Theorising Chinese International Relations and Understanding the Rise of China: A Preliminary Investigation

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Abstract

This paper critically analyses the case-study of Chinese international relations theory from the lens of non-Western International relations theoretical framework and also trying to understand the different narratives on the rise of China. There should be an attempt to democratise the existing international relations discipline where the global heritage of international relations cannot be derived from the positivist-Western international relations theories because societal interactions among the countries across the globe cannot be judged from the yardstick of Western experiences. The non-Western international relations theories can be generated under the less scientific post-positivist methodological framework because if 'West' is successful in projecting their international relations theories as a universal and homogenous then 'non-West' can also generate and project their own international relations theories for pluralising the epistemological bases of existing international relations theories. It is equally important to include the localised voices and experiences of Asian, African and Latin American countries by reactivating their local historical traditions and ancient philosophies, sociological perspective and ontological, epistemological and axiological dimension of international relations theories. Scholars like Amitav Acharya, Barry Buzan, Arlene Tickner, Ole Waever, David L. Blaney, J. Ann Tickner, Lily Ling, Qin Yaqing, Zhang Tingyang and others are working on this.

Introduction

The rise of China and its integration with global community are two of the most important phenomena in the post-cold war era. Though there are several studies from the Western international relations theories on these issues, the basic problem is that Western international relations theories (IRT) are inadequate in explaining non-Western regions in the world. The understanding of the rise of China depends on the kind of international relations theoretical framework employed. The dominant Western international relations theory has its limitations because of different geo-political and geo-cultural roots from which it emanated. The non-Western international relations theory is a collection of situated outlooks on the modern

conditions (like rise of civilisational states such as China, India and Iran) where indigenous traditions play a crucial role. There are various debates on democracy and development in the rise of China but this study is an attempt to examine the nature and implications of theorizing Chinese international relations and explaining the Chinese foreign policy decision making process. The understanding of 'nature' of the rise of China depends on the kind of method, techniques and sources employed. Hence, this study is an attempt to investigate the process of theorising Chinese international relations and also understanding the rise of China from the lens of Chinese international relations perspective.

As an academic discipline, International Relations (IR) were always considered as highly ideological field controlled by the Chinese state especially during the Maoist era (1949-76). Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought was the guiding force in international affairs. The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December month of 1978 was a crucial turning point, where Deng Xiaoping adopted the policy of '*Opening-up and Economic Reform*' which led to its active participation in the world economy. Only after the Fourteenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1992, Deng Xiaoping's '*Socialism with Chinese Characteristics*' became guiding ideology and also special attention was made to establish IR as an academic discipline for theoretical and empirical research. The last Four decades witnessed a rapid institutional growth and the '*National Association of History of International Relations*' (NAHIR) was set up in 1980 as the first academic association for developing IR as a separate discipline. In 1999, it changed its name into China National Association for International Studies (CNAIS) so as to have a clearer identity and wide coverage.

By translating Western IRT classics of realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism and so on, Chinese International relations community helped in explaining Chinese foreign policy and behaviour. But, it was the tension between dominant Western international relations theories and endeavours to develop distinct Chinese international relations theories by employing traditional Chinese philosophy and Western theoretical achievements, which was always a source of inspiration for Chinese IR community. There are many *Chinese schools of international relations* rather than one *Chinese school* and this can not negate the possibility of locating Chinese international relations theory under the non-Western international relations perspective, which will help in pluralising the epistemological bases of Western international relations theory

by adding rich and diverse ontological assumptions. The indigenous local traditions help in developing an inclusive methodology for theorising international relations.

Phases in Chinese IR Theories

Qin Yaqing argues that the development of IR as an academic discipline has taken place in three phases in China namely pre-theory (1978-90), theory-learning (1991-2000) and theory-innovation phase (2007 till today):

In the pre-theory phase (1978-90), both Marxism and Leninism were dominant and realism was on the rise, due to innovative thinking but no conscious attempt was made to build theoretical paradigm. This was the period when Mao Zedong developed '*Three World Theory*', where first world consists of US and USSR; second world consists of US and Western allies on the one side and USSR and East European allies on the other side; and third world includes Asian, African and Latin American countries. The most significant development was the debate between two different schools of Marxism. One of them believed that the world was still in an era of war and revolution drawing upon Lenin's analysis of imperialism, while the other stressed that Marxism should develop along with the changes in international economy and politics and, therefore viewed peace and development as the characteristic features of our times. This debate clearly reflected the contrasting worldviews of these two schools: the first emphasised international class struggle and the second favoured reform and economic development (Yaqing 2009: 185).

In the theory-learning phase (1991-2000), IR discipline evolved as an academic community where liberalism and realism guided knowledge-oriented research. *The Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of 1978* was a crucial turning point, where Deng Xiaoping adopted the policy of *Opening-up and Economic Reform* led to its active participation in the world economy. *After the Fourteenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1992*, Deng Xiaoping's *Socialism with Chinese Characteristics* became guiding ideology and also special attention was paid to establish IR as an academic discipline for theoretical and empirical research. Attempts were made to move away from copying the Western international relations classics and develop distinct Chinese international relations theories by employing traditional

Chinese philosophy and Western theoretical achievements because of the tension between dominant Western international relations theories and endeavours to develop Chinese IR theories. *At the Sixteenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2002*, Jiang Zemin proposed *Three Represents* as political thought in the party documents where communist party was expected to represent the advanced social productive forces, advanced culture and representing people's interests. The focus of IR in China has somewhat shifted from classical mainstream IR theories to other areas pertaining to feminism, world governance theory and complexity theory, where the *English School of IR* has engaged the attention of Chinese IR scholars in particular (Yaqing 2009: 189-190).

Under the theory learning phase, the deepening stage (2001-07) developed interest in constructivism coincided with the debate on *peaceful rise of China* under the Chinese philosophy of *yi jing* implies that identity and behaviour are changeable. This was the phase when Chinese international relations community sought to study practices in international relations by employing methodologies and analytical frameworks borrowed from the United States to explain Chinese experiences and behaviour at the international level. The rise of interest in constructivism among the Chinese IR scholars was an outstanding feature of this period. Hence, Chinese IR scholars realised that IR theories was not only a tool for interpretation of foreign policy but also a means to understand the complexities of international politics (Yaqing 2009: 191-192).

In the theory innovation phase (2007- till today), the focus is more on *how to build Chinese IR theory than whether to develop Chinese IR theory,* where '*how to*' question tends to mark the very beginning of theory innovation. *At the Seventeenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2007*, Hu Jintao articulated the *scientific outlook on development* under which emphasis was on *harmonious world* and *harmonious society*, which cannot be achieved without *peaceful development*. This concept revolves around multilateralism for common security, mutual co-operation for common prosperity, spirit of inclusiveness for harmonious world and finally the reforms in United Nation Security Council (UNSC). One can see clearly that Jiang Zemin's emphasis was on building a *well off society* in an all round way by maintaining a high growth rate and Hu Jintao's stress was on *balanced development*. The interest in constructivism coincided with the debate on *peaceful rise* of China along with a profound identity change at the

international level because China is fast becoming a full member of international society. This has led China to redefine its national interests and its strategy aiming at a peaceful rise in the world. Second, Constructivism implicitly fits into the Chinese philosophy of *yi ching*, which advocates that both identity and behaviour are changeable. The debate over the development of IR as a separate discipline in China has focussed on issues like whether social theory is universal or rooted in the history or collective memory of a people; whether a distinct Chinese School of IR theories can emerge, develop and sustain itself; and whether the positivist methodology alone should guide IR research (Yaqing 2011: 249-253).

Indigenization and Sinicization of IR Debate

This section deals with the theoretical breakthrough and developments in Chinese International relations where scholars like Yan Xuetong, Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing are constantsly pressing the need of 'Chinese school' and 'IR theories with Chinese characteristics'.

Yan Xuetong (2008), who emphasized the need of first try to develop theories before *Chinese school* of IR. He takes into account the traditional thoughts from the *spring and autumn period* and *warring states period* by stresses social scientific methodology and theoretical universalism. He is influenced by a positivist understanding of social science, with an emphasis on quantitative methods. Although he acknowledges that different questions need different methods of study like hypothesis testing, causal analysis, objectivity and verifiability. His ideas on 'how to use traditional culture as soft power' were inspirations for China's soft power strategy. One of the areas where contemporary methodological assumptions have explicitly exerted influence on him is the use of the 'level of analysis' tool in analysing ancient Chinese thought. The result is a classification that puts the analytical perspectives of 'Mozi and Laozi' on the level of system, those of 'Guanzi and Hanfeizi' on the level of the state, and those of 'Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi' on the level of the individual. He retains a key element of realist thought- that hard power is a central factor in international politics but, his new and greater emphasis on political power as opposed to economic and military power, hierarchy as opposed to anarchy, and on international norms, state morality, political ideas, and the very idea of human authority led to '*realism with Chinese characteristics*'.

Zhao Tinyang (2009) argues that world governed by the current state system is a 'non-world' hence; inter-state institutions cannot solve global problems. While Confucian *Tianxia* institutions are world institutions in the real sense of the world, and therefore constitute the prerequisites for establishing a global system and solving global problems. In fact, *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven) has a triple meaning - as the land of the world; as all peoples in the world; and as a world institution - combined in the single term. The Tianxia system emphasizes a unity of the physical world (land), the psychological world (the general heart of the peoples), and the political world (a world institution). Linguistically, worldview is a Western hence; the Chinese worldview must be termed the view of *all-under-heaven,* which emphasises the political characteristic of a worldview. The concept of all-under-heaven favours hierarchy, which is a pattern of order based on a world measure. The issue and affairs of the world are to be analysed and measured by a world standard and in the world context. Hence, the basic assumption in tianxia system is the principle of *subjectivity/Other*. He further argues that how China will be a world power and why we need to discuss *tianxia* as a worldview. He feels that to be true world power China needs to excel not just in economic production, but in knowledge production. To be a knowledge power, China needs to stop importing ideas from the West and exploit its own indigenous resources of traditional thoughts. Hence, there is a need to 'rethink China' so as to 'restructure China'. But, because China's problems are the world's problems, we then need to 'rethink and restructure the world' in terms of tianxia worldview. Therefore, the core problem in essence is a mismatch between present reality and our conceptual thinking about it. The problem is globalisation, a new world order, and how to conceptualise this new world. For him, the social factors are keys to the *tianxia system* like ethics, hierarchy and identity that are shared amongst all people in the world. He also sees the *Chinese School* as an assertion of cultural sovereignty to protect China's unique way of understanding the world. He engaged in the construction of a theory with Chinese characteristics for proposing an IR theory based on Chinese ancient philosophy. He provides a framework that is built on ancient Chinese philosophical thought for rethinking contemporary global politics.

Qin Yaqing (2010) posits that by showing the possibility or necessity of a Chinese school is not the same thing as creating the conditions for the actual existence of such a school. He talks about the combination of Western and Chinese ways of logical reasoning and theory development. It has embarked on conceptualising and theorising about Chinese intellectual legacy and socio-

cultural experience for constructing IR theories and for making conceptual breakthroughs in the framework of the established mainstream Western IR theories. Informed by both Chinese and Western thoughts, it has made efforts to conceptualise the core Chinese thought for constructing a theoretical system and to use Chinese narratives and practices to enrich the established IR theories. The most recent effort is to explore a core Chinese idea of *relationalism*, using it as a significant concept in parallel to the Enlightenment concept of *rationalism* and as an essential assumption for building informal networking and for relational governance. He mentions that an original Chinese IR theory would have three basic characteristics: first, it should be based on Chinese culture, historical traditions, and practical experience; second it should be universally valid, transcending local traditions and experience; third, its core assumptions must be distinct from those of other theories. By these three criteria, there is still no theory that can be called a '*Chinese School*'. He argues the lack of a *core theoretical problematic* as one of the reason. His views have been strongly influenced by Imre Lakatos's *hard core-protective belt* argument in his theory about *research programs*. He takes the 'harmonious world' argument as an example, the practice of Chinese diplomacy and scholarly knowledge production world aim toward the Confucian purpose of building a harmonious world; that seeking 'long lasting peace and common prosperity for the world' unlike the theoretical problematic of American IR theory is 'hegemonic maintenance' and the problematic of British IR theory is the 'formation and development of international society'.

Keeping these differences in mind, one can say that Chinese IR scholars are trying to sustain a balance between the West and China, between science and art, between modernity and traditions.

The East Asian World Order: The Tribute System Revisited

In terms of traditional Chinese theory and practice of foreign relations in East Asia, China's re-emergence onto the world stage poses a number of questions centring on China's relations with the outside world. In this context, it has become important to understand and grasp the Chinese way of thinking about the world. '*Looking back is an essential means to look forward*' hence, there is a growing research interest and related literature in traditional Chinese thoughts on inter-state relationships. The model of East Asian World Order was built on the assumption of

sinocentrism – the notion of supposed Chinese centrality and superiority. From this assumption, it is argued that China's relations with other states were hierarchic and non-egalitarian like the Chinese society itself. The historical East Asian order was unified and centralised in theory by the universal pre-eminence of the *tianzi* (son of heaven). It was not organised by a division of territories among sovereigns of equal states but rather by the subordination of all local authorities to the central and power of the emperor. In fact, one can describe and analyse the relations between China and its neighbours without adhering to the tribute system language. The term *tribute system* was a Western intervention, dating back into Chinese as *chaogong tixi*. The term *chao* and *gong* do appear in the Chinese historical sources, but the Chinese had no conception of such a system. This can also serve as an important reminder that the actual international system of historical East Asian politics is much broader than the tribute system. One should strive to develop new conceptualisations and to think about ways to move beyond this paradigm. He raises a few critical points of importance like to what extent the relationship under the so called *tributary system* was rhetorical or substantive? The tribute system was more designed for the purpose of defence and there was not an element of territorial ambition in it which can always be questioned critically (Gungwu 2008).

He emphasized to look at the Chinese intellectual and the cultural imagination of an international order, and the way in which the Chinese have pursued or will pursue such an order. One also needs to look at the convergence with and divergence between the international order that China imagines and the one that was established by the West, and the one that West wants to have in the future. So, what is China's imagined international order today? Like the *tianxia*, this international order must be based on Chinese idea. There, we have to examine whether the traditional mindset of the *tianxia* is still in existence and whether it has been transformed. There are different ways to answer these questions but, China has given up the idea of thee tributary system, China today has accepted the independence of both Korea and Vietnam. It has also acknowledged the independence of the Mongolian republic (Gungwu 2005).

From Deng Xiaoping's 'to keep a low profile' foreign policy to Jiang Zemin's 'peaceful rise to Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world', the theme of this doctrine is the same namely peace and development. Wen Jiabao's speech can be regarded as an executive summary of the Chinese doctrine of its external relations which makes it clear that China wants to be a state with a

continuous valuable tradition of external relations, a peaceful state, a cooperative state, a learning state, and a state that wants to build a harmonious world. China's old Confucian imperial states were based on the idea of a *datong* (universal great harmony) and a high degree of cultural homogeneity that is why *tianxia* (all under heaven) was based on such an idea even today? But, the Chinese no longer believe that China is the *zhongguo* (middle kingdom) today; neither do they believe that China's external relations can be established and maintained by the *tianxia*. In modern times, China and other states in the regions, many of whom were within China's tributary system, have struggled to achieve an independent sovereign status. However, for the Chinese, a world of sovereign states does not contradict its old idea of the *tianxia*, except that China can no longer regard itself as the centre of the world. How China is able to realise its old concept of the *tianxia,* which without 'China as the centre' is completely new to the Chinese. It is this context of 'China as a learning state' that matters for its neighbours as well as the world (Wu and Lansdowne 2008: 175-197, Yongnian and Tok 2008).

The Chinese leadership decides that China should go with the existing international order. After the fall of *tianxia*, the tributary system was completely destroyed by the modern state system. During the Cold war, Mao Zedong once attempted to establish again a China-centered external order but that effort failed badly. After China established diplomatic relations with the United States, it quickly moved closer to the international order established by the West. By the time Deng Xiaoping initiated the '*open-door policy*' in 1978, China was already a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). There are norms and rules governing the idea of the international order. Like other countries in Asia, China is conscious that the norms of behaviour and discourse of this order have been established by the West, and these state norms come from a distinct political culture that evolved from a particular state-system in Europe. The Chinese understand from their history of the *tianxia* that alliances and friendships between polities do require degrees of cultural harmony, they accepted these norms for practical as well as cultural reasons. At the practical level, to accept this international order is a powerful means of protecting China's sovereignty and national integrity as this order recognises sovereignty for each member within it. At the cultural level, the Chinese were actually confident that they could learn much from another culture without losing their Chineseness. For many decades, China has tried to model its international behaviour on that of the great powers and has moved away from the hierarchical view that underlies the tributary relationships of the past. He also asked this

question that how China has been socialised by the West to be a more cooperative partner in international relations? There is also another important reason for China to accept the existing international order because the Chinese have a deep cultural belief in the prevalence and inevitability of change (Gungwu and Yongnian 2008, Gungwu 2008).

The only proposition that does not change is that 'everything is subject to change' stems from the concept of *yi jing* which is a universal guide to Chinese thought and action for 5000 years old civilisational state. For China's leaders, their country is socialised by accepting and joining this international order but, other countries can also be socialised by China. Even the state-system of the great powers is not fixed, and it has itself been evolving. China's post-Mao leaders were willing to change China's existing laws and institutions, or China was willing to *jiegui* (integrate into the international order) but, the existing international order can be interpreted in different ways. When the Chinese accepted it, they had their own expectations. Of course, this idealised world order is in the best interest of China. The Chinese believe that this ideal world order is also in the best interest of other countries including great powers or small states. But from their experience in the past, Chinese leaders know that the realisation and survival of such an order requires tools and mechanisms, just as the old *tianxia* was realised and maintained by the tributary system. However, the Chinese can see clearly that many elements that are the pillars of the existing order and could motivate the existing order towards a new one are already embedded in the existing system. China was not forced to join the existing world order. The Chinese had examined this system before joining, and knew how to use this order to protect and promote own interests (Gungwu and Yongnian 2008: 24-27, Gungwu 2008).

Relationality Factor in East Asian World Order

In response to the rationality as an ontological base of Western IR theories, the relationality is an ontological base of Chinese IR theories. Qin Yaqing (2012: 78-81) is propounder of the concept of relationality. He suggests that a theory consists of three main components under interactive approach: *process in terms of relations*, *the meta-relationship*, and *relational governance*. It argues firstly that process is ontologically significant and is defined in terms of dynamic relations. It also identifies the meta-relationship, which according to Chinese dialectics is the

yin-yang relationship. It is the '*relation of relations*', and represents the essential nature of all relations, including relations between humans and nature itself. Here, norms and institutions are like *co-theses* differing at the beginning, interacting through a harmonising process, and integrating into a new synthesis realised through *Zhongyong* or the mutually inclusive way. It then discusses relational governance, which places emphasis on managing relations between individual actors for the purpose of establishing order. The definition of *relational governance* is mainly derived from Confucius philosophy, sociological theories and business management:

> Relational governance as a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust evolved over a shared understanding of social norms and human morality (Yaqing 2011: 133).

Confucian philosophy has certain distinct elements to contribute. Three of them are crucial to a Confucian model of governance. They are: *relationality, morality* and *trust*. Relationality constitutes the nature of society and therefore is the key to governance; morality is the guiding principle for behaviour towards harmonisation of social relations; and trust works as the guarantee for good and sustainable governance of relations. This tripartite structure of relationality, morality, and trust reflects the essence of the relational approach to governance, which is social in nature. In Chinese society, the way of thinking embedded in Chinese culture and society is based upon groups, i.e. the family, the country, and the world. Hence, relations is the pivot of the social groups; social relations, therefore is the key to governance. Quality relations constitute the most significant factor for effective governance. Mediating, coordinating, and harmonising relations thus become the fundamental means to relational governance (Yaqing 2011: 134).

Non-Western IR does not even have an identity or when new approaches like feminism or reflexivism arrive, established scholars insist they conform to scientific research methodology and criteria like testable hypotheses and research programme. There are international relations scholars around the world working on the conceptualisations under non-western IR theories. Lily Ling (2002) conceptualises the Daoist *yin/yang dialectics* and *gender-as-analytic* under non-Western IR perspective. She argues that Daoist dialectics recognise the counterpoint between centers and peripheries, West and rest as well as self and other in post-colonial terms to jointly

produce the complicities because of the mutual conflicts that endure despite and sometimes that tear them apart. The *yin/yang dialectics* which represent a living tradition came through food, medicine, religious/spiritual practices, literature and many more. It challenges Westphalia world's assumptions of universality, objectivity, and autonomy. It also conceptualises the *gender-as-analytic,* which reminds us that 'who and what we are'. Without understanding the value of the feminine in relation to the masculine, power favours those who rule. Gender-as-analytic also clarifies that '*race'* serves as a descriptor without understanding the gender relations. Globalisation's border-crossing complex flows intensify this inter-subjective process but it has been accumulating from above and below, inside and outside, centre and periphery. Hence, it binds Westphalia world and multiple worlds despite their obvious divergences. She also says that the China threat thesis is wrong or inaccurate; it is that China does not yet qualify as a threat. Of course, one implication is to keep China from qualifying. This implies a whole host of policies and strategies that either portents violence or induces it. What should happen when China does qualify as a so-called threat? Gender-as-analytic intervenes here and exposes foreign policy as a sexualised play. She gives the example of military bases in Asia, hyper-masculanise both the US and the China in relation to others in the region, where China becomes the rapist, the US the protector. Whether it is Japan, India, or Singapore, it will experience prostitution, rape, assault, theft, and other kinds of violence, where states are involved in addition to individuals. Participation in these schemes for China means turning it into a rapist, for others their hyper-feminisation into helps victims and only the US can get benefit.

Conclusion

The existing dominant Western international relations theories are colonial in nature and thereby deny space for the localised voices and experiences from the non-Western world. Knowledge is the function of power especially when warfare strategy among the nation-states has been transformed completely in the twenty first century. There are many Wests within the so called West but still they are successful in projecting themselves as a singular, homogenous and universal category. This raises a concern about the whole task of theorising, methodology, ontology and the epistemological bases of Western international relations theories.

There is a need to highlight the works by Michel Foucault, Edward Said and Amitav Acharya primarily in order to conceptualise the non-Western IR theories in general and Chinese IR theories in particular. Michel Foucault's discursive question about the *governmentality* that how power of states operates through hegemonised Western knowledge discourse, where knowledge is the function of power. Following Edward Said's articulation on the linkages between Western knowledge about third world societies and the historical processes of colonialism and imperialism that underlay them, the study underscores the need for a new paradigm of IR. In this context, the relevance of post-positivism can be a possible source for the generation of non-Western international relations theory as proposed by Amitav Acharya. He articulates the need for two-way dialogue and discovery to build alternative theories about the international relations that have their origin in the Global South. They also encourage dialogue within as well as between cultures and locations to make the project of theorization worthwhile and productive.

One can always contest his argument that why one should not focus on generating indigenous IR theories, which will lead to pluralisation of epistemological bases of existing Western IR theories. Since there are multiple worlds and you cannot judge the Asian, African and Latin American societies from the yardstick of European civilisation, it is equally important to give attention to the alternative histories and different trajectories of development in these countries. Overall, one can say that the discipline of IR is not theoretically rich because it does not include sociological and political science frameworks though it came into being from political science in the beginning. Area Studies should be taken into consideration in the process of theorisation by giving proper attention to local contexts and experiences for a wider audience but one should not forget that the generation of any theory has its own context hence, it is crucial to decide the context behind the generation of non-Western IR theories also.

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