



# Upgrading the Paradigm of Leadership Analysis

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## Abstract

Leadership analysis has been a traditional paradigm for studying international relations. The theory of moral realism improves this paradigm's scientific rigour when explaining the relationship between the leadership of major powers and system-level international changes. Methodologically, moral realism uses morality as the criterion to categorise international leadership, the key independent variable. The theory is developed to improve realism's explanatory power regarding the common historical phenomenon of the rise and fall of great powers. Rather than being Sino-centric, the foreign policy recommendations extrapolated from the theory of moral realism—which are descriptive rather than prescriptive—are applicable to both China and other major powers. Since theories of systemic analysis have failed to explain the transition of global order from globalisation to the counter-globalisation, the paradigm of leadership analysis is worth consideration. It may indeed provide a vector of enquiry regarding the correlation between the current prevalence of populist leadership in major powers and the growing counter-globalisation trend.

The most crucial international change during the last few years was the shift from globalisation to counter-globalisation in both the economic and political domains. This transition posed a challenge to systemic analysis of international relations (IR). As systemic analysis treats systemic factors only as independent variables, it cannot explain why the transformation from globalisation to counter-globalisation, a systemic phenomenon, could occur when power structures, global institutions, and international norms remained the same. Meanwhile, the current anti-globalisation trend is concurrent with the rise of populist policymakers in many countries, including most major powers. Moral realism has adapted traditional paradigms of leadership analysis into a framework of binary agent-system analysis, which can explain the correlation between the rise of populist leaders and the counter-globalisation trend.

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## The Paradigm of Leadership Analysis

In both the Eastern and Western political literature, leadership analysis has been used in the study of interstate politics for 3000 or more years. During the period 500–300 BCE, leadership analysis was the main paradigm used by historians, philosophers, and political thinkers in ancient China, Greece, and India. Although these scholars had no direct discourse with each other, they all nevertheless emphasised the importance of individual rulers, such as kings, monarchs, dukes, princes, ministers, and generals, as the factor driving the changes in such political phenomena as foreign policy decision-making, interstate crisis, peace and war, and the rise and fall of states.

Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi are the major representatives of Confucianism. They all conceptualise political leadership as the determining factor in state governance as well as interstate status. Ancient Greek thinkers, such as Themistocles, Thucydides, and Plato, all attribute the city-states' welfare and military victories to political leadership. In his magnum opus *Arthashastra*, Kautilya, one of the most famous among the ancient Indian thinkers, regards the ruler of a state as the paramount element of statecraft. These ancient scholars are viewed as members of different schools of political thought, yet all of them treat political leadership as the crucial force shaping interstate political changes.

The paradigm of leadership analysis has maintained its dominance in the study of interstate affairs, including both competition and cooperation, for more than 3000 years. However, from the mid-1960s, it encountered challenges from the paradigm of systemic analysis. In the IR domain, the systemic paradigm was adopted by theorists of systemic, structural, and societal analyses,<sup>1</sup> who attributed changes in international politics and different foreign policy decision-making to changes in systemic factors, such as power structures, political institutions, and social norms. They regarded decision makers as automatons programmed to respond to changes, and hence devoid of input from the subjective initiative of the policymakers themselves. Among modern IR theories, however, it was structural realism, introduced by Kenneth Waltz in his book *Theory of International Politics*, that probably posed the greatest challenge to the paradigm of leadership analysis. By applying scientific methodologies to IR studies, the systemic paradigm opened new perspectives for IR theoretical progress and became the prominent analytical approach for IR studies in the 1980s.

However, the systemic paradigm ignores the impact of individual variation driving a population's behavioural shifts. In treating policymakers as robots capable only of responding to international environments according to a predetermined set algorithm of limited optimal choices, they ignored the crucial fact that policymakers are human beings who may innovate new strategies to achieve a similar political goal. Keren Yarhi-Milo noted that “for many years scholars have treated individual level explanation of international politics as ‘reductionist,’ while leaving open the question of the extent to which leaders can explain the foreign policy of states.”<sup>2</sup> The systemic paradigm may have strong explanative powers when examining a stable situation in a given interstate system and its durability, but it does not in a fluctuating system, due to being particularly weak at explaining sudden changes.

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig von Bertalanffy, “General Systems Theory,” in Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Anatol Rapoport, eds., *General Systems: Yearbook of the Society for General Systems Research*, Vol. I (Washington, DC: The Society for General Systems Research, 1956), pp. 1–10, reprinted in J. David Singer, ed., *Human Behavior and International Politics: Contributions from the Social-Psychological Sciences* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1965), p. 21; Charles A. McClelland, “System History in International Relations: Some Perspectives for Empirical Research and Theory,” in Ludwig von Bertalanffy and Anatol Rapoport, eds., *General Systems, Yearbook of the Society for General Systems Research*, Vol. III (Washington, DC: The Society for General Systems Research, 1958), pp. 221–47; Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba, eds., *The International System: Theoretical Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 4.

Nannerl Keohane stressed the importance of leadership in human society, saying that “leadership is central to almost all collective social activity.”<sup>3</sup> Henry Kissinger went even further when he said, “Without leadership, institutions drift, and nations court growing irrelevance and, ultimately, disaster.”<sup>4</sup> The importance of leadership can never be overemphasized in forming IR theories which conform to the objective world. Since Donald Trump’s ascension to the US presidency in 2017, there has been a growing consensus that leadership, both domestic and international, can be decisive in foreign policy decision-making. That is not to say that systemic factors are irrelevant to the decision-making process, but rather that they define only the content of national interests and policy goals. The moral realist framework stresses the interaction between leadership type and strategic preference and attributes the deciding factor in foreign policy to leaders’ strategic preferences.

Moral realism is not the only framework that focuses on the effect of leadership, however. Many IR psychologists have also modelled leaders’ strategic preferences with personal biases or morality as the independent variables.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a large amount of literature that studies the psychology of decision makers has emerged, so providing empirical evidence for the impact of leaders’ operational codes, personality traits, leadership styles, and more. One such study is Yarhi-Milo’s work explaining, through a psychological framework, why some American leaders are more willing to use war to defend their reputation than others. She notes that “the high self-monitor presidents, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton, differed in their beliefs about the efficacy of military force, their degree of their ideological rigidity, and their attitudes toward public opinion.”<sup>6</sup>

The present tilt from systemic approaches towards the paradigm of leadership analysis is not limited to that within studies of the US leadership. As China watchers have observed, China’s foreign policy transformed from “keeping a low profile” to “striving for achievements” soon after the change of national leadership at the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress held in November 2012.<sup>7</sup> This decisive change in China’s foreign policy gave rise to academic speculation that major powers define their foreign policies according to their geopolitical status only. However, as China’s geopolitical status has remained constant since 2012, systemic approaches could not explain those changes, and China watchers turned to leadership analysis in search of an answer. Suisheng Zhao attributed foreign policy transitions during the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to transformational national leaders.<sup>8</sup> His work placed Chinese leaders at the centre of his analysis of PRC’s foreign policy and explained how their policy preferences were shaped.

Unlike structural realism and offensive realism, theorists of moral realism will argue that international configuration defines only the scope of national interests or strategic goals, while leaders’ preferences determine the selected strategies to achieve those interests or goals. Leadership is the process of influencing others towards the achievement of a given set of goals. As Joseph Nye explained, it is composed of three key elements: leaders, followers, and the contexts wherein they interact.<sup>9</sup> Among the three elements, it is the difference in context between anarchic and hierarchic systems that distinguishes between the natures of domestic and international leadership. The moral realist framework defines international

<sup>3</sup> Nannerl O. Keohane, *Thinking about Leadership* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy* (Dublin: Allien Lane, 2022), p. xv.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua D. Kertzer, et al., “Hawkish Bis and Group Decision Making,” *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2022), pp. 512–48; Brian C. Rathbun and Caleb Pomeroy, “See No Evil, Speak No Evil? Morality, Evolutionary Psychology, and the Nature of International Relations,” *International Organization*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2022), pp. 656–89.

<sup>6</sup> Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation*, p. 267.

<sup>7</sup> Yan Xuotong, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–84.

<sup>8</sup> Suisheng Zhao, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Nye, *The Power to Lead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xi.

leadership as “a process of interaction between the national policymakers of leading powers and those of the states that follow them within an anarchic system.”<sup>10</sup> On the issue of the rise and fall of great powers, moral realism posits that the types of leadership, which is exercised by decision makers, is the determinative factor rather than the geopolitical situation in which the actors are embedded. As Jack S. Levy notes, “most of what we want to explain in international politics involves the actions and interactions of states ... each of which is, in principle, a collective decision-making body.”<sup>11</sup>

The framework of moral realism treats the national leadership of major powers as the key factor in their either winning or losing in international support. Exercising leadership that is perceived as moral is crucial to obtaining the dominant status in the anarchic international system. Winning moral support is hence equal in importance to exercising material strength in winning strategic competition. To be perceived as a humane authority requires the leading power to abide by human rights norms both domestically and internationally. Humane authority, as Daniel Bell notes, is not the same as soft or cultural power, because it is a type of political leadership that underpins national capability and international stability.<sup>12</sup> To understand how different types of leadership see the world and how they try to change essentially entails explaining why major powers choose different foreign strategies for dealing with a similar international situation.

To address the criticism that the paradigm of leadership analysis lacked scientific precision, moral realism tried to improve the methodology by applying scientific guidelines and academic standards. The moral realist approach chose ancient Chinese philosophies that fit into the framework of modern IR theories and systematise the leadership's role in foreign policy decision-making. In line with the consensus that domestic society is a hierarchical system and an interstate system is anarchic, the moral realist framework accordingly categorised domestic and interstate leaderships using different criteria.

To address the criticism that leadership analysis lacks universality, the moral realist framework categorises leadership types in a manner that is applicable to both ancient and modern leaderships, as well as to both Chinese and non-Chinese models. Moral realism bridges analysis at the individual and system levels by attributing changes at the systemic level to the decisions of major powers' leadership at the individual level. As the majority opinion is that the current counter-globalisation trend is driven by individual populist leaders adopting de-globalisation policies, this suggests that IR theories need to study the impact of leadership on the changes in the global order. For instance, in referring to the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, noted that the major threat we now face emanates not from the COVID-19 pandemic, but from the lack of a global leadership.<sup>13</sup> The global prevalence of populism is strengthening the impact of warmongering leaders on the international order, thus escalating the decline of liberal democracy domestically and of human rights norms internationally. The war in Ukraine that broke out in 2022 and the war in Gaza that started in October 2023 signify that more and more policymakers are recklessly violating sovereignty norms and human rights norms. Under the intense Israeli bombardment of Gaza, more than 25 000 Palestinian civilians were killed within 3 months.<sup>14</sup> According

<sup>10</sup> Yan Xuetong, “Moral Realism on Interstate Leadership in Response to Critics,” in Yan Xuetong and Fang Yuanyuan, eds., *The Essence of Interstate Leadership: Debating Moral Realism* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023), p. 180.

<sup>11</sup> Jack S. Levy, “Loss Aversion, Framing, and Bargaining: The Implications of Prospect Theory for International Conflict,” *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1997), p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel A. Bell, “Introduction,” in Yan Xuetong, ed., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 1–18.

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization, “WHO Director-General Opening Remarks at the Member State Briefing on the COVID-19 Pandemic evaluation – 9 July 2020,” 9 July, 2020, <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-opening-remarks-at-the-member-state-briefing-on-the-covid-19-pandemic-evaluation-9-july-2020>.

<sup>14</sup> Humanitarian Aid, “25000 Civilians Killed in Gaza War as Humanitarian Needs Go on Rising,” *UN News*, 22 January, 2024, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/01/1145742>.

to Oxfam, the daily death rate in Gaza is higher than that of any other major conflict in the 21st century.<sup>15</sup> These events were not instigated by factors at the system level, but rather by decisions taken by the leadership, or the lack thereof in the system.

## Leadership Morality in Decision-Making

In the previous section, we discussed the significance in IR theoretical studies of updating the paradigm of leadership analysis. This section will focus on the issue of leaders' morality in decision-making. In 2019, I published *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. The next year, Nye published *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump*, and Richard Ned Lebow *Ethics and International Relations: A Tragic Perspective*. The three of us come from three different IR schools, respectively: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. That we all focused on international leadership, as well as their morality, reflects the prominence of leadership morality in IR studies of current events. This academic trend has been noticed by others in both Western and Eastern IR communities.<sup>16</sup>

In early December 2022, some Tsinghua alumni held a webinar on the development of moral realism. At the meeting, some participants raised the question whether leadership or morality is the independent variable in the moral realist framework. To clarify, in the moral realist framework, leadership is the independent variable, which contains four categories under which the morality of the leadership is classified. The confusion stems from the moniker "moral realism," which implies that the theory is concerned with defining the morality of leadership, rather than focusing on classifying leadership according to the perceived morality of the leaders' behaviours. Nonetheless, this question indicates that future development of the moral realist framework requires more clarification regarding the relationship between leadership and morality.

The moral realist framework identifies the national interests or strategic goals of major powers according to their status in a given international configuration, and classifies their leaders' types based on the latter's concern about morality in decision-making. Their different concerns in this regard will lead to different strategic preferences or foreign policies. Changes to a major power's international status are less frequent than changes to its national leadership; therefore the state's international status is a constant variable in the moral realist model. As such, the political leadership of major powers is the key independent variable in this model.

Political leadership can be categorised according to many different classifications. In the moral realist model, morality is the categorisation reference, and leadership is grouped into categories based on whether the level of categorisation is at the domestic or international level. At the international level, leadership is characterised into humane authority, hegemony, tyranny, and anocracy. Interstate leaderships categorised as both humane authority and hegemony value the perceived morality of their decision-making, but the former practices what they preach while the latter uses a double standard. In contrast, interstate leaderships that are categorised as tyranny or anocracy are not concerned about the perceived morality of their decision-making. The former is concerned with preserving institutional power, while the latter makes decisions based purely on his/her personal benefit.<sup>17</sup> The four categories predict a different behaviour from the leadership under the same

<sup>15</sup> Oxfam International, "Daily Death Rate in Gaza Higher than Any Other Major 21st Century Conflict," 11 January, 2024, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/daily-death-rate-gaza-higher-any-other-major-21st-century-conflict-oxfam>.

<sup>16</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "Two Books on Ethics in International Relation," *Foreign Affairs*, 8 December, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2020-12-08/two-books-ethics-international-relations>; Yuanyuan Fang, "A New Synthesis among IR Theories? Moral Leadership in International Relations," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2023), pp. 311–32.

<sup>17</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), pp. 42–7.

circumstances. Incorporating leadership types into the current realist theoretical framework can account for the variance in strategic decisions when the external situation is similar, thus improving the predictive power of realist models.

The existing studies of morality in foreign policy decision-making present two routes: one is practical, closely associated with specific leaders and their foreign policies; the other is theoretical, focusing on the classification of leadership types. The practical route has been more prominent because its application is easily understood and has been relevant for thousands of years, even to this day. For instance, Kissinger's last monograph focused on six individual leaders: Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Richard Nixon, Anwar Sadat, Lee Kuan Yew, and Margaret Thatcher. He considered all of them as "architects of the post-war evolution of their societies and the international order."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the theoretical route has attracted insufficient attention from dominant IR theorists, mainly because IR students generally prefer explanations that use systemic factors rather than individual factors in international politics. In the late 1980s, my PhD advisor Carl Rosberg published *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant*, in which he studied the typology of African national leaders and categorised them into the four types listed in the title.<sup>19</sup> However, IR theorists, especially structural realists, did not regard analysis of individual leaders as scientific.

This kind of misunderstanding is prevalent among IR scholars of systemic analysis. Robert Jervis suggests that it is because they believe that the leadership's individual preferences do not matter, and that systemic incentives and constraints are the key variables that have impact on foreign policy decision-making.<sup>20</sup> I would rather believe that this perspective stems from inability to understand the differences between the physical and life sciences. In physical sciences, little value is accorded to the individual element or molecule. However, in life sciences, modelling the forces which select for individual variation constitutes the entire discipline. IR theoretical study bears greater similarity to the life sciences, because humans are the subjects of our study.

There is also a popular misconception that realists regard foreign affairs as amoral and hence do not accommodate ethical norms. Deepshikha Shahi, for instance, views the theories of classical realism and neorealism as evidence that realism in Eurocentric IR is amoral.<sup>21</sup> Brian Rathbun and Caleb Pomeroy hold that most realists perceive power politics as beyond the realm of morality.<sup>22</sup> There is some truth to this perception of realism, as some systemic realist theorists see foreign policy as something eminently unbound by any concerns about ethics or morality. They conceptualise international conflicts as a clash of national interests between two states, rejecting the notion that morality has any influence over foreign policy decision-making, arguing that when fighting for their state's survival, national leaders are not concerned with morality. Niebuhr observed that there is a sharp distinction between the morality of individuals and of states, in light of the brutal character of all political entities.<sup>23</sup> George Kennan, architect of the Cold War containment policy, argued that foreign policy has no room for morality; that military security has no moral valence, and that assuming one side's moral standards are the same as the other's is erroneous.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Kissinger, *Leadership*, p. xix.

<sup>19</sup> Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 73–82.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Jervis, "Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?" *Security Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2013), p. 153.

<sup>21</sup> Deepshikha Shahi, "The Spectre of 'Amoral Realism' in International Relations: A Classical Indian Overview," in Amitav Acharya, Daniel Bell, Rajeev Bhargava, and Yan Xuetong, eds., *Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft in India and China* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2023), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> Rathbun and Pomeroy, "See No Evil, Speak No Evil?" p. 656.

<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (Louisville: John Know Press, 2001/1932), pp. xxv, xxx, 268–9.

<sup>24</sup> George F. Kennan, "Military and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (1985), pp. 206–8, 217.

Contrary to popular perceptions, however, realist scholars have a varied perspective on the impact of morality on international politics and/or foreign policy decision-making. Classical realist Arnold Wolfers argued that states involved in international politics have seldom faced the issue of survival, their foreign policy practices being generally directed towards the pursuit of a much broader range of national interests, including international support. He suggested that adhering to moral values could make a state's allies feel secure and content by virtue of shared affinities, thus consolidating international support for that state.<sup>25</sup> Moral realism inherits this perspective, arguing that, for national leaders, protecting the survival of a state is itself a moral responsibility, one which seems unlikely to include the initiation of war against or invasion of other countries. For national leaders, the state's self-preservation is not merely a preference, instinct, or objective, but a moral responsibility, because human lives are at stake. Morality and statecraft, the latter of which includes the making of foreign policy, are not detached but intertwined in the exercise of leadership. Thus, moral realist scholars believe that theoretical studies of international leadership should not ignore morality. As Guilherme Vasconcelos Vilaça noted that “the focus on recruitment and the morality of leaders or elite officials parallels a recent turn in international relations and international law literatures towards virtue ethics and how international organizations' reputation and success largely depend on the exercise of leadership and virtues by their highest officials.”<sup>26</sup>

Toni Erskine and Liane Hartnett acknowledged that classical realism, normative IR theory, and moral realism all embrace the centrality of ethics in their study of international politics.<sup>27</sup> The two scholars classified the statist ethic of realism into the following four types: ethical egoism, communitarianism, impartialist statism, and responsible realism. Each of the four statist ethic models represents a position that provides moral justification for granting priority to one's state, fellow citizens, and the national interest.<sup>28</sup> They said, “the robustness of Yan's explanatory theory is tethered to the soundness of the statist ethic that underpins it.”<sup>29</sup> In the family of realism theories, moral realism might be that most concerned about the effect of morality on the making of foreign policy decisions and international changes. Moral realism's focus on morality is further supported by Frans B. M. de Waal's claim that, “any theory of human behaviour that does not take morality 100 percent seriously is bound to fall by the wayside.”<sup>30</sup>

Moral realists argue that morality plays a significant role in establishing international leadership. This idea is supported by evolutionary psychology, which argues that humanity's “moral sense” is essential to its success as a social species. Rathbun and Pomeroy, two evolutionary psychology theorists, found that in IR, foreign policy is seldom devoid of moral considerations, and that state leaders often exercise moral judgement when assessing international threats.<sup>31</sup> They argued that “even egoists must operate under the shadow of morality to avoid the outrage of others,” and “[i]t is not despite anarchy but because of anarchy that humans have an ethical sense.”<sup>32</sup> The moral realist framework uses governmental morality as the criterion for judging political leadership—a methodology that

<sup>25</sup> Arnold Wolfers, “Statesmanship and Moral Choices,” *World Politics*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1949), pp. 189–95.

<sup>26</sup> Guilherme Vasconcelos Vilaça, “Strengthening the Cultural and Normative Foundations of the Belt and Road Initiative: The Colombo Plan, Yan Xuetong and Chinese Ancient Thought,” in Wenhua Shan, Kimmo Nuotio, and Kangle Zhang, eds., *Normative Readings of the Belt and Road Initiative Road to New Paradigms* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), pp. 30–1.

<sup>27</sup> 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), p. 157.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>30</sup> Frans B. M. de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> Rathbun and Pomeroy, “See No Evil, Speak No Evil?” pp. 657, 659.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 658.

diminishes variances stemming from cultural differences between states. Athanasios Platias and Vasilis Trigkas's recent study holds that Chinese ancients' criterion for a good ruler as one that strives for support from neighbouring states is similar to the ancient Greek ideal of virtuous political leadership.<sup>33</sup>

Morality in the moral realist model is defined by its instrumental aspect rather than value orientation. When *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* was published in 2011, certain constructivist IR scholars mistakenly assumed that I had converted from realism to constructivism. This misconception possibly sprang from the assumption that realist scholars are unconcerned with morality. After a close reading of the book, however, they found that moral realism analyses the role of morality in international politics from an instrumental perspective rather than one of value orientation, where moral policy is regarded as useful for achieving long-term strategic interests. In treating morality in such an instrumental way, moral realists render rationality and morality compatible, in the sense that being moral enables the maximisation of one's utility. Foreign policy that falls within the accepted norms of the majority, meanwhile, is perceived as "moral," but not inflexibly so, being dependent on international norms at any given time. Hence Linsay Cunningham Cross's article on moral realism titled "A Realist Never Changes His Spots."<sup>34</sup>

Erskine and Hartnett, however, perceived a certain ambiguity as to whether the moral realist framework considers the state to possess instrumental or intrinsic values. They suggest that "it is unclear what value Yan attaches to the state. Does it have intrinsic or instrumental value?"<sup>35</sup> In response, I would point out that this question conflates the state's leadership with the state itself. In its capacity as a type of institution, the state is an instrument of political rule. Moral realism applies the question of morality to human beings, but not to political institutions, including states, whether democratic or autocratic. Moral realism uses morality to categorise decision makers that exercise national power by means of the state, rather than state itself.

In this regard, moral realism suggests that international leadership is the interaction between leaders (the decision makers of leading powers) and followers (their counterparts in states with limited recognition). No matter who a state's leaders may be, any inability on their part to make even the most basic moral judgement—thus to gain strategic credibility—makes impossible, in the eyes of their followers, the establishment of an international leadership. Although the US proclaims itself a democratic state, Biden and his aides are unable to establish any such leadership in regard to preventing the humanitarian disaster in Gaza—because they provide military aid to the Israeli troops that have created that disaster. Moral realism argues that perceptions of state leaders' morality constitute one of the bases for establishing international leadership.

Moral realism theorists argue that strategic credibility is the lowest bar of international leadership morality. Strategic credibility is not just complementary to national power, but indispensable to a state's international influence. When a leading power's decision makers disregard maintaining strategic credibility with other countries, they will inevitably get less international support in their strategic competition with other rivals. The oscillating attitudes towards strategic credibility evident between the administrations headed respectively by Barack Obama and Donald Trump exemplify this. The Obama Administration valued strategic credibility with traditional allies, and hence maintained solidarity with European allies. Trump's Administration, in contrast, did not value strategic credibility with allies, and offended European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

<sup>33</sup> Athanasios Platias and Vasilis Trigkas, "Moral Realism and Hegemonic Transition", in Yan and Fang, eds., *The Essence of Interstate Leadership*, pp. 126–7.

<sup>34</sup> Linsay Cunningham-Cross, "A Realist Never Changes His Spots: A Critical Analysis of Yan Xuetong's Turn to Culture in Chinese International Relations," in Niv Horesh and Emilian Kavalski, eds., *Asian Thought on China's Changing International Relations* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 34–53.

<sup>35</sup> Erskine and Hartnett, "Images of a Statist Ethic in 'Western' and Chinese IR Theory," p. 171.

## Applicability of Moral Realism

Since its founding, moral realism has been accused of Sino-centrism. Salvatore Babones held that “Chinese IR scholars prefer to draw lessons from a time when China was at the centre, if not of the world, then at least of its own neighbourhood.”<sup>36</sup> Erskine and Hartnett also made the observation that “the moral starting point of this approach is located in the Chinese state,” moreover that “the sphere of equal moral standing that this approach thereby supports is qualified, if not delimited, by its borders,” and that “the ‘humane authority’ that Yan associates with China’s potential relies on ‘moral ability’ and comes from a ‘superior moral status.’”<sup>37</sup> Certain Chinese scholars hold similar views. Lu Peng, a professor at Fujian Normal University, suggested that the slow progress of Chinese IR theoretical study “is attributed to the prevalence of the Sino-centrism in Chinese IR which assumes the superiority of Chinese international experience in knowledge making.”<sup>38</sup> Feng Zhang, a professor at South China University of Technology, critically observed that moral realism “imbues an undeniable statism and great power mentality, and even a sort of hegemonism, in unashamedly advocating and in places assuming Chinese hegemony in international politics.”<sup>39</sup>

As to the criticism regarding limited foreign historical experience, moral realism draws on lessons from both Chinese and foreign history. For instance, my book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* cites both Chinese and foreign examples of different leadership types. Its examples of humane authority include both the early Western Zhou Dynasty leadership and Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Administration. Examples of hegemonic leadership include both the rule of the Duke Huan of the State of Qi and the governments of the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Examples of anemocratic leadership include both the King You of the late Western Zhou Dynasty and Donald Trump’s Administration. And examples of tyrannical leadership included the Qin Dynasty headed by Ying Zheng and the government of Nazi Germany headed by Adolf Hitler.<sup>40</sup> These historical examples go to show that moral realism’s categorisation of leadership types embraces both Chinese and foreign cases, and also underline the consistency of the theory’s criteria for leadership types.

Regarding the criticism of the moral realist model for its use of predominantly Sino-centric academic resources, this is rendered groundless when considering that it draws on foreign academic theories for inspiration—especially modern IR works by American and European scholars—as well as ancient Chinese philosophies. My prototyping of moral realism indeed began by comparing the similarities and differences between ancient Chinese and European political thinkers. As noted in the preface to *Pre-Qin Chinese Thoughts on Foreign Relations*, “modern IR theories assume that an international system is anarchic, and therefore that states fall into many conflicts and wars for the sake of their own interests. This idea is consistent with Xunzi’s view that ‘a social group without hierarchical distinctions leads to rivalry’ (群而无分则争).”<sup>41</sup> This shared assumption between Xunzi and Kenneth Waltz, the founder of structural realism,<sup>42</sup> is fundamental to the construction of moral realism. Although *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* draws considerably more on

<sup>36</sup> Salvatore Babones, “Taking China Seriously: Relationality, Tianxia, and the ‘Chinese School’ of International Relations,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 26 September, 2017, p. 7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.602>.

<sup>37</sup> Erskine and Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory,” p. 169.

<sup>38</sup> Lu Peng, “Chinese IR Sino-centrism Tradition and Its Influence on the Chinese School Movement,” *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2019), p. 150.

<sup>39</sup> Feng Zhang, “The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, pp. 43–7.

<sup>41</sup> Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin, *Zhongguo Xianqin Goujiajian Zhengzhi Sixiang Xuandu* (Pre-Qin Chinese thoughts on foreign relations) (Shanghai: Fudan University Press, 2008), p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 102–28.

Chinese literature than foreign resources in that regard, readers will find that the reverse is true for *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*.

Some scholars mistakenly believe that policy recommendations based on moral realism are applicable solely to the Chinese government. Erskine and Hartnett, for instance, hold that “moral realism can also be read as embodying an ethic that unapologetically elevates and promotes the interests of a particular state, namely China.”<sup>43</sup> This is a view popular among China watchers. However, the policies recommended under the moral realist framework are by no means specific to the goal of Chinese national rejuvenation, but rather generalisable to any major state seeking to enhance its international status. The USA, for example, might more effectively maintain its leading position in the world by following such policy recommendations.

Moral realism does derive certain recommendations from Pre-Qin Chinese strategic thought, because interstate relations in the Spring and Autumn period mirror those of modern international systems. Such recommendations are hence applicable to any leading power. For instance, Mencius advised King Xuan of Qi to treat weak states with benevolence and strong states with wisdom.<sup>44</sup> This advice was not designed exclusively for the State of Qi; it is generally applicable to all states, both ancient and modern. My suggestion that the Chinese government give top priority to improving relations with neighbouring countries is a piece of advice applicable to all rising powers because having good regional relations is the precondition for establishing a global leadership. Offensive realist scholars also hold the same view. For instance, John Mearsheimer said, “the best outcome a great power can hope is to be a regional hegemon.”<sup>45</sup>

The purpose of moral realism is to construct a generalised model that explains the mechanism pertaining to the rise and fall of great powers throughout history. The theory attempts to address the weakness in current realist theories as regards modelling how a hegemon can be overtaken by a rising power despite the former’s advantage over the latter in most domains. Currently, historians’ explanations for the rise and fall of great powers carry more influence than those of IR theorists.<sup>46</sup> IR theory indeed provides scant mechanistic explanations for this phenomenon. The moral realist approach, however, sets out to strengthen the explanative power of realist models by introducing political leadership as an independent variable on which both the rise and fall of great powers are dependent.<sup>47</sup>

For the sake of theoretical applicability to leaders from different cultural backgrounds, the moral realist framework is also concerned with the compatibility between strategic credibility and the strategic preferences of the leaders of major powers. Moral realism argues that major powers must heighten their strategic credibility in order to triumph in international competition; moreover that decision makers may adopt different strategies in their pursuit of greater international credibility (Tyranny and anemocracy are irrelevant to this issue, because they are categorised as the domains of amoral decision makers that disregard the importance of strategic credibility). The compatibility of the two arguments can be illustrated by the strategies adopted by both Beijing and Washington to promote their international strategic credibility. The decision makers of Beijing and Washington have interpreted and operationalised the concept of strategic credibility in distinctive and rational

<sup>43</sup> Erskine and Hartnett, “Images of a Statist Ethic in ‘Western’ and Chinese IR Theory,” p. 170.

<sup>44</sup> “King Hui of Liang Part II,” in *The Work of Mencius*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, in Liu Chongde and Luo Zhiye, eds., *The Four Books* (Changsha: Hunan Publish House, 1994), p. 285.

<sup>45</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, NY: Random House, 1987); Charles A. Kupchan, *The Vulnerability of Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Peter Heather and John Rapley, *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West* (New York, NY: Yale University Press, 2023).

<sup>47</sup> Yan, *Leadership and The Rise of Great Powers*, p. 191.

ways. The former tends to apply the understanding and practice of the concept on pragmatism, and the latter to do so according to its values. Chinese decision makers seek to expand their economic aid and commercial appeal, while their American counterparts place democratic values and military protection at the heart of their promotion of strategic credibility. As each side endeavours to refine its strategic credibility, onlookers of the world over are judging whether Beijing or Washington is more reliable than the other. Such judgement will be decided in capitals other than Beijing or Washington.

Moral realism also highlights the competition for talent as integral to great power rivalry, both historically and in modern times.<sup>48</sup> As Vilaça observed, moral realism's "practical suggestions for China to become a humane international leading power are adaptable to other major powers. In this respect, albeit Yan's proposal is mostly directed at Chinese institutions, it can easily be translated into the international sphere, not to mention the indirect contribution that better Chinese officials and leadership produce."<sup>49</sup> For instance, moral realists regard international strategic credibility as of equal importance to both the rising power and the status quo. As the contest between the USA and China accelerates, meanwhile, strategic credibility becomes another vector of competition wherein Washington and Beijing vie in their respective presentations of themselves as the most reliable power to the rest of the world. The USA needs to heighten its strategic credibility to maintain its current dominant status, while China, as a rising power, must accomplish this in order to win more international followers and wield greater influence on global opinion. However, the facts show that neither Beijing nor Washington appreciates the moral realist approach. Beijing has undermined its strategic credibility by taking a neutral stance on the war in Ukraine,<sup>50</sup> as has Washington by enabling Israeli troops' creation of a humanitarian disaster in Gaza.<sup>51</sup>

It is ironic that moral realists' recommendations are viewed as specifically designed for the Chinese government when they have had no demonstrable influence on China's foreign policy for the last decade. For instance, moral realists have asserted for years that China is unable "to provide a global leadership in the next decade as long as it adheres to the non-alignment principle and does not provide security protections for any country, including its neighbours."<sup>52</sup> As it turns out, the Chinese government has firmly adhered to the non-alignment principle and given no consideration to any possibility of adjustment.<sup>53</sup>

The applicability of moral realism is decided by its explanatory nature. Erskine and Hartnett suggest that moral realism is a combination of explanatory and normative theories, saying, "Yan's moral realism aspires not only to explain 'what is' and 'why' (in accordance with his espoused 'scientific positivism') but also to set out 'what ought to be' and (in guidance directed specifically at China) 'what should be done'—prescriptions that are themselves linked to particular evaluations of what constitutes right and good action."<sup>54</sup> This statement may stem from viewing my policy recommendations as prescriptive ones. Either explanatory or normative theories can serve as the basis for making foreign policy recommendations, but there is an academic difference between the two types of theories. Explanatory theories identify the relationship between facts and are constructed according to the principle of

<sup>48</sup> Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, p. 67.

<sup>49</sup> Vilaça, "Strengthening the Cultural and Normative Foundations of the Belt and Road Initiative," p. 37.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Smith, "How One Chinese Ambassador's Comments Set Off a Wave of European Fury," *NBC News*, 24 April, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/china-europe-anger-sovereignty-ex-soviet-states-ukraine-russia-rca81072>.

<sup>51</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "Why the Global South Is Accusing America of Hypocrisy," *Foreign Policy*, 2 November, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/02/israel-palestine-hamas-gaza-war-russia-ukraine-occupation-west-hypocrisy/>.

<sup>52</sup> Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, p. 199.

<sup>53</sup> "Guofangbu Tan Meimeng Tixi: Jianjue Fandui Lengzhan Siwei He Linghe Boyi Linian" ("Defense Ministry Talking about American Alliance System: Firmly Opposing Cold War Mentality and the Idea of Zero-Sum Game"), *Chinanews.com*, 19 October, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1681885955997681047&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

<sup>54</sup> Erskine and Hartnett, "Images of a Statist Ethic in 'Western' and Chinese IR Theory," pp. 19–20.

positivism; thus, they have a predictive function. An explanatory theorist's suggestions are hence descriptions of a set of policies that are most likely to achieve the decision makers' goals, based on the predicted outcome derived from their theoretical explanation. In contrast, normative theories cannot be used for prediction as they only express conceptions of desirable ends, purposes, or norms, thus indicating value preferences to decision makers.<sup>55</sup>

Moral realism is an explanatory theory rather than a combination of explanatory and normative theories. It is meant to explain the mechanisms of the leadership's role in the rise and fall of great powers. As an explanatory theory, it intends to provide mechanistic explanations for historical IR patterns that can predict outcomes of decisions made in current IRs and forecast potential outcomes if decision makers were to accept the described policy recommendations. My policy recommendations are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is to say, my advice does not purport "to be the most moral leadership"; instead, it is a description of the approach with the highest probability of success based on the predicted outcomes using the moral realist model. Since the moral realist theory posits that international leadership is established when followers find the leader's moral code palatable, moral realism scholars thus recommend that decision makers obtain international support by adopting foreign policies that are perceived as moral ones. The morality of the leadership is measured not by a specific ethical standard, but is rather determined through popular acceptance.

## Conclusion

It is my hope that moral realism may contribute to the resumption of the paradigm of leadership analysis in IR studies. Moral realists do not deny the role of systemic influence in foreign policy making, but argue that leadership bias determines the final policy choice. In any event, leaders are human beings who have preferences and priorities in foreign affairs.<sup>56</sup> The moral realist framework hence incorporates political leadership as an independent variable when modelling changes at the system level, thus connecting IR analysis at both the individual and system levels.

Morality is used to describe and categorise international leadership into four ideal types: humane authority, hegemony, tyranny, and anemocracy. The first two types are leaderships that are at pains to present themselves as moral, and at the very least maintain a reputation for strategic credibility, while the last two place no value on the moral perceptions of other members of international society. Although both anemocracy and tyranny devalue moral reputation and responsibility for international interests, the former is more likely than the latter to undermine its own national capability or international status. As anemocratic leaders are those most likely to destroy their own national interests and international status, studying them will be an important vector for understanding the mechanism of the rise and fall of great powers. Presently, many leaders of major powers are adopting policies that objectively undermine their national capability for the sake of consolidating their personal power. There is a possible correlation, therefore, between the trend of counter-globalisation at the system level and the popularity of anemocratic leadership in some major powers at the individual level.

The moral realist framework suggests that a major power whose actions are more popularly received than those of its rivals will get the most international support and hence a greater chance of attaining the dominant international status. Although this phenomenon is universal, it should be taken as probabilistic rather than deterministic. Moral realist scholars believe that strategic credibility is a necessary condition for establishing an international leadership, because no state can gain followers without strategic credibility. This idea is

<sup>55</sup> Vernon Van Dyke, *Political Science: A Philosophical Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation*, p. 266.

applicable to all major powers rather than to any specific country. Therefore, it suggests that humane authority has the greatest chance, among the four types of international leadership, to win the strategic competition between major powers. Since the theory of moral realism is applicable to leading powers of different cultures, the policy recommendations that moral realist scholars make to the Chinese government are applicable to both rising and status quo powers.

Empirical studies on the current absence of a positive global leadership are sorely needed. At the individual level, populism encourages certain leaders of major powers to adopt de-globalisation policies for so-called economic security. This kind of strategic preference was vividly demonstrated in the case of US–China trade war and the decline of US global leadership. Trump’s Administration was neither the first nor the last populist leadership in the 21st century. The USA has thus inadvertently undermined the rules-based order that it helped build and protect. As Oona Hathaway, a Yale University professor of international law, said, “the US really led the way in pioneering this idea that states can use military force against nonstate actors located in the territory of other states, and they can do so without the consent of the state.”<sup>57</sup> Empirical studies of populist leadership of major powers may hence discover the mechanism of growing uncertainty in the current global order.

I have no ambition through this essay to reach a consensus on the understanding of moral realism, but I hope to inspire reflections among readers on the paradigm of leadership analysis. The systemic approach cannot adequately explain current changes in the global order, especially the trend of counter-globalisation derived from the post–Cold War globalisation. Therefore, I believe we may find research on international leadership to be more fruitful.

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<sup>57</sup> Joshua Keating, “It’s Not Your Imagination. There Has Been More War Lately,” *VOX*, 25 January, 2024, <https://www.vox.com/world-politics/2024/1/25/24049551/war-increasing-ukraine-gaza-sudan-ethiopia>.

### Article