theories is also applicable to the Chinese School.¹¹⁸ The primary concerns of the Global South, threatened by poverty, disease, climate change, and domestic political, economic, and social issues, do not necessarily align with the theme of peaceful competition over leadership, relational thinking about the rise of a big power, or a symbiotic order under China's leadership. To talk with Global South IR, therefore, becomes the second dimension of ongoing dialogues with the Chinese School. By incorporating insights from both Western IR and Global South IR, the Chinese School will enhance its explanatory capabilities and, consequently, make more substantial contributions to IR theoretical studies.

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¹¹⁷ Moral realism, exemplified by its devotion to power transition, presents a distinctive case. In the realism paradigm, small states hold minimal significance, a perspective that extends to moral realism. Yan Xuetong's treatment of small states in his discussion of power transition reflects this stance. He classifies states into four types based on their capabilities, relegating small states to those too weak to exert significant influence at the regional or subregional levels. And owing to the assumption of international anarchy, survival is the primary strategic interest of a small state, achievable only through reliance on a powerful state for protection. See Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, pp. 60–6. The question is: is morality truly crucial to power transition in such a realpolitik world? Yan's response is rather confusing when considering his Chinese discussions on moral realism. He asserts in his 2015 book that great powers should protect small states by using force when necessary; they otherwise risk losing international credibility, and consequently their moral standing (pp. 22–3). However, he later warns that even a small state that adopts a morality-oriented foreign policy may still fall prey to the aggressive ambitions of great powers (p. 142). An intriguing statement adds to the complexity by suggesting that “morality is important for a dominant power or a rising power to protect their dominant position and to maintain the international order dominated by them, however it is unnecessarily good to the middle or small states.” (p. 2) See Yan, *Transformation of World Power*. Despite inconsistencies between discussions on morality and small states in a realist world, moral realism unequivocally implies a particular foreign policy stance: China should prioritise the provision to small states of security protection over economic development aid. This approach aims to garner more international support and compete with the USA for hegemony, see Yan, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” p. 183; “Zhongmei ying jianli heping jingzheng de guoji zhixu (China and the US Should Build Up An International Order Based on Peaceful Competition),” *China Daily*, 30 September, 2015, https://world.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-09/30/content_22018103.htm.

¹¹⁸ Hedley Bull asks, “If the theories that are available are almost exclusively Western in origin and perspective, can they convey an adequate understanding of a world political system that is predominantly non-Western?” See Hedley Bull, “The Theory of International Politics 1919–1969,” in Brain Porter, ed., *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Relations, 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press), 1972, p. 50.

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