



Why there is Now Non-Western International Relations Theory

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, Chinese international relations scholars have embarked on a journey of innovative thinking in world politics. The endeavour has borne theoretical fruits that both complement existing paradigms and potentially constitute a distinct “Chinese school” of international relations. Contrary to common misconceptions, this emerging school seeks not to challenge Western theoretical hegemony outright, but rather to reflect the organic evolution of Chinese intellectual contributions, independent of direct government influence. Notably, such theories as *gongsheng*/symbiosis have, in diverging from Western IR frameworks, matured autonomously. The emergence of a “Chinese school” thus heralds a significant stride towards a more inclusive Global IR programme.

Introduction

This planet that human beings inhabit is fraught with crises, including poverty, war, climate change, and pandemics—a seemingly endless catalogue of catastrophe. In thinking about possible ways to cope with the world’s worries “It appears we are running out of ideas to fix the problems in the face of contemporary crises,”¹ according to one Hong Kong-based scholar. Are we at our wit’s end? Is there a largely unnoticed crisis brewing in the Western intellectual stream? And if so, what is the way out? Today, thinking more creatively is more crucial for the world’s future than ever before. To that end, intellectuals must liberate their minds from the much vaunted power struggle and think beyond the restrictive intellectual box of zero-sum games. “We cannot just rely on one nation or one civilisation. The world needs to get together and think about what makes a virtuous and strong leading power that cures our centuries-long illnesses and brings order and justice to our common future.”²

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¹ Walter Lee, *Principles and Laws in World Politics: Classical Chinese Perspectives on Global Conflict* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2021), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 40

This essay is organised into six sections. The first section raises the central question of why non-Western international relations (IR) theory is necessary, and goes on to summarise five questions arising from the articles that non-Chinese participants in this dialogue project have written. The ensuing sections try to address these questions, which constitute the major components of this essay, one by one. It will then reach conclusions on the basis of these analyses.

Why Non-Western IR Theory?

The world is such a complex place. “Because the world is infinitely complex, we need mental maps to identify what is important in different domains of human activity.” However, as John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt forcefully point out, the trend is that of “the triumph of methods over theory.” But “downgrading theory and elevating hypothesis testing is a mistake.”³

The question is: Do non-Western nations have something to contribute to the theoretical innovation of IR? Asking this question may open a new window before us. As Cooke puts it, “Non-Western theory, broadly speaking, refers to frameworks developed within the context of states which fall outside of the geographical remit of the ‘West’.”⁴ Countries in the non-Western world may think differently from the “mainstream” IR theory, and hence offer alternative perspectives and approaches. “What mainstream IR theory offers is a narrative of world politics which cannot be told without the US at its core, or predominantly European theory framing our understandings.”⁵ However, thus far non-Western ideas have not been sufficiently heard; nor has their potential role been adequately appreciated. This unbalanced situation must be redressed, and sooner rather than later.

American scholar David Kang has admitted that he learned, in both in his undergraduate and graduate education, about the Spanish Armada, the Holy Roman Empire, and Napoleon, and about the European experience with war, state formation, economic development, and cultural achievement. Yet, in contrast, until recently he was never exposed to any scholarship either about the Chinese tributary system, nor Japanese foreign relations in the Tokugawa era and, moreover, had never heard of the Imjin War.⁶ This is an illuminating case, demonstrating that non-Western experiences have long been excluded from Western sight, and hence unstudied.

As the Western-centric tendency and its legacy largely remains, why must more attention be paid to the non-Western world? Some reasons are obvious. First, Western theories have not yet exhausted either the exploration or explanation of world politics.⁷ Second, the work on existing theories may have fallen prey to blind spots or missing links. Third, parochialism, which remains widespread in different parts of the world, must be overcome. More importantly, “It may be possible to discover entirely new ways of promoting peace or extending hegemony that scholarship drawing only from Western history may have missed or obscured.”⁸ That scholars should never stop working for new discovery is beyond doubt.

³ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “Leaving Theory Behind: Why Simplistic Hypothesis Testing is Bad for International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2013), pp. 427–57, esp. 429–30.

⁴ Samantha Cooke, ed., *Non-Western Global Theories of International Relations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ David Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. xii.

⁷ Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever, eds., *International Relations Scholarship around the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁸ Amitav Acharya, “Why Compare the Classical Political Thought of China and India?” in Amitav Acharya, Daniel A. Bell, Rajeev Bhargava, and Yan Xuetong, eds., *Bridging Two Worlds: Comparing Classical Political Thought and Statecraft in India and China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), p. 30.

Over and beyond the first two decades of the 21st century, Chinese IR theorists have raised useful questions about the future of humanity, and made serious efforts to think innovatively about world politics. Throughout the process they have harvested theoretical fruits that may at least complement the existing theories, or ultimately even form a “Chinese school” of IR. This has ignited debate, both within and outside China, which is meaningful and beneficial. The more the progress in this regard, the more inspired scholars are likely to be, and scholarly work advanced.

“Theory” in American IR is often narrowly defined. The dominant American tradition “usually demands that theory be defined in positivist terms: that it defines terms in operational form, and then sets out and explains the relations between causes and effects. This type of theory should contain—or be able to generate—testable hypotheses of a causal nature.”⁹ From this, we can see the American social science model of imitating natural science in order more to approximate “hard” science. This attempt and the thinking behind it are questionable, due to its mixing up of the nature of social science with that of natural science, and mistakenly seeing it as the only effective way of achieving a scientific status. It is a problem engendered by the positivist approach to defining and constructing a theory. The pitfalls down the road include downplaying, and being exclusive of less “hard” IR theoretical research, thus losing sight of numerous opportunities for new discovery through thinking differently. The overly positivist understanding of “theory” and theory-building, therefore, does not help with, and may even hinder, theory development.

Therefore, it is important to appreciate that Acharya and Buzan are “happy to take a pluralist view of theory that embraces both the harder, positivist, rationalist, materialist and quantitative understandings on one hand of the spectrum, and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern on the other.”¹⁰ This is a crucial viewpoint that ought to be more widely shared in the world IR community, thus to avoid the overly narrow understanding of “theory” and its consequence, that is, the Americanization of IR and seeing the positivist approach as the sole right path to take. One must be aware of the risk of neglecting other approaches and ways of thinking in other parts of the world, which could lead to a loss of balance, and acknowledge that although there can be no panacea for all of the world’s questions and problems, other intellectual resources may nevertheless empower us and offer alternatives to the existing theories. Any available alternative should be seen not as a threat but as an opportunity.

Like Western IR theories, Chinese theories also need to be questioned, debated, and improved. In this regard, the admirable efforts of the invited international scholars have produced excellent articles that are both stimulating and thought-provoking. They, in a constructive way, force Chinese scholars to think further and harder about relevant questions. As one of the Chinese authors approached, I am happy to respond to their ideas and questions, and to offer my own thoughts.

The choice of title for this essay is deliberately polemical; it is a straightforward response to the provocative (and important) question Acharya and Buzan raised and tried to address in 2007, namely, “Why is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory?”¹¹ As a Chinese scholar that has been a part of the “Chinese School of IR” movement over the past two decades, I am inevitably biased in favour of a “There Is” answer. Responding to the papers written by leading non-Chinese international scholars, this paper tries to address the following five questions: (1) What is a “Chinese School” anyway? (2) Does a “Chinese School” aim to undermine the hegemony of Western theories, and if so, why? (3) Does a

⁹ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 3.

¹⁰ Acharya and Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, p. 4.

¹¹ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, “Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2007), pp. 287–312.

“Chinese School” aim to justify the Chinese government’s policies, and if so, why? (4) Why is *gongsheng*/symbiosis theory not a development within Western IR theory? and (5) How is the “Chinese School” related to Global IR? I hope this response essay will contribute to the debate by offering a stimulus. Together, it is to be hoped that Chinese and Western scholars will promote further the development of international theory in general.

What is the “Chinese School of IR”?

The idea of inventing a “Chinese School” of IR, put forward in 2000,¹² has thus far proved a fruitful one. Short and succinct, its possible provocation of its critics has doubtless also inspired them. Although a fundamentally simple idea, it has unexpectedly sparked various responses, albeit including misunderstandings. In his essay, Barry Buzan underlines a few types of understandings of a “Chinese theory,” which merit further discussion. As one of the early proponents of a “Chinese School,” in my view, the term fundamentally denotes a specifically Chinese contribution to IR theory; a set of inter-related statements on IR that are invented by China-based IR scholars. It is something that enriches and balances, but does not displace Western theories. Since those Chinese inventions are sufficiently original, they may together constitute a school of thought that can be called a “Chinese School” of IR.

With the passing of time and making of progress, the Chinese IR community now realises that the “Chinese School” should not be regarded as singular but rather plural. I have elsewhere identified four distinct Chinese theories.¹³ They include, but are not necessarily limited to, theories of relationalism,¹⁴ moral realism,¹⁵ *Tianxia*,¹⁶ and *gongsheng* (literally symbiosis).¹⁷ This identification does not preclude other efforts towards theorising IR currently underway in China. Encouraged by their actual growth, and aware of their degree of seriousness and fruitfulness, I feel sufficiently upbeat to hold an optimistic view regarding future prospects. Meanwhile, I would like to discuss further the several relevant issues involved by addressing some of the questions and misunderstandings that have appeared throughout the process.

One misunderstanding is the argument that a theory is always universal; therefore, that there can be no so-called “Chinese theory.” It is true that any theory consists in a set of generalisations about a social or political phenomenon—a wide-ranging recurrent regularity whose actions and reactions it tries to generalise. It is upon making a successful generalisation that the theory emerges. But as generalisations can be either right or wrong, there exist both “right” and “wrong” and, therefore, “good” and “bad” theories. It may be argued that there is no such thing as a universal, perfect social science theory about humanity. All extant IR theories possess only limited universality, and may be flawed to a certain extent. Therefore, they should and can be redressed. All things considered, certain Western theorists need to be reminded of this limited universality; hence the value of a non-Western theory which, like others, sets out to capture the essence of human society and to better understand the world politics. Its value lies in the possibility of complementing or balancing the existing theories. A “Chinese School” may play such a role in this regard. As Mearsheimer and Walt write, “The study of IR should be approached with humility. There is no single theory that makes understanding of world politics easy, no magic methodological bullet that yields

¹² Ren Xiao, “Grown from Within: Building a Chinese School of International Relations,” *Pacific Review*, Vol. 33, No. 3–4 (2020), pp. 386–412.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Yan Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Zhao Tingyang, *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance* (Singapore: Palgrave Pivot, 2019).

¹⁷ Ren Xiao, ed., *Gongsheng: shanghai xuepai de xingqi (Gongsheng: The Emergence of a Shanghai School of Thought)* (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2015).

robust results without efforts, ... We therefore favour a diverse intellectual community where different theories and research traditions coexist.”¹⁸

Theories are usually invented by theorists that were born and raised in different countries. The specific traditions and intellectual backdrops of these nations engendered varying and contrasting life experiences that left an indelible imprint on such theorists’ thinking, worldview, and cultural spirit. Therefore, IR theories have evolved in different contexts (e.g. different countries), from whose respective underpinning ideas they inevitably proceed. As David Lake so aptly observes, “As scholars, our personal background and experiences inevitably colour the questions we ask and, through the theories we build, the answers we find.”¹⁹ The underpinning idea of American IR theories may hence be that of “power,” and that of UK history and law. The two countries have played strikingly different roles in world history, and evolved distinct types of society and culture. In particular, scholars within the two communities have responded quite differently to the development of social science. For Steve Smith, “...one of the most prevalent views about the discipline” is that “it is possible to delineate a British tradition in International Relations, which can be distinguished from the American approach.”²⁰ He believes that the major reason for the two countries’ divergent approaches to IR derives from their distinct intellectual climates. The IR discipline in the USA evolved in an academic environment both conducive and responsive to social science methodology. In Britain, however, the subject had its roots in the study of philosophy, law, and history.

Chinese culture, by contrast, always sees an individual as part of the social web. Chinese theories are hence developed very much along the same lines that social relationships are handled. It is not difficult to discern that Chinese IR theories, especially those that are relational, such as the *gongsheng* theory, often locate their theoretical discourses amid a web of relations. Building on that, they explore possible alternative ways of co-evolving and co-progressing, while co-existing in an interactive network. When looking at Chinese theoretical innovation, the influence of the Chinese intellectual tradition is too prominent to overlook.

In addition, currents in the social sciences also have impact upon IR theory-building. American theoretical work is prone to ask if there is any correlation between A and B. Perhaps an extreme example—on the topic of air pollution—is that of raising a research question on whether or not the problem relates to form of government, i.e. democracy or non-democracy! This, however, is usually not the case in other countries, where scholars seldom formulate and ask such research questions. But in the US, positivism prevails. The prevalent formal modelling builds on the belief that social sciences should and can be developed in the same way as natural science. American “social science” hence tends to use the word “science” in exactly the same sense as that applicable to natural science. This may be called the spirit of positivism, in essence, “scientism,” which holds that imitating natural science is the sole route to attaining “scientification” of social science research. We must, however, notice that in addition to the swathe of American work that uses a “scientific method” for the purpose of “rigour,” there are other equally—if not more—justifiable methods in this regard. For example, British scholars define “science” in the classical sense, as something involving a systematic but broad pursuit of knowledge along many parallel paths: analytical, legal, philosophical—and historical.²¹ In China, although there exist a group of scholars that are staunch adherents of American positivism and its

¹⁸ Mearsheimer and Walt, “Leaving Theory Behind,” pp. 427–57.

¹⁹ David Lake, “White Man’s IR: An Intellectual Confession,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2016), pp. 1112–22.

²⁰ Steve Smith, “Introduction,” in Steve Smith, ed., *International Relations: British and American Perspectives* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), p. x.

²¹ Christopher Hill, “History and International Relations,” in Smith, ed., *International Relations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 130.

“scientific method,” the majority are sceptical of its acclaimed validity, and define “science” rather more broadly. They tend to share certain British features. To overcome parochialism, therefore, it is necessary to transcend such Western/non-Western boundaries.

Second, a theory is invented by a theorist who lives in a particular country and works in a social context of history, society, and culture that brings him/her both advantages and disadvantages as regards theory-producing. Throughout the process, although progress is made, blind spots may also exist, and important factors neglected. However, another theorist that comes on the scene may, by taking into account such previously neglected elements, enable the emergence of a new theory. On taking a look at the history of IR’s theoretical development, we can see that newer theories do not replace previous ones, but rather transcend or complement them. Although the older ones were “replaced,” their value or partial value was often later rediscovered. One example is that of the inter-war “idealist” discourses on arms reduction, international government, and an international court, among others. Although an international police force never materialised, its presence is intimated through the UN peace-keeping forces that came into being after World War II. These are institutions with Western characteristics, and so is the UN Charter, a formal legal document that has become a common property of humanity. That China was its first signatory is an oft neglected fact. Although not a part of the Western world, China is probably the most enthusiastic and staunch supporter of the UN system and its operations, whose relevant principles and theories have an enduring value for our understanding and management of the society of nations.

Therefore, adjectives like American, British, and Chinese all carry legitimacy. They signify that the country wherein a theory originates has relevant repercussions. A national school of IR is thus possible, and can claim credit. IR scholars of a specific country form a community, and are influenced by an intellectual or political tradition. None of their theories can claim to be universally applicable and, although indisputably generalisations, each has limited universality. They should hence complement each other, as each one has something to contribute to our understanding of world politics. Moreover, given their limited universality, humility is imperative. As in other countries, therefore, that there exists only a single Chinese theory is not the case, the topic to which I will next turn.

Multiple Chinese Theories

For Beate Jahn, a “Chinese School” signifies one specific Chinese theory. In fact, multiple Chinese theories have appeared, which together form what could be called the Chinese school of IR.

On this particular issue, there is a debate between and among Chinese IR scholars themselves. For example, both Qin Yaqin and Ren Xiao are strongly in favour of the title “Chinese School,” while Yan Xuetong argues that there is no nationally unified theoretical school, nor any school of thought that can “represent” China’s IR.²² This is, of course, true. However, the issue is not whether or not there exists a unified Chinese theory, but rather that there are multiple Chinese theories which, taken together, may constitute a “Chinese School.” As K. J. Holsti puts it, “...we will never have a single theory of international politics, that different perspectives on the world are probably a reasonable expression of the complexities of real life and of different value preference.”²³ Yan is distinct in arguing against the “Chinese School” label, his reasoning being that any theory is “universal.” That, however, is a matter of semantics—of different understandings of the same term. Yan

²² Yan Xuetong, “Zailun weihe meiyou ‘zhongguoxuepai’” (“On Why There Is No ‘Chinese School’, Again”), *Guoji zhengzhi kexue* (Quarterly Journal of International Politics), Vol. 3, No. 1 (2018), pp. 4–7.

²³ K.J. Holsti, *Change in the International System: Essays on the Theory and Practice of International Relations* (Aldershot, Hants.: Edward Elgar, 1991), pp. 236.

is averse to any national characterisation of a theory. However, this presents no problem when my definition—whereby any original theory invented by a China-based IR scholar can and should be seen as a native Chinese theory—is adopted. Thus, Yan's theory itself may be as part of the Chinese school, in spite of his disinclination to be associated with the "Chinese School" label.

In fact, to the best of my knowledge, no one in China has advocated any pursuit of a unified Chinese IR theory. As regards, the Chinese IR community, therefore, this criticism is something of a straw man. Broadly speaking, there were indeed efforts in the social sciences towards a unified, all-encompassing theory, e.g. system theory—a social system in the case of Talcott Parsons, a political system for David Easton, and an international system for Morton Kaplan. Unfortunately, however, all are empty in being sweeping "theories" that explain everything and hence nothing. In common with other attempts towards an eventual, all-encompassing solution, therefore, each of them, having proved futile and incapable of taking root, failed without exception. The reason is simple: it is not possible for any such system to come into existence. Thus, diversity is both a normal and healthy condition for the development of social sciences, so we should always let "a hundred flowers bloom." Likewise, in order for their respective proponents to debate with, and inspire one another, multiple theories should be encouraged to evolve in parallel. The result is promotion of theoretical advancement and its prosperity.

In regard to Chinese IR, multiple theories have indeed been developed in parallel. Their common feature is of having gained intellectual nutrition from traditional Chinese thought; for example, relational theory from the concept of relationality; moral realism's use of the kingly way (*Wang dao*); *Tianxia* theory's link to the *Tianxia* idea; and the fundamental idea underpinning *gongsheng* theory, wherein multiple *dao* may proceed without harming each other. Meanwhile, they differ from each other in that relational theory sees itself as a kind of processual constructivism, moral realism as a reformulated neorealism, and *Tianxia* as a distinct and innovative system for the entire world. *Gongsheng* theory, meanwhile, distances itself from those familiar *isms*. Having been disrupted by the world's problems, and after much soul searching, this school of thought formulated the *gongsheng*, or symbiosis theory, wherein co-evolving while coexisting is the path to a dynamic life and vitality in general. It is hence a largely a normative theory, albeit not excluding empirical research. At present, these multiple Chinese theories do not share any such core concept as "international society," as embraced by the English School. However, such absence does not impede their respective growth; nor does it mean that they cannot converge at some point in the future.

What I find strange and hard to understand is Beate Jahn's asking if these theories "represent" people of different quarters in China. This is a surprising question, and implies a puzzling misunderstanding. How can any theorist represent a people? In fact, they can represent only themselves. Nor do I understand the rationale for Beate Jahn's claim that "it continues to exclude Indian, African, and many other resources." A Chinese school excludes nothing, having offered a Chinese theorisation geared to enriching our theoretical thinking, and prompting the academic community to reflect better on world politics and advance our insights in order to seek any possible, piecemeal, betterment or progress.

Therefore, a correct understanding would seem to be that such theorists are China-based IR scholars, contextually sensitive to traditional Chinese thought and culture, which have come up with original IR theories. Often inspired by the Chinese classics, they have more or less inherited China's cultural spirit. They offer Chinese perspectives on various issues, big and small. Whether or not works by Chinese IR scholars indeed do contribute to our understanding of world politics, their aspirations should nevertheless be encouraged and appreciated. As always, time is the toughest judge. A fair number of theories have survived over many years and are repeatedly returned to, while others may rapidly disappear. The

vicissitudes of contemporary theories of international relations are self-explanatory, in that many survive while others become outdated. It is often those texts imbuing insights that endure, while others invoking esoteric dragons are rapidly eclipsed. That certain theoretical works are long-lasting, of which there are numerous examples, is plain to see. Examples include E. H. Carr, who is far better remembered for his *Twenty-Years' Crisis* and *What Is History?* than his voluminous *History of Soviet Russia*; Kenneth Waltz for his *Man, the State and War* and *Theory of International Politics* than his *Democratic Politics and Foreign Policy*; and Arnold Toynbee for his *A Study of History* than his voluminous *Survey of International Affairs*. These facts may be gratifying for the theorists that think long and hard, and whose painstaking labours have yielded impressive products that have survived the many years that have since passed.

Does a “Chinese School” Aim to Undermine the Hegemony of Western Theories?

When, in the year 2000, the goal of “constructing a Chinese School” was first proposed, Mei Ran of Peking University was indeed compiling a list of his grievances against, and hence motivations for breaking the hegemony of American theories. The concurrent writings of Ren Xiao of Fudan University, meanwhile, were borne more of dissatisfaction with the dearth of Chinese IR. In any event, the two scholars both took the initiative in advocating the construction of a “Chinese School.” Their academic paths later diverged when Mei shifted to other areas of research, but Ren continued his explorations in this regard. More Chinese scholars later joined this endeavour, and debates ensued. For the proponents of a “Chinese School,” it was more a question of building rather than undermining something; more that of a plus than a minus. There had, earlier in the 1990s, already been calls for a more innovative Chinese IR, as opposed to simply importing foreign products. For those proponents of a Chinese school, although learning from foreign scholarship was a necessary and indispensable phase, the time had now come for Chinese IR to be more creative. They accordingly set about materialising their aspirations through the invention of a “Chinese School” of IR.

It was not until the turn of the 21st century that serious and original efforts towards constructing a “Chinese School of IR” became apparent. Two decades or so later, they have proved fruitful. These efforts have yielded important scholarly publications produced by China-based IR theorists. As one senior scholar puts it, “Without a discourse, how can one have any discursive power?”²⁴ This powerful statement demonstrates the self-awareness and determination to originate a Chinese-style “discourse,” whatever it may look like in the future. However, undermining the hegemony of Western theories, whether or not it is accomplished, must be the result, rather than the primary objective of scholarly endeavour and investigation. Such “undermining” would achieve an elevated balance in the field of IR theories, and hence a more positive ethos. Being more amenable to non-Western thoughts, rather than parochial, would incline Western, especially American, theorists to open up their minds and broaden their horizons. Longstanding intellectual hegemony has created a tendency on the part of the American IR community to be oblivious of thoughts and intellectual developments in other parts of the world. Instead, the majority pay attention solely to their fellow American colleagues within that community. This issue of the “closed American mind”²⁵ has yet to be sufficiently explored. What is clear, however, is that there

²⁴ Private conversation.

²⁵ Daniel J. Levine and Alexander D. Barder, “The Closing of the American Mind: ‘American School’ International Relations and the State of Grand Theory,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2014), pp. 863–88.

is a greater need now than ever before for this “closed mind” to open to external thoughts and different ways of thinking.

Certain American IR scholars tend to assume that the IR theories they have produced, especially those “mainstream” ones, have exhausted theoretical explanations for world politics. That the “ultimate” truth is deemed already to have been found may account for the stagnation of theoretical exploration. Exhaustion in whatever sense would signify that no new breakthrough is necessary. But this is surely not the case. One important recent product on comparative Indian and Chinese international thought²⁶ highlights how Asian international thought and scholarship could open a new window for Western thinking. Other such “windows” include Daoist dialectics,²⁷ Buddhist ontology (i.e. Interbeing), and a Daoist “trialectical” epistemology (i.e. *yin/yang* dynamics). *Zhongyong* dialectics²⁸ is another example. However, instead of thinking in a *gongsheng*/symbiotic way, American thinking is focused largely on transforming and assimilating other peoples in efforts to make them “more like us (the US),” and so become all the same. They would then feel safer. This is not a way of thinking which tolerates and respects difference, let alone engender a mindset of taking differences for granted and seeing them as a source of inspiration for progress. That said, there are aspects of American academia that also merit praise. For example, the International Studies Association (ISA), founded on the US West coast in 1959, should be commended for being open to scholars from around the world. Its practices permit IR scholars of all stripes and nationalities to participate in its many academic activities. The ISA is an exemplar of how international scholars may engage in constructive dialogues, and even synergy.

Does a “Chinese School” Aim to Justify Chinese Government Policies?

As always in the Western context, this question, and the assumption it implies, is one that frequently arises. It thus exemplifies another misunderstanding, often encountered, that distorts the overall picture. Traditionally, China’s intellectuals have regarded learning as medium whereby to serve society. The goal of many is hence to utilise their knowledge in the social sphere. There are, of course, two sides to this coin. On the one hand, there is an abundance of willingness to serve social needs. But on the other, this may supersede the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, which is imperative for theory construction at a certain level of abstraction. The tendency to focus on the usefulness of something is an attitude that propels already prevalent presentism.

However, that the aim of China’s theorisation efforts is to justify government policies is unsupported by facts. This claim is not overtly mentioned in articles by non-Chinese authors in this special symposium, but it is argued elsewhere; for example, in William Callahan’s article on *Tianxia*.²⁹ However, this erroneous belief may be more widely shared than would appear. It must hence be discussed, because it implies a significant—albeit incorrect—assumption in regard to the emerging “Chinese School” of IR’s purposeful justification of government policies, which constitutes a serious misunderstanding. Chinese foreign policies are subject to both continuity and change. A scholarly theory that followed, or was intended to endorse specific foreign policies, therefore, would rapidly become outdated. This occurred with the attempted defence of the “Three Worlds” concept, as coined by Mao, which was eventually abandoned. But it has not been the case for China’s IR theoretical developments

²⁶ Acharya, Bell, Bhargava, and Yan, *Bridging Two Worlds*.

²⁷ Lily Ling, *The Dao of World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁸ See Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politic*.

²⁹ William A. Callahan, “Chinese Vision of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (2008), pp. 749–61.

over the past two decades or so, whose focus has been on serious scholarly endeavours towards IR theorisation. There has consequently been actual theoretical growth. In this sense, Chinese theorists merit commendation for maintaining their intellectual autonomy and academic integrity, both of which are indispensable for the production of any truly innovative theoretical work. Regrettably, Zhao Tingyang's reinterpretation of *Tianxia* was mistakenly seen as an apology for a return to the ancient tribute system. This assumption is, again, entirely without basis. In fact, there is no essential connection between theoretical works and government policy. Zhao is a philosopher, the focus of whose work has been the rethinking and reinterpretation of the *Tianxia* concept, solely in the context of Chinese thought, and hence completely removed from contemporary government policy.

Gongsheng (symbiosis) theory has evolved from the fundamental question of how the world should avoid conflict that arises from the pursuit of homogenisation through assimilation; in other words, of trying to make others "more like" the country that takes such action. *Gongsheng* recalls the world's original essence, advocating as it does diversity of culture, history, religion, form of governance, lifestyle, and more. Based on this fundamental cognition, a symbiotic system overcomes its antithesis of pursuing sameness through assimilating others and eliminating differences. But at the same time, the symbiotic way of thinking believes that different entities should and can coexist and, through constructive interactions, enhance one another. This is achieved not despite of but *because* of their differences. Although not a policy-oriented theory, it indeed has policy implications, namely, *gongsheng* as a way out of conflict for a fundamentally diverse world. However, *gongsheng* theory is not intended to speak for or defend any government policy.

Theory-building is a time-consuming, intensive process requiring sustained intellectual activity and continuous, exhaustive research. It is solely this type of intellectual activity at a certain level of abstraction that can yield good theoretical products. By contrast, a mindset of being content to compromise with fragmentations of a subject, or habitually skimp on the time necessary to produce a viable result cannot hope to achieve genuine theoretical progress. Largely owing to the stringent demands of theory construction, theorists in any country are likely to belong to a small group in the IR community that often experience a feeling of intellectual isolation. However, "Theory is the lodestone in the field of International Relations (IR). Its theorists are the field's most famous and prestigious scholars."³⁰ Thus, that the work of Chinese IR theorists has borne fruit is truly gratifying, and there still exists much space and potential for further development in the future.

Is *Gongsheng*/Symbiosis Theory a Development within Western IR Theory?

The *gongsheng* theorists of IR have been influenced by Chinese sociologists who, in investigating the origins of the term "symbiosis," referred to the works of German microbiologist H. A. de Bary. Yet beyond simply a reference, any elaboration of de Bary and his research is often absent. A decade prior to the *gongsheng* concept's introduction to Chinese IR, Hu Shoujun, a Fudan University professor of sociology, and his associates were proactive in the study of *shehui gongsheng* (social symbiosis). Their research yielded original and admirable products. Around 2010 to 2011, inspired by their sociologist colleagues, IR scholars set about introducing the concept of *gongsheng*/symbiosis to the study of international relations. The term was soon recognised and gained intellectual autonomy in IR. It has since been used to refer, for example, to a state of relations between political entities, under discrete categories. Prior to that, Japanese scholars had conducted research and published works in the field, some of which were translated into Chinese. Chinese IR scholars took

³⁰ Mearsheimer and Walt, "Leaving Theory Behind," pp. 427–57.

up and read those works with considerable interest. Japanese scholarship has thus also had impact on Chinese researchers.

A third, perhaps more fundamental, source of inspiration has been that of traditional Chinese thought. As observed in the famous teaching, “All things grow together without harming each other, and the Tao runs parallel without contradiction” (from the Chinese classic *Zhongyong*). The Chinese intellectual tradition tends to be inclusive, not just in tolerating but, more importantly, also encouraging the coexistence of diverse entities and ideas. As a Chinese observer once noted, Buddhist, Daoist, and Islamic temples could, amazingly enough, coexist in the same Chinese village. Although “imported” from India, Buddhism was embraced, transformed, and Sinicized in the Chinese context. Unlike Deism, Chinese culture welcomes heterogeneous ideas and thoughts—which after all are not homogeneous. In fact, *gongsheng* thought requires a paradigm shift in our political thinking vis-à-vis inter-state relationships.

Since about 2011, Jin Yingzhong, Ren Xiao, Su Changhe, and others—all Shanghai-based IR scholars—have published articles in leading, mostly Shanghai-based Chinese journals. Prominent among them are *Shehui kexue* (Social Sciences), *Guoji guancha* (International Review), *Tansuo yu zhengming* (Exploration and Free Views), and *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics). Ren later compiled into volume and republished the major articles in 2015.³¹ According to two researchers, *gongsheng* scholars can be divided into two groups. The first, including scholars such as Jin Yingzhong, Hu Shoujun, and others, combines classical Marxism with traditional Chinese discourses on harmony in applying *gongsheng* to the analysis of world politics. Such studies have focused on the evolution of Chinese diplomacy over time, with scant reference to Western IR theory. The second group, including Ren Xiao and Su Changhe, seeks explicitly to offer an alternative to Western IR. These scholars use ancient Chinese diplomatic practice and political thought to explore the historical significance of a symbiotic international system in ancient East Asia. These historical lessons encourage the present-day construction of a symbiotic international system as an alternative to the Western-dominated system.³²

More importantly, the concept has exerted influence on and been used by more Chinese scholars elsewhere. For example, Liu Xuelian and her associate Yao Lu, both of Jilin University in China’s Northeast, have adopted the term “symbiotic security,” and expanded its use to the security field. They use the theoretical *gongsheng* framework in efforts to transpose the symbiotic system to the field of international security, and on three levels, namely: symbiotic environment; symbiotic unit; and symbiotic pattern. Changes in the security environment are the objective conditions for the construction of *gongsheng* relations. The security goal changes from “survival” to “development”; security issues feature a complex interdependent network; the boundary of security problems becomes increasingly ambiguous; and the security level elevates. Based on such changes in the security environment, the relationship among the security units alters from mutual exclusion to symbiosis. The relationship thus changes from “subject-object dichotomy” to mutually beneficial coexistence; and from “cycle theory” to coevolution of symbiotic units and of the system as a whole.³³ The Jilin University-based scholars have formed a team, led by Liu Xuelian, to work together and develop a symbiotic security theory.

This expanding *gongsheng* school and its members possess the following traits:

First, they have a shared core concept: that of *gongsheng*. They engage in academic research and theoretical elaboration in regard to this concept, and maintain a certain level

³¹ Ren, ed., *Gongsheng*.

³² Adam Grydehoj and Ping Su, *China and the Pursuit of Harmony in World Politics: Understanding Chinese International Relations Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 35–40.

³³ Yao Lu, “Lun guoji guanxi zhongde gongsheng anquan” (“Gongsheng Security: Constructing a New Concept in Security Research”), *Guoji guancha* (International Review), No. 1 (2019), pp. 51–66.

of academic contact with each other. It is a relaxed manner of contact that preserves the spirit of discussion without getting bogged down in formalities. They are united by a shared theoretical interest and similar or adjacent academic views.

Second, they possess shared academic goals, namely, developing the methods of different disciplines and the theoretical discourses of different fields, from the starting point of the basic thought and concept of *gongsheng*. They motivate and encourage each other academically to pursue these goals both independently and jointly, and undertake separate research and while gaining insight from the results of each other's academic work and research, from which they devise further research work.

Third, most of them live and work in Shanghai. Those that work outside of Shanghai gained most of their academic training within Shanghai, which makes them part of the same intellectual and academic tradition. As a result, all have been influenced by Shanghai culture and history to some degree, something that endows them with a similar style. Shanghai is a city of migrants noted for its mixing of Chinese and international cultures, embrace of northern and southern Chinese customs, and its welcoming ethos. Over the years it has cultivated a diverse, inclusive, and open culture that is reflected in the academic theories that the city has produced. Living in Shanghai also makes it convenient for these scholars to stay in touch.

On the basis of his earlier research, Shanghai-based scholar Ren Xiao further explored the “*gongsheng* peace” concept. In his view, establishing a supranational organisation to eliminate war and realise long-lasting peace is a transcendent method that humans have been considering for many years. The universally hoped for world government, however, has not materialised, and perhaps never will. Global organisations such as the UN have fallen short of the objective of creating a better world order. However, different from the idea of a world government, *gongsheng* does not need a supreme authority to maintain peace and order; rather, it proposes that peace can be achieved through *gongsheng* methods. What this essentially means is that international actors will not strive for uniformity, but maintain contact and exist together in a state of *gongsheng*. If this norm can be established, it will herald a new era of international relations.

Gongsheng theory is built on differences rather than sameness between and among things. The fundamental assumptions of *gongsheng* theory include:

First, pluralism constitutes the world's essence, and plurality pervades all areas of human society. In different parts of the globe there exist multiple civilisations, traditions, cultures, religions, values, habits, and customs. It is within a broader environment of plurality that agents—whether individuals or groups—interact. Pluralism is, and will continue to be, the reality of human society. As such, international theory must be built on this fundamental reality.

Second, there are differences between and among things. Just as “no two snowflakes are alike,” difference exists in all areas of human life throughout the world. This difference is an inevitable byproduct of endogenous development whereby, given their distinct local histories, traditions and practices, societies prioritise different values. Differences are a given, and this is the essence of the world we live in.

Third, different things can peacefully—even amicably—coexist and interact with each other, on the basis of equality. They do not necessarily clash. Interaction and engagement can and does happen without any need to eliminate differences.

Fourth and finally, different things, through constructive interactions, can together achieve advance. This sort of constructive interaction does not culminate in one swallowing or assimilating the other. Rather, through comparison and mutual learning, they become capable of appreciating each other. Acting autonomously allows them to achieve progress and development together. Their respective acts are not expected to be taken on or compulsory, but rather regarded as voluntary behaviour on the basis of treating each other on an equal footing.

All these facts together demonstrate that the *gongsheng* theory, rather than the Western IR theory, has evolved autonomously within the Chinese IR community. Growing numbers of scholars, moreover, are using the theory in their research.

How Is the “Chinese School” Related to Global IR?

A main reason for proposing a Global IR is the need to overcome the tendency towards Western-centrism, and to accommodate more non-Western IR theoretical thinking and scholarship. Global IR may thus become more open and broad-minded. It also signifies greater humility. Such an attitude is indispensable for reform of the world IR theoretical landscape. Chinese theorists, through their creative work, are contributing to such a Global IR. Their original work is deservedly gaining more attention and appreciation within the world IR community. Each of the four theories invented by Chinese scholars that I have identified above tries to theorise world politics in its own way: Qin’s through relational theory; Yan’s through “moral realism”; Zhao’s through a reformulated *Tianxia*; and Ren et al.’s through taking *gongsheng* as the central concept to search out an enduring and constructive order. All have raised questions about the validity of existing theories, and provided alternatives as regards thinking about interstate relations. Undoubtedly, they together constitute a Chinese contribution to Global IR, thus demonstrating that the Chinese also possess the capability to think theoretically and innovatively about the world, in a way that is similar to how the English School contributed to Global IR. Chinese theorists may, in turn, inspire thinkers in other parts of the world to do the same, so bringing diversity and balance to the field of IR theory. Global IR thus broadens and grows. At present, these prospects are unfolding before us; it is safe to say that they will bear more fruit in the future.

No part of Global IR can come into being *a priori*, however. It must build upon world history and reality, and be developed both empirically and normatively. With regard to such a theory-building process, there is a role for area studies to play: “In principle, area studies should be a main location for subsystemic theorising.”³⁴ An overly positivist and narrow understanding of “theory” constitutes the antithesis of area studies, which regards such an understanding as particularistic—and thus a less desirable way of knowledge production and that is inferior to more overarching assertions and generalisations. Fortunately, this situation never prevails in China, where area studies is gaining momentum and flourishing. Chinese scholars have not been forced to take sides between area studies and social science theory, as was the case in American political science, wherein fierce debate has been going on since the end of the Cold War. Because it obtains accumulative knowledge by observing real life, area studies may be a source of inspiration and the advance of theoretical arguments. Examples are numerous. Chalmers Johnson’s developmental state theory springs from his profound study of East Asia in general and Japan in particular. Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” is built on his study of Southeast Asian countries, while Clifford Geertz’s cultural theory stems from his study of Indonesia, Morocco, and others.

Although there is a strong case for area studies, it is nevertheless sometimes questioned. There are indeed fluctuating fashions in the social sciences which—especially in the USA—mostly emulate natural sciences, and are seen as superior. Meanwhile, “The problem with area studies is that although it might well be the right location for subsystemic, exceptionalist theorising, area studies is generally dominated by disciplines that have a low interest in theorising, effectively taking exceptionalism to be a reason not to theorise.”³⁵ What the two scholars pinpoint out here is indeed valid—area studies do tend to describe rather

³⁴ Acharya and Buzan, eds., *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

than generalise. However, the question here is “where does a theory come from?” A theory arises from examinations of history and actual processes. It is not *a priori*, and should not be imposed from above. Rather, generalisations are made through discovering interconnections between different matters. This kind of activity must resort to intellectual materials which, in turn, consist in real-life history and facts, namely, those regarding what happened and what is happening. After all, fundamentally different from natural sciences, human beings—living in a social setting imbued with a wide range of human needs, emotions and behaviour, and that interact, feel, judge, decide, and change—are the object of social scientists’ study. When human beings are missing, social scientists lose sight of the object they are supposed to understand. Therefore, area studies that examine different societies have an important role to play in theory-building.

By contrast, the English School favours a comparative and world historical perspective on the study of IR. This is demonstrated by Hedley Bull et al.’s *The Expansion of International Society* (1985), Adam Watson’s *The Evolution of International Society* (1992), and many other publications. The writings of the school’s first generation, such as Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, are overtly Eurocentric. This shortcoming is overcome by later generations of the English School when they adopt the broader view of the “society of states.” In China, area studies have been an essential component of IR from the very beginning. Until recently, however, scant effort has been made to theorise IR upon an area studies basis. One positive development is that, more emphasis having been laid on them and greater resources made available, area studies giving “full coverage” of all human-inhabited parts of the world are flourishing in China. The younger generation of scholars, who are better trained owing to an awareness of social science theory-building, are best positioned to theorise on world politics. Considered as a whole, what can be achieved is up to the Chinese theorists themselves that aspire to continue the advance of a Chinese School of IR.

Conclusion

Dialogue advances scholarship, and the coming to fruition of this dialogue project has been a long process. That it has invalidated the question, “Why is there no non-Western international relations theory?”, however, is a positive and encouraging development. A Global IR is clearly proliferating—a heartening phenomenon that augurs a more balanced intellectual picture in the field. Chinese IR has grown more conspicuous, and the “Chinese School of IR” movement has made real progress through publications, discussions, and debates. This essay has addressed five main questions to demonstrate: (1) exactly what a “Chinese School” of IR is; (2) that a “Chinese School” does not aim to undermine the hegemony of Western theories, at least nor directly; (3) that a “Chinese School” does not aim to justify the Chinese government’s policies; (4) that the *gongsheng*/symbiosis theory has evolved autonomously and not as a development within Western IR theory; and (5) that the “Chinese School” constitutes an important development and major facet of a Global IR.

The genuine growth of Chinese IR theories over the first quarter of the 21st century is attributable to the serious scholarly contributions of Chinese theorists, whose impressive high-quality publications showcase the fruits they have harvested over the years. Chinese theories have matured not as a result of serving Chinese government policies, as misconstrued by certain Western observers. On the contrary, they have matured precisely as a result of Chinese theorists’ not having followed concrete government policy, hence producing genuine scholarly products. It is to be hoped that their work in this regard will continue to progress in the years to come and generate further development of a Chinese School of IR.

That their theoretical products are receiving more attention internationally and their scholarship discussed and debated is gratifying for Chinese IR scholars. Debate and discourse “help us to expand the parameters of our disciplinary imaginations and pave the way for a new era of discovery.”³⁶ Any such dialogue between Chinese and non-Chinese academics ought to be appreciated and encouraged. It is to be hoped that future dialogues will attract more thinkers that may expand our understanding of world politics.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

³⁶ Yong-Soo Eun, “An Intellectual Confession from a Member of the ‘Non-White’ IR Community: A Friendly Reply to David Lake’s ‘White Man’s IR,’” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 52, No.1 (2019), pp. 78–83.