China’s Rise and the ‘Chinese Dream’ in IR Theory

Thuy T Do
Department of International Relations
The Australian National University

Refereed paper presented to the
Second Oceanic Conference on International Studies
University of Melbourne
9-11 July 2014
Abstract:

The rise of China/East Asia and the decline of the US/West pose an emerging question about how International Relations Theory (IRT) should respond to this change. Increasingly, there have been heated discussions and debates over the deficiencies of IRT in its current form as it is applied to China/East Asia as well as the potential desirability and possibility of building alternative approaches that have their origins in the region. Although this debate has spanned across the region, its dynamics is most vibrant in China where a number of influential scholars have mapped out different visions for a Chinese contribution to IR Theory, most noticeably the ‘Chinese school’ project. This endeavor, however, also creates backlash among Western and Asian (including Chinese) scholars as they question the nature of this academic movement given the ‘nationalistic’ if not ‘hegemonic’ discourse of the scholarship. Against this background, this paper will examine the current state of IR theory development in China and the logics behind. It suggests that the Chinese IR theory debate can be used as a springboard into a better appreciation of the relationships between theory and practice and between power and knowledge.

Keywords: ‘Non-Western’ IR Theory, China School, East Asian IR
Although serious theoretical studies in China only began in the early 1980s, it was as soon as in 1987 that Chinese scholars started to distant themselves from the Western-dominated IR discourse in China and move forward to build up an ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’ (juyou Zhongguo tese de guoji guanxi lilun). Since then, there have been several other attempts by Chinese IR scholars to map out a likely Chinese contribution to IR theory including the call for ‘indigenization’ (bentuhua) and ‘Sinicization’ (Zhongguo hua) of IR theory in the 1980s and 1990s and the more recent ‘Chinese perspective’ (Zhongguo shijiao), ‘Chinese school of IR theory’ (Zhongguo Xuepai) and the ‘Chinese IR theory’ (Zhongguo Guoji Guanxi Lilun) projects which, for the purpose of convenience, is hereafter referred to as the ‘Chinese IR theory’ debate. Most recently, a staunch proponent of the ‘Chinese school’ project has gone as far as promulgating a ‘Chinese dream’ (Zhongguo meng) in IRT. Together these different visions have formed some of the most heated debates within and beyond the Chinese IR community about the necessity, possibility, and substances of a Chinese IR theory. Examining this debate will help shed lights on the dynamics of theoretical innovation in China. My analysis proceeds in two steps: First, I will briefly discuss the development of Chinese IR through the history of science and philosophy of science approaches. I will then borrow the sociology of science approach to interpret this ‘Chinese Dream’ phenomenon.

**Debating the ‘Chinese Dream’ in IR theory**

The need for China to have an IR theory with its own characteristics was first put forward by Huan Xiang (the then Director-General of the China Center for International Studies of the State Council and former foreign affairs aide to Zhou Enlai) at the first national conference on IR theory in Shanghai in 1987. From the very beginning, this idea was largely seen as a transplant of the ‘Chinese socialism with Chinese characteristics’ political slogan coined by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The initiative was then promoted by Professor Liang Shoude (the then chairman of the International Politics Department at Peking University) and was followed by many other senior scholars.¹ Some argue that ‘Chinese characteristics’ should focus on Marxist IR theory while others focus on Chinese culture and traditional diplomatic theory and practice (Wang 2009, 109; Ren 2008, 294). The question of what ‘Chinese characteristics’ are and how work of that kind should be carried out, however, was not sufficiently and adequately explained by the advocates. This resulted in scepticism if not opposition to the idea by younger generation of Chinese scholars who believes that theories should be scientific, universal, and generally acknowledged. The critics to the project posit that it is highly questionable whether these Chinese scholars, so obsessed with Chinese uniqueness, will spawn a theory that has ‘transnational appeal’ (Shambaugh 2011). Sceptics of the ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’ ideas e.g. Professor Song Xinning from Renmin University therefore concluded that ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’ dismisses the ‘Chinese characteristics’ idea to be highly ‘ideology-driven’ and even concludes that it was more or less a political project (Song 2001; Song and Chan 2000).

If the ‘Chinese characteristics’ appeal seemed to lack of consensus, the subsequent proposition of a ‘Chinese school of IR theory’ increasingly win supports and proponents, whilst arousing criticisms and disagreements.² Since 2000 when the two scholars Mei Ran and Ren Xiao first mentioned the term ‘Chinese school’ (Zhongguo Xuepai), the ‘Chinese school’ has replaced the ‘Chinese characteristics’ project to be the spotlight of Chinese

¹ For an excellent review of the debates surrounding “IR Theory with Chinese characteristics”, see (Song 2001)
² A search in Chinese Online Academic Journal system (http://cnki.net/) with the keywords “Chinese school” and “IR theory” shows 70 articles discussing the various aspects of a possible “Chinese school of IR theory” during the period between 2000 to 2013. See also (Ren 2008, 294).
academia. Mei (2000, 63-67) laments the ‘unreasonable’ circumstance of the global IR community – the dominance of American theories and thus proposes building a ‘Chinese school of International Politics’. Ren (2000, 70-1), meanwhile, calling for Chinese scholars to start thinking independently, not merely copying and transplanting Western IR theories and ultimately striving to become ‘knowledge producers’ themselves. Ren (2003) further noted that there was an ‘English School’ and even a ‘Copenhagen school’ and asked why it was not possible to have a Chinese school. Other proponents have connected this quest to China’s rise, seeing a Chinese school of IRT as a counterpart to the emergence of China as a global power. The ideas won further support and received international attention when Professor Qin Yaqing joined the camp and play an instrumental role in developing sophisticated propositions for the idea. Inevitably, the initiative creates a backlash among Chinese academia. Opponents of the ‘Chinese school’ project can be identified to include: i) continuing skeptics of the former ‘Chinese characteristics’ concept who believe that it is still early to discuss about a ‘Chinese school’ as China is still in its theory-learning process (e.g. Professor Wang Yizhou of Beida); and ii) the scientism camp which advocates for universally applicable and scientific theories (e.g. Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University). There are three dimensions in this debate that have received greatest academic attention: i) why there is no Chinese IR theory?; ii) is a Chinese school desirable and possible?; iii) how to construct it?

Qin Yaqing was the first Chinese scholar to address the first question. He argues that the unconsciousness of ‘international-ness’, the dominance of Western IR discourse and the absence of a theoretical hard-core in Chinese IR research, were three main factors, collectively responsible for the absence of a Chinese school (Qin 2010). Wang Yiwei and Han Xueqing who are of a like mind attribute the lack of a Chinese IR theory to the three indigenous factors that have deeply rooted in Chinese way of thinking, way of living and way of producing, namely i) no impulse – lack of missionary spirit in its secular society, ii) no soil – path-dependence disturbs its conventional development, and iii) multi-culture system and multiple identities leads to the lack of theoretical incentives (Wang and Han 2013). Yan Xuetong, a critic of the ‘Chinese school’ idea, meanwhile suggested three possible academic reasons and one political reason for the situation: i) the lack of basic methodological training among Chinese scholars to systematically explain international phenomena; ii) inadequate knowledge of traditional Chinese political thought by Chinese scholars as their Western partners do with their own philosophical heritage; iii) insufficient theoretical debates among Chinese IR community to critique and improve IR theorizing; and iv) the fact that China has not reached the power status like the United States explaining why there is much less attention on Chinese IR concepts and ideas (Yan 2011, 256).

Chinese scholars also hold different views regarding the question of the desirability and possibility of a Chinese IR theory. This lies in the different philosophy of science that they employ, most clearly the contrasting monist versus dualist conception of theories between the two camps headed by Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong. Qin adopted a dualistic view of theory, believing that social theory differs from natural theory in that the former has ‘a distinct geo-cultural birthmark’ (Creutzfeldt 2011). Qin (2006) argues that a Chinese school is not only justified but also possible and even inevitable given three counts: i) the (sometimes) inefficiencies of Western IR theories in explaining the behaviour of China as well as other East Asian nations in a convincing manner; ii) general consensus among Chinese IR scholars since the mid-1990s that it is necessary to build IRT from a Chinese perspective; iii) China’s increased interaction with the rest of the world that has encouraged the development and promotion of a Chinese school of IRT.
Qin’s conception of theory received the support of many of his followers, including Ren Xiao, Wang Yiwei and other scholars who hold a shared belief that ‘theory is always for someone and for some purposes.’ Zhang Xiaoming, an English school proponent, believes that the English school along with other major Western IR theoretical schools (including the so-called scientific theoretical schools) is hard to ‘escape ethnocentrism or cultural bias in their perceptions of and dealings with the non-Western countries. They are all culture-laden and value-laden. In fact, there is not a true value-free and universal IR theory in the world. Every IR theory is provincial in cultural terms’ (Zhang 2011, 785). Wang Yiwei similarly argues that IR theory is both science and art in the sense that even if some features appear to be universal, IR in essence is still a kind of art with nationality. In an article published in 2007, Wang describes Western IR as ‘vulgar theories’ and increasingly lost its appeal. The western world, he says, is still in crisis and confronts a profound reflection on its theory and ‘the diversity of world’s development reduced western universal theory into regional theories’ (Wang 2007, 194, 204).

In this context, Wang Yiwei and Han Xueqing suggest that the world needs a ‘Chinese dream’ in IR theory whereby ‘grand theories might be replaced by meso and micro theories. Encouraged by Chinese inclusiveness of Indian Buddhism into Chinese Zen, China can also include western universalism into Chinese theoretical framework. As the consequence, Chinese dream in IR school will turn into reality with the full shaping of global China.’ What China has beyond Western IRT, in their views, is threefold: i) Chinese style cosmopolitanism (Tianxia zhuyi), Ethical idealism (daode lixiang), and Harmonious mentality (hexie linian). Chinese Dream then can be realized in three ways: first, construct IR theory with ‘Chinese characteristics’ by reviving Chinese cultural tradition; second, construct a ‘Chinese School’ of IR theory that should be ‘de-westernized, especially, de-Americanized’, but on the other hand, taking China as a historical nation and civilized culture, should also be ‘open and inclusive’ of western civilization, particularly not excluding the American Dream as well as European Dream; and third, construct IR theory that ‘originates in China and belongs to the world’ to ‘innovate’ the IR theory system. The difference between a ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘American Dream’ of IR theory is that Western IR theory held a universal dream, while, Chinese IR theory harboured a ‘harmonious but different’ (he er bu tong) dream. There is a belief that with its benign nature and tolerance of diversity, the future Chinese IR theory will contribute to making the real world and the discipline ‘a better place’ than what a Western-centric one offers (Wang and Han 2013; see also Wang 2007).

The ‘scientific’ camp led by Yan Xuetong, strongly criticizes this dualist conception of theory. As a hard realist and proponent of Western quantitative IR methodologies, Yan believes that any theory worthy of that name should be constructed in a scientific way and be universally applicable regardless of time and space, thus a ‘Chinese school’ is not achievable. He therefore openly opposes to the concept of a ‘Chinese School’ because giving birth to a theory is more important than giving name to it. The ‘Chinese school’ idea, in his view, is also misleading because the ‘Chinese school’ proponents has somehow misunderstood that the ‘English school’ is a national theory. In addition, he argues that it is impossible to have a single unified IR theory with Chinese characteristics because China is rich in both population diversity and philosophical thought. Even Confucianism, he believes, cannot represent all of Chinese thought. Therefore, it is not feasible that a single school of thought or theory could represent the entirety of Chinese thinking (Creutzfeldt 2012). This is largely shared by Yan’s collaborator Xu Jin: ‘China is too big and diverse. No one can represent the whole China and no theory can capture China’s diversity. Hence, there can only be a Han Chinese approach or
a Tsinghua approach but not a Chinese school.\(^3\) Another colleague of Yan at Tsinghua University has placed an attack on Wang Yiwei’s conception of theory standing between art and science and his criticism of Western IR theories (Sun 2003).

Notwithstanding critics of the ‘Chinese school’ project, Yan Xuetong and his colleagues at Tsinghua University are actually proposing another Chinese style IR theory that attempts to understand world affairs and Chinese international behaviour by using existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks – a so-called ‘Tsinghua approach to international relations’ which, in Yan’s words, attempts to ‘create something universal, applicable not only to China, but the world’ (Creutzfeldt 2012). This has driven him to look into the diverse literature of ancient Chinese thought to better understand modern Chinese power, particularly its rise as an alternative source for Chinese IR theorizing. As he suggests and encourages his Chinese colleagues at a national conference: ‘Simply conducting literature reviews of classical theories will not offer much traction for real theoretical innovation. Chinese scholars will derive more value from absorbing the existing knowledge and rational elements of classical theories’ (Li 2013). It should be important to note that despite his opposition to the ‘Chinese school’ idea, Yan shares a lot common points with the non-Western IR theory project. As he states, ‘I think if we want IR theories to become truly rich and develop more universal values, we should encourage these scholars and students to take a deeper look into their own culture, knowledge, philosophy, and political theory, to enrich this field, as Amitav Acharya and others have argued, because this kind of study is severely lacking’ (Creutzfeldt 2012).

The ‘Chinese school’ and the ‘Tsinghua approach’ proponents, also differ on how to construct a Chinese-style IRT. Yan advocates for the applying of scientific methodology (e.g. quantitative methods) while the majority of Chinese scholars do not believe in ‘there is only one road’ and ‘science is value-free’ approach and argues for methodological diversity instead (Ren 2008, 301-4). In this methodological debate, Chinese scholars increasingly refer to the different philosophy of science implied in the work of Kuhn, Lakatos, and Laudan. Wang Yiwei foresees a Kuhnian revolution or paradigm shift between Western and Eastern/Chinese IR theory (Wang 2007; Wang and Han 2013). Qin Yaqing, meanwhile, employs Lakatos philosophy in his attempt to construct a Chinese school. It is his belief that a Chinese school can be constructed if Chinese scholars found a new and different ‘theoretical problematic’ or ‘hard-core’ in their research program, taking the English school as an example. Comparing the theoretical problematic of American IR theory which is ‘hegemonic maintenance’ and that of the English school which is ‘the formation and development of international society’, Qin (2006) argues that the successful construction of the English school is thanks to the problematic it holds, which differs from that of American mainstream IR theories. In this light, China’s possible peaceful integration into international society is most likely to become the theoretical problematic of a Chinese school of IR theory.

Yan Xuetong meanwhile suggests that Chinese scholars should rely on both Lakatos’s MSRP and Laudan’s problem-solving criterion to guide their research, particularly in justifying his ‘Tsinghua approach’ endeavour to theorize ancient Chinese thought. As he elaborates:

‘The final goal of Chinese scholars is to develop a new research program, that is, a series of theories with a shared hard core, as Lakatos’s MSRP suggest. The first step for Chinese scholars, however, is to follow Laudan’s suggestion that they focus on solving existing theoretical and empirical puzzles by wisely using traditional Chinese thought and literature. For example, traditional Chinese thinking offers a different understanding of hegemony than mainstream IR theory does. Different typologies of hegemony within traditional Chinese thought may shed some light on our

---

\(^3\) Personal interview, Beijing, 5 September 2013.
understanding of the rise and fall of U.S. hegemony within the system. If Chinese scholars can successfully solve existing research puzzles in IR from a similar perspective, then this shared view has the potential to develop into a new hard core for a new research program’ (Yan 2011, 259).

Despite these many faces of an emerging ‘Chinese Dream’ in IR Theory that attempts to bring the Chinese perspectives into global knowledge, there are also scholars, although being Chinese, are not interested in either a Chinese school or a Chinese perspective. They do not actively involve in the current Chinese IRT debate, believing it is of little value (and a waste of time indeed) if there is no real progress made. For example, Prof. Tang Shiping of Fudan University says that ‘the only way for those insisting on Chinese IRT or East Asian IRT to show is to present their research (what is new, what is that something?). Academic debate is not valuable without noticeable research outcomes.’ A distinguished professor at Renmin University meanwhile posits that ‘the discussion is too narrow because most of the scholars talking about Chinese school rely too much on Western theory and methodology but do not have solid background about Chinese history and philosophy; because they focus too much on Chinese foreign affairs experience since Deng Xiaoping but ignore the modern Chinese history like the Sun Yatsen’s or the Republic era.’ Lacking such foundation, these scholars warn their pro-Chinese school colleagues against striving for a Chinese IR theory when the condition is not ripe enough. Discussing how to promote theoretical innovation in international relations Zhang Ruizhuang from Nankai University emphasizes that first and foremost Chinese scholars should not try to propose new theories simply from a place of impetuousness or impatience to see progress in the field. ‘Some think international relations has been on the decline in China because it didn’t generate any new theories with real explanatory power to interpret the post-Cold War geopolitical reality that rapidly emerged… It’s normal for a discipline not to make important theoretical breakthroughs in 5 or 10 or even 20 years’ (Li 2013). Traditional skeptics e.g. Prof. Song Xinning of Renmin University meanwhile argues that there is a gap between the proposed Chinese theory and the real practice of Chinese foreign policy. As he puts it, ‘Chinese foreign policy recently has become more and more realistic. China still adopts bilateralism, instead of multilateralism so it seems to me that China does not support regional integration. Its foreign policy is still adopting a reactive approach with no big initiative.’

In short, there has been vibrant debate about theory development in China over the past two decades be it an ‘IR Theory with Chinese characteristics’, a ‘Chinese school of IR Theory’, or another Chinese-style IR theory. Such debates have focused on issues like whether social theory is universal or rooted in cultural and geopolitical birthmark; whether a distinct Chinese School of IRT can emerge, develop and sustain itself; and whether the positivist methodology alone should guide IR research (Qin 2009). Despite all the differences in term of positions and moves, the fact that leading Chinese scholars, many of whom was trained in the West and have a very solid knowledge about what social science is, began to be involved in this discussion thus brought a more meaningful academic, not merely political, features this debate. A recent survey shows the relevance of this debate: 69% of Chinese IR academia agree or agree very much that ‘building a Chinese IR theory or IR school is an important task’ - only 18% disagree or disagree very much. But the connotations of the debate have changed, from characteristics to school, from isolation to integration, and from scientific socialism to social scientism’ (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013, 24).

---

4 Personal Interview, Shanghai, 13 August 2013.
5 Personal interview, Beijing, 7 September 2013.
6 Personal interview, Beijing, 3 September 2013.
A sociological approach to interpreting the ‘Chinese IR theory’ debate

Most existing research on the Chinese IR theory debate to date takes a ‘history of science’ or ‘philosophy of science’ approach in explaining the Chinese drive toward building alternative theoretical frameworks. The history of science approach reviews the development of IR studies in China under the lenses of power-truth and power-knowledge linkages and the various positions in the debate. Some comes to a conclusion that the ‘Chinese IR theory’ movement is a product of China’s rise and a matter for an academic community getting more mature (Qin 2009; Wang 2009). Sceptics of this movement, however, concludes that Chinese IR is the case where power speaks to truth ‘directly and forcefully’ and dismiss this academic endeavour as an attempt to replace the Marxist/Maoist ideology with a 21st century version of a Chinese cultural hegemony or a ‘political straightjacket’ (Peng 2013; Callahan 2008; Song 2001). The philosophy of science approach examines the Chinese conception of theory and science, the question of ‘why there is no non-Western theory in China?’, as well as the necessity, possibility, and methodology for building a Chinese IR theory. Chinese scholars conclude that this is a serious ‘academic pursuit’ whilst in their Western partners’ eyes, this academic movement is ‘unscientific’ that merely reflects the ‘theoretical nationalism’ of a number of Chinese scholars (see, for example, Snyder 2008). As Kristensen and Nielsen (2013) point out, a seemingly consensus of both approaches is that the ‘Chinese IR theory’ debate is associated with the geopolitical rise of China and the nature of Chinese authoritarian politics but it has difficulties explaining the way theorizing occurs, and the fact that it occurs in more than one way. In other words, what is missing is an attempt to ‘open the black-box’ of IR theorizing. These two scholars then turn to the sociology of science approach to examine the driving forces behind the theoretical innovation drive in China. Drawing on earlier work on the sociological turn in IR, including Ole Weaver’s disciplinary sociology and Randall Collins’ sociological theory of intellectual change, they argue that because of the ‘law of small number’ which only allows few intellectuals to rise to the prominence, scholars are driven to find new ideas and initiatives and oppose against a rival theorist/theory in order to stay prominent (Collins 2000). Taking this into Chinese IR, their argument is that the Chinese IR theory debate should be seen as moves by a small number of scholars seeking attention and prominence rather than through the lenses of power transition and counter-hegemony (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013, 19-20).

This emerging micro-sociological approach to theoretical innovation also echoes in China where self-reflective studies are just beginning. An example of the growing self-reflexivity of the Chinese IR community was during the period from June to April 2006 when the editor of China’s leading IR journal, World Economics and Politics, interviewed ten leading Chinese IR scholars in order to ‘trace their personal identities and explore how their identities shape their IR studies… Although this group is of roughly similar age, they enjoy very different identities and ways of studying IR’ (Wang 2009, 116). The micro-sociological thesis, taken by Kristensen and Nielsen, is therefore useful in understanding why there is a drive toward the Chinese IR. Yet it still has difficulties in explaining some of the core consensus among different approaches such as those shared between Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong. As Ren Xiao observes, ‘no matter how it is summarized, nobody denies that building Chinese theory and inventing a Chinese school must have an intellectual basis in Chinese philosophy and culture, from which nutrition must be extracted to breed new thinking… That may even become the foundation of a possible mansion that otherwise could not possibly be built. Obviously, this cognition has become a consensus in the Chinese IR community’ (Ren 2008, 304). Here I argue that the ‘Chinese IR theory’ debate is shaped by the personal identity of scholars which in turn is forged by their social background, the emerging national identity of China, and broader features of the time including political and institutional changes. In this
light, the personal identity refers not only to the mentalities of individual Chinese IR scholars but also to their connections with institutions, policy and politics, and the broader social-political context in which they are living (Wang 2009, 115). A remark by Ren Xiao is particularly relevant here:

‘Those who produce any particular theory have different background (nationality/concerns/experience etc) in shaping their own research question. When they try to answer it, they incorporate their own experience into theory building. People who produce theories are social animals in a social world in the sense that their interests and concerns impact on their theorizing and theoretical efforts.’

Wang Yiwei (2009, 115) once wrote that the Chinese IR theory is shaped by the ‘broader features of the time’. Undoubtedly, one of the most remarkable features of our time is the geopolitical rise of China in the international system that attracts the world’s growing interest in a Chinese worldview as well as how the country places itself in evolving order. In the process of accelerating integration that has successfully caught up to the West economically, China now aims to narrow the ‘normative gap’ in IRT. The cultural and ideological rise of China, according to Zhang Feng, has begun since 2005 with the simultaneous introduction of the ‘harmonious world’ rhetoric, the ‘Tianxia system’ thesis, and the commencement of the Tsinghua project on pre-Qin thoughts (Zhang 2013, 3). As a scholar has rightly noted, ‘it is true that if China were not a rising power, Chinese IR perspectives and the establishment of a Chinese IR school would only hold interest among Chinese scholars’ (Wang 2013a, 126). Yet apart from the power-knowledge linkages, the question of how China’s geopolitical rise actually shapes academic debate and theorizing is not adequately examined. Here my argument is that the rise of China not only forms the theoretical core for a likely Chinese IR theory (as Qin Yaqing argues) but also shapes their vocabulary, argument, research agenda and the extent of ‘theoretical nationalism’ of Chinese scholars. In this light, the Chinese IR theoretical endeavour is associated with the process of ‘Sinicization’ of these scholars’ theoretical identity.

People may wonder why Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong – those who were trained in the West, well aware of the foundation of social science, and already schooled into IR theory ultimately argue for ‘bringing China in’ IRT albeit in different ways. Yan Xuetong provides a simple and straightforward explanation for his attempt to theorize ‘ancient Chinese thought’: ‘because I’m Chinese, my Western cultural background is lacking. It is difficult for me to understand that culture, because I did not grow up with it. But I’m familiar with the Chinese culture: I know international politics today are very different than two thousand years ago, but I also find some similarities between now and then. Perhaps we can get some important resources from ancient Chinese thought, to help us to develop theory—to help us to surpass Alexander Wendt’ (Creutzfeldt 2012). He also acknowledges that ‘national identity not only influences my choice of research questions, but also influences the direction of my research. I choose international questions that are highly relevant to China… I will specifically study those that are central to China’s core interests’ (quoted in Wang 2013a, 6). Despite holding different perspectives in the Chinese IRT debate, Qin Yaqing largely shares this thinking with Yan, saying that his approach to IR was that ‘while much of my reasoning was from the Western theories, the aesthetic spirit is Chinese’ (Creutzfeldt 2011).

National identity has led these two most prominent and many other Chinese scholars to view the China’s rise and Chinese foreign policy in a different way than what existing IRT and their Western counterparts generally says. Arguably, there is indeed a strong sense of ‘theoretical nationalism’ among the Chinese academia as seen in their belief that some

---

7 Personal interview, Shanghai, 13 August 2013.
Chinese questions may only be answered by Chinese scholars (Paltiel 2011). This sentiment has resulted in a surge of conceptualizing efforts on the issues of national concerns from a Chinese perspective including its peaceful development, great power responsibility, strategic culture, soft power, public diplomacy, and most recently Wang Yiwei’s theorizing on Chinese ‘new type of great power relationship’ (Wang 2008, 2013b; Chan 1999; Zhang 2013; Zhang 2011; Qin 2003). One of the staunch proponents of the ‘Chinese School’ project Ren Xiao (2008, 306) concludes that despite different viewpoints among Chinese academics by and large they have come to a consensus that Chinese future theoretical explorations have to be ‘based upon the significant issues that are facing China as a rising power in the world, and to seek solutions through Chinese independent research’. That is why such a vocal critic of the ‘Chinese school’ and a self-proclaimed structural realist and highly positivist like Yan Xuetong argues against John Mearsheimer’s thesis that China’s rise will not be peaceful and instead develops a Chinese style ‘moral realism’ model in which China will not pursue hegemony like the US but providing a different type of international leadership for the world with ‘human authority’ (Yan 2011). It is his belief that ‘if we can rediscover more interstate political ideas of ancient Chinese philosophers and use them to enrich contemporary international relations theory, this will provide the guideline for a strategy for China’s rise’ (p. 106). Other scholars such as Zhu Feng from Peking University openly states that the Sinicization of IR is ‘part of the larger process of China’s rise with the aim to providing theoretical support for China’s foreign policy and national interest – specifically to ‘prove’ China’s peaceful rise even though the process has not been completed’ (Zhang 2012, 81).

While the shaping of a Chinese national identity as a great power has affected Chinese scholars’ theorizing endeavours in an indirect or unconscious manner, the material, institutional, and political settings have a more direct and obvious impact on their scholarship. As Ole Weaver (1998) argues, the material dimensions matter in periphery IR, China is no exception. Most universities in China are public universities so the main source of support for IR academic research comes from the Government. In the ‘opening up’ stage of Chinese IR (1980s-1990s), various American and European funding agencies (e.g. the Ford Foundation) provided generous support for Chinese IR research as well as for sending Chinese scholars overseas for in-depth training which somewhat contributed to the domination of Western knowledge in Chinese IR discourse. Yet China now has its own funds to support academic research so that universities and scholars do not need to rely on foreign grants anymore. Until 2011, less than 3.5% of Chinese GDP was reserved for education but this amount increases every year thanks to the rapid growth of Chinese GDP. In 2012 this number was raised to 4% of the country’s huge GDP, reflecting the higher awareness of the role of education in China. Particularly in its quest for world-class universities, since 1993 the Chinese Government has provided extra funding for a group of elite universities through the ‘Project 211’ and ‘Project 985’ and the ‘Quality Project.’ Being the top four ranked universities in China, Peking, Tsinghua, Fudan, and Renmin Universities are among the largest beneficiaries. Yet, central government funding represents only one-third to one-quarter of universities’ annual budgets. Other sources are generated from tuition, profit-making enterprises, and applied projects for the business sector. The diversification and increase of funding sources also help reduce scholars’ dependence on government funding, which often favours applied over theoretical research and have improved the conditions for research (e.g. access to research materials, library holdings, exchange and collaboration with foreign scholars) and academic well-being (salaries, healthcare, weekly working hours etc) (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013, 33-5). Better working condition and more academic freedom have resulted in a phenomenon of leading IR scholars moving from policy-oriented think-tanks to universities, including Wang Yizhou, Wang Jisi, Yan Xuetong, Shi Yinhong, and
Tang Shiping. This help to promote the ‘academicization of Chinese IR’ that pulls into the direction of more in-depth research and IR theorizing.

Despite having greater autonomy, Chinese IR scholars still need to rely on research grants from government foundations to conduct large research projects. The Chinese research funding system for social sciences includes the National Social Science Foundation (NSSF), the Humanities and Social Science Foundation of China under the Ministry of Education (HSSF), and the research projects system of CASS. These foundations primarily support policy relevant and applied research and access to their funds is not easy as these are ‘grants that come with conditionalities’ (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013, 34). For example, only a limited number of grants are given to theoretical research on selected theme such as ‘Marxist theory’, ‘China’s peaceful rise’, ‘Harmonious world theory’, ‘IR theory with Chinese characteristics’, and most recently the ‘Chinese Dream’. This is partly seen as an attempt of the Government to construct ‘social sciences with Chinese characteristics’. In a 2004 speech on how to make advancement in the study of philosophy and social sciences, Hu Jintao openly encouraged Chinese academics to look into both Chinese and foreign resources to break new ground in academic disciplines, academic viewpoints and research methods.

Following this trend, in March 2011 the Planning Office of NSSF formulated the National 12th Five-year Plan for Research in Philosophy and Social Science, which is oriented toward constructing a system for innovation in philosophy and social sciences in China (Ren 2012). When Xi Jinping came to power, he has largely promoted the ‘Chinese Dream’ idea which is thus far vaguely defined as ‘the great rejuvenation of the China nation’ and this has already become a popular topic for Chinese academia. In 2013 the Central Propaganda Department Theory Bureau issued a notice to nation-wide research institutions to register research topics on deepening research on the Marxist Theory and the Chinese Dream. The 15 suggested topics cover almost every aspect of the ‘Chinese Dream’ including its origin and contemporary background, opportunities and challenges, basic content and main characteristics, and how it is related to the current development of China.8 As can be seen, these themes echo in IR with a number of publications on the ‘Chinese Dream in IR theory’, such as those of Wang Yiwei.

Given the overarching ideology and the overall political environment in China, it can be expected that there are some linkages between the policy and the scholarly circles. Many academics used to serve as diplomats or government officials (e.g. Ren Xiao, Wang Yiwei) before joining/returning to the academia. Other distinguished scholars e.g. Qin Yaqing, Wang Jisi, Yan Xuetong, Wang Yizhou, Shi Yinhong are members of various government consultancy committees on foreign affairs. Scholars are expected to produce research projects and policy reports for the Government to generate more funding. The incentive for IR theorizing in China is thus strongly policy-oriented. Yet there are also scholars who argue against retreating to the Ivory Tower to do purely theoretical work with no policy guidance. Note a relevant remark of a professor at Renmin Univeristy, ‘you cannot keep a distance to the government because in that case you cannot find the information to build theory. However, if you get too close to the government, your theory will only explain but cannot predict or inform foreign policy’.9 How to balance between academic integrity and policy-relevance, therefore, will be a headache for Chinese academia in their theoretical pursuit.

In summary, this paper has attempted to review and interpret the Chinese IRT debate from a sociological perspective. It argues that academic positions are shaped by their theoretical

---

8 A copy of this notice can be found at http://www.npopss-cn.gov.cn/n/2013/1024/c221360-23311531.html, retrieved 15 April 2014

9 Personal Interview, Beijing, 27 August 2013.
identity (personal background and mentalities) of scholars which is interwoven through a set of layers - the social-political context of China, connection to politics, and the material dimensions. The combination of these factors has pulled Chinese IR scholars in the direction of theoretical unity and diversity. This approach also helps explains why research and theorizing have taken place in the orientation of bringing more ‘Chinese perspectives’ in IR. As the Chinese national identity as a great power deepens with China’s rise and the growing confidence among Chinese IR community, this theoretical debate will continue and sharpen. Despite its ‘nationalist’ discourse and remaining pitfalls, this should be seen as an academic movement that reflect greater self-reflexivity that would enrich the sociology of, to borrow Weaver’s (1998) words, ‘a not-so-international discipline’ thus far.

Bibliography

———. 2012. "Yan Xuetong on Chinese Realism, the Tsinghua School of International Relations, and the Impossibility of Harmony." Theory Talk (51).
Li, Mao. 2013. "China should speak its own language, scholars say at IR meeting." Chinese Social Sciences Today.
Mei, Ran. 2000. “Gai bu gai you guoji zhengzhi lilun de zhongguo xuepai – jian ping meiguode guoji zhengzhi lilun” (Should there be a Chinese School of Theory of International Politics?), Guoji zhengzhi yanjiu (Studies of International Politics) (1): 63–7


———. 2003. “Xiang yingguo xuepai xuexi” (Learning from the English School), Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi (World Economics and Politics), (7).


