

# ‘Joining the Club’

## The place of a Chinese School in the global IR academy

THØGER KERSTING CHRISTENSEN

ASIA IN FOCUS

Since the 1970s, international relations (IR) as a discipline has been called an ‘American social science’. However, despite persistent criticism, Western-centrism still permeates the discipline today. In response, Chinese scholars are debating whether to create a Chinese IR theory, most recently in the form of a ‘Chinese School of IR’. This article focuses on the three main scholars in the debate – Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong and Zhao Tingyang – and their theories. Through a bibliometric study of IR periodicals published by Chinese institutions, the paper seeks to measure the influence of the new theories domestically and the Chinese School’s position in the global structure of IR knowledge production. Finally, it critically evaluates the theories’ relationship to existing Western-centric IR theory. All of this is done in order to assess whether Chinese IR theory can be considered a paradigm-shifting phenomenon. The article finds that Western-centric IR – both from an institutional and ideational perspective – continues to dominate the discipline. Furthermore, creating national schools in response to Western hegemony runs the risk of reproducing the problematic tropes of mainstream IR. China’s growing role in the world, its cultural and intellectual tradition, and its sheer proportion of the world population all speak in favour of its potential to emancipate global IR. However, in striving for a truly global discipline, scholars will need to adopt a critical stand against existing IR theory and seek a broader interpretation of what constitutes *China*.

**Keywords:** Western-centrism, Chinese School, international relations theory, global international relations, dialectics

Despite its name, the field of international relations has long been criticised for being parochial (Kristensen, 2015) and serving a Western outlook (Hobson, 2012) - it has even been called an 'American social science' (Hoffman, 1977; Smith, 2000). Critics claim that the field's universalisation of the Western experience has served to downplay the role of imperialism and colonialism. The discipline assumes an idealised world structured around arbitrary dates such as 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia, and the supposed foundation of the discipline in 1919 (Carvalho et al. 2011). The earlier roots of the discipline in fields such as racial science and colonial administration are ignored, as is the fact that one of the discipline's most trusted periodicals, *Foreign Affairs*, was founded in 1911 as *The Journal of Racial Development* (Vitalis, 2000).

With the emergence of critical, feminist and postcolonial IR studies, and the rise of developing non-Western countries such as the BRIC block, voices criticising subliminal Western-centrism in IR theory have grown more acute. The fact that these 'new' powers seemed to arise at the same time as the economies of established powers were floundering has reignited bouts of Western defeatism (Ferguson, 2011; Goldberg, 2018). Arguably, none of the newcomers spurs more attention, fascination or concern as China. A growing interest in China and its global vision carried popular titles as *What Does China Think* (Leonard, 2008) and *When China Rules the World* (Jacques, 2009). However, in the Western IR communities, rising powers continue to be studied mainly as objects rather than subjects able to 'speak' or theorise themselves (Kristensen, 2015).

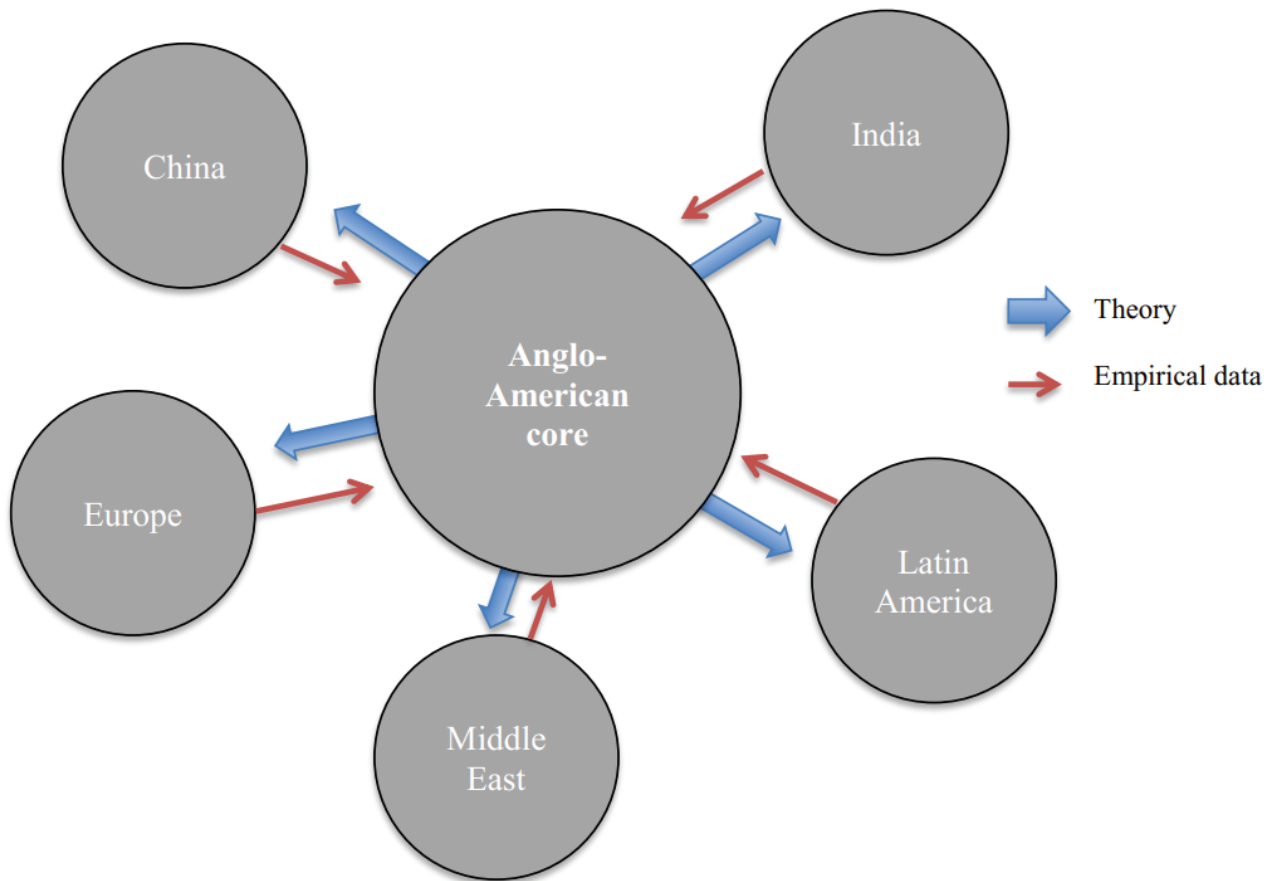
A call for a *global* IR by concerned IR scholars Acharya and Buzan (2007) reenergised the debate for indigenous theory inside China. The potential for a *Chinese School* of IR inspired by the English and Copenhagen Schools has been a hotly debated topic for decades since Liang Shoude called for an "IR discipline with Chinese characteristics" (Liang, 1994). Recently, Chinese scholars have moved into a new phase formulating theories founded on Chinese

history and philosophy (Qin, 2018; Zhang and Chang, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Yan, [2011] 2013). In this paper I discuss the potential for a Chinese School to challenge the Western-centric structure of IR both ideationally and from an institutional perspective by surveying more than 2,500 IR articles published from 2013-2017 in Chinese academic periodicals. In addition, I introduce a comparative angle as four periodicals are published in English and five in Chinese. The purpose is to investigate how much of the Chinese IR community is engaging in theory innovation, how much of this work promotes new theory based on Chinese resources, and how the new theories relate to existing IR and Western-centrism.

### **The stratified structure of the IR academy**

Charges of Western-centrism in IR have taken different forms including institutional bias (Reingewertz and Lutwar, 2017), epistemological inflexibility (Brincat and Ling, 2014), cultural exceptionalism (Hobson, 2012), developmental determinism (Hoogvelt, 1997) and a lack of non-Western agency (Kayaoglu, 2010). An illustration of the stratified institutional structure of the IR community is the "hub-and-spokes system" (Kristensen, 2015) in which core scholars, largely made up by an Anglo-American institutional elite, dominate. As Kristensen puts it, "it is the privilege of 'core' scholars to theorise, while periphery scholars do not speak back to the core, except perhaps in the sense of providing some raw empirical materials." (Kristensen, 2015, p. 214).

Voices addressing these structural imbalances are either welcomed (Acharya, 2016) or met by resistance. Influential realist scholar John Mearsheimer portrays this exclusion in terms of scarcity: "[T]here are limited opportunities in 2015 for scholars outside the United States - as well inside it - to develop wholly new theories. If this were 1945, the situation would be markedly different" (Mearsheimer, 2016, p.2). There is a feeling in the more entrenched parts of the academy that IR is already overly fragmented (Wæver, 2013, p.336)



**Figure 1.** The stratified structure of knowledge production in the international IR community. The Anglo-American core of the global IR works as central disseminator of knowledge to the peripheral cores, which as subjugated entities are only conditionally able to ‘speak back’ mostly by providing ‘raw, material data’ to the ‘theorising core’. There is little inter-peripheral contact.

and that it has reached its own end-of-history. That being the case, Chinese scholars are working to construct IR theories from Chinese resources either to contribute to existing research paradigms (Yan [2011] 2013) or as a new ‘school of IR’ (Zhang and Chang, 2016). Three of the main figures to emerge in the debate are Qin Yaqing, Yan Xuetong and Zhao Tingyang. The paper continues with a brief outline of the content of these scholars’ theories, which is followed by the methodological approach of the survey. I then discuss how the sanctioned sources react to the existing mainstream theories.

### **Sanctioned sources of the Chinese School of IR**

Although the debate around a Chinese School of IR has gained attention from a number of scholars, three scholars in particular have emerged as the main figures in the debate. I refer to their work as *sanctioned* partly because of their domestic status as eminent scholars that was revealed by surveying their Chinese peers (Kristensen, 2015, p.327) and partly because of their recognition globally as key representatives of a Chinese School. Qin, Yan, and Zhao have been called “main contributors” (Demir, 2018, p.96), “the three bigs of Chinese IR” (Babones, 2018) and “leading scholars” (Cunningham-Cross,

2014, p.6) by Western IR scholars. This is not to say that these particular scholars are necessarily ideal proponents of an imagined Chinese School, but they have become recognised as such by the core of the international IR academy, willingly or not.

#### *Qin Yaqing - The proponent*

Qin Yaqing, professor at China Foreign Affairs University, is strongly associated with the quest to build a Chinese School of IR (Kristensen, 2015, p.332). In his work, Qin draws extensively on Confucian philosophy of relations, Daoist cosmology, and also channels the sociologist Fei Xiaotong. Qin defines IR theory as having a hard core composed of a substantive and metaphysical component. According to him, the Western IR traditions have different substantive components – *power* in realism, *institutions* in liberalism, *norms* in constructivism – but a consistent meta-physical component, *rationality* (Qin, 2016, p.34). He coins his own approach to IR theory as *relational constructivism* structured around the meta-physical component of *relationality*. Instead of looking at pre-conceived individual actors, Qin focuses on the relations and processes of these actors. Overemphasising the Western constructivist focus on identity formation as an *internal* process, Qin borrows from Fei Xiaotong and locates this formation solely as revealed through relations between actors. As an example, in a typical IR scenario what is considered rational US nuclear policy differs widely depending on whether it is engaging with a rival such as Iran or an ally such as the UK (ibid, p.36). Furthermore, Qin also advances an alternative to Western Hegelian dialectics inspired by Daoist cosmology and the Confucian Classic, *The Doctrine of the Mean* or *Zhongyong*. Zhongyong dialectics look to engage and accept contradictions and create polarity without duality in contrast to Hegelian dialectics:

Like their Western counterparts, the Chinese conceptualise the universe in a polar way, believing that progress and evolution take place

by interaction of the two opposite poles [...]. [T]he Confucian tradition understands them in an immanent way. They interact not as the thesis and antithesis, but as co-theses.

(Qin, 2016, p.39)

This concept opens up to new avenues of research such as relational power, relational governance and relational international systems (ibid, pp. 41-45).

#### *Yan Xuetong - The opponent*

In opposition to Qin Yaqing is Professor Yan Xuetong from Tsinghua University who has almost accidentally become the leading figure of the *Tsinghua approach*, a common denominator for scholars using ancient Chinese sources to enrich existing, especially realist, IR theory (Cunningham-Cross, 2014, p.181). A long-time public intellectual often weighing in on Chinese foreign policy, Yan is a staunch opponent of the Chinese School label – he advocates a scientific, positivist approach to social sciences closely aligned with the US empiricist tradition. For Yan, a Chinese School of IR is as of little use as a “Chinese School of physics or chemistry” (Yan, [2011] 2013, p.216). Including Yan Xuetong in a discussion on Chinese IR theory is therefore controversial, as he insists that he is merely adding perspectives to existing (Western) theory. However, as Yan himself argues, it is not up to scholars themselves to coin academic schools (ibid, pp.252-253), and he has willingly or not become a central part of the discourse on building Chinese IR theory (Demir, 2017; Kristensten 2015; Cunningham-Cross 2014b; Kai 2012; Zhang 2012). Yan would no doubt claim that through his Tsinghua approach that he is merely creating universal IR theory. However, the rationale of his work does not rest upon just any strain of intellectual thought but exclusively invokes ancient Chinese philosophers and concepts such as *moral realism* and *humane authority*. As such both he and Qin Yaqing agree that Chinese intellectual culture is an important resource from which to develop global IR, and some scholars argue that

Yan's objections to the term a Chinese School might be more a problem of phrasing than an unbridgeable gap between the two (Zhang, 2012). For this reason Yan has also become a central figure in the discussion of how Chinese culture might invigorate IR theory and guide Chinese foreign policy. The central question for Yan is "how China can become the leading power in the world and what kind of world leadership it can provide" (Yan, [2011] 2013, p.216). Although considered a hawk and "neo-comm" by some (Leonard, 2008, p.112), he also expresses belief in the peaceful rise of China managed through adherence to moral realism, which in practice means drawing foreign policy lessons from ancient Chinese philosophers. This link is clearly emphasised in the title of his book, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Yan, [2011] 2013). In the realist tradition of might-makes-right, Yan sees the domination of states as a constant and natural occurrence in international politics. He believes China can become a dominating state by learning from the mistakes of the US, which he calls a hegemon, and instead cultivate harmony and strive to become a "humane authority" (ibid, p.39).

#### *Zhao Tingyang - The outsider*

The last influential thinker in advancing Chinese IR theory is Zhao Tingyang, who is associated with promoting a revamped conception of the *tianxia* system. The original *tianxia* system, literally translated as *all-under-heaven*, refers to the pre-Qin interstate system that existed between 1045-221 BCE approximately. During this period, the rule of Zhou over the other Chinese states was, according to Zhao, a "political institutional revolution not built on force, but on morality and the common good" (Zhao 2012, pp.55-56). It is important to keep in mind that just as with the "Westphalian myth of IR" (Carvalho et al. 2011), the reality of this 800 year period was much more complex – after all, it was not called the Warring States period for its adherence to morality and stability (Hui, 2004).

As a philosopher, and as such less associated

with the IR community, Zhao is pushing for the most idealistic and normative project of the three scholars: a hyper-institutionalised world government and a world constitution that will entrench a philosophy of *worldness* (Zhao, 2012, p.64). *Tianxia* has become one of the most widely discussed ideas related to Chinese IR, partly due to its perceived impact on policy-making (Callahan, 2008). It is speculative at best to establish causality between academia and politics, but some scholars have pointed out similarities between Hu Jintao's concept of harmonious world and Zhao's *tianxia* system (ibid). Taking his point of departure in a critical assessment of the current state of international affairs as a failed world, he seeks to go beyond the nation-centrism of Western IR theory by inducing the concept of worldness into international theory (Zhao, 2009, p.6). Just like his two colleagues, Zhao finds inspiration in the pre-Qin micro-cosmos of interstate activity taking Confucian relationism as a metaphysical component very similar to Qin's conception of relationality (Zhao, 2012, p.49). Zhao argues for inherent differences in the Western and Chinese worldviews, seeing the former as embodied in the multipolarity of ancient Greek political states and the latter in the moral hierarchy of the Zhou Dynasty. This bipolarity opens up for a return of Hegelian dialectics, which I return to later in the discussion.

#### **Methods and Data**

Having briefly accounted for the three most prominent scholars in the Chinese School of IR debate, I now turn to data to analyse to what a degree their ideas hold sway in the wider Chinese IR community. I survey 2,544 IR articles published between 2013 and 2017 (see Figure 2). The articles included in the sample come from nine journals and include prefaces and interviews, but exclude literature reviews, conference summaries and calls for submissions. I also include a comparative angle to investigate and compare the contents of Anglophone publications with Sinophone periodicals. By comparing publications published

<b>Sinophone publications</b>	<b>First published</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Articles</b>
<i>The Journal of International Studies</i> 国际政治研究	1980	Peking University	235
<i>Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies</i> 当代亚太	1992	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	180
<i>International Issues Studies</i> 国际问题研究	1959	China Institute of International Studies	305
<i>Contemporary International Relations</i> 现代国际关系	1981	China Institutes of Contemporary International Studies	626
<i>World Economics and Politics</i> 世界经济与政治	1979	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	436
<b>Total</b>			<b>1782</b>
<b>Anglophone Publications</b>	<b>First published</b>	<b>Publisher</b>	<b>Articles</b>
<i>Contemporary International Relations</i>	1981	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations	330
<i>China International Studies</i>	2005	China Institute of International Studies	265
<i>China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies</i>	2015	Shanghai Institute for International Studies	87
<i>The Chinese Journal of International Politics</i>	2006	Tsinghua University; Oxford University	80
<b>Total</b>			<b>762</b>

**Figure 2.** Periodicals and number of articles included in the data survey.

by Chinese institutions in different languages, I hope to highlight potential differing priorities in the internal debate among Chinese-speaking scholars and the Anglophone periodicals that are directed at international audiences.

The purpose of bibliometric studies is to measure a discipline through published research, whether using journals, textbooks or curricula (Kristensen, 2015, p.213). In the present survey, I focus on the articles' theoretical framework in order to map the landscape of IR in China. The approach is inspired by Peter M. Kristensen's bibliometric study of IR in rising powers (2015) and Qin Yaqing's stocktaking measure (2011a), but will differ in certain key ways. By looking at the entire production of IR articles, I aim to discover how large a proportion theory innovation occupies. By measuring the proportion of IR theory in general, and then focusing on research related to the quest of developing *Chinese* IR theory, I get an empirical foundation upon which to assess whether Chinese IR theory is challenging mainstream IR theory in China. The surveyed Sinophone publications are some of the most cited and influential IR publications according the Chinese Academy of Social Science (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Evaluation Center 2014). In addition, I have included all available Anglophone publications. It is possible to select publications with a larger representation of theory-oriented articles, but this survey aims to discover the amount of theory production in the *most influential* periodicals.

Through the coding of the articles, I first determine whether the article is mainly analytical or if it seeks to break new ground in theory innovation. This categorisation was achieved through selective reading with a focus on the abstract, theory and conclusions of each article. If a clear source of theory is discernible, I note the source. Here I categorise theories into three main groups: a *Chinese paradigm* (including keywords such as Chinese School, Confucianism, dynastic sources, Maoism, pre-Qin sources, socialism with

Chinese characteristics, *tianxia* and the tributary system); *mainstream theories* (all subcategories of constructivism, liberalism and realism); and *other theories* (critical IR theory, the English School, feminism, Marxism, post-colonial IR theory and security studies). All articles were accessed through the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database.

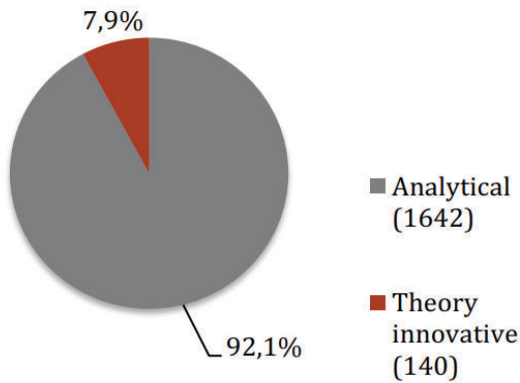
As Figure 3 shows, the vast majority of the articles are analytical in nature and do not refer to any specific IR theory tradition. These articles might implicitly be influenced by certain assumptions derived from specific strains of IR theory, but they do not contribute anything in the way of theory innovation. This is likely due to the prominence in the survey of periodicals published by think tanks. China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, one of the oldest and most prestigious think tanks in China, publishes both in Chinese and English with the latter mostly containing selected translations of the former. In general the articles published by think tanks show less interest in theory, use fewer footnotes, and mainly publish foreign policy analyses and area studies. These articles lack discernible theoretical foundation and, far from innovate new theory. Instead, there is a clear concentration of theoretically innovative articles in two periodicals: the Sinophone *World Economics and Politics* and the Anglophone *Chinese Journal of International Politics*.

As highlighted in Figure 4, although the Chinese paradigm is comparable in size to 'other theories', and the mainstream theories dominate. This suggests that the hegemonic position of mainstream IR theory in the Chinese IR community remains overall secure. Nonetheless, the Sinophone sample contains the largest percentage of content classified as belonging to the 'Chinese paradigm'.

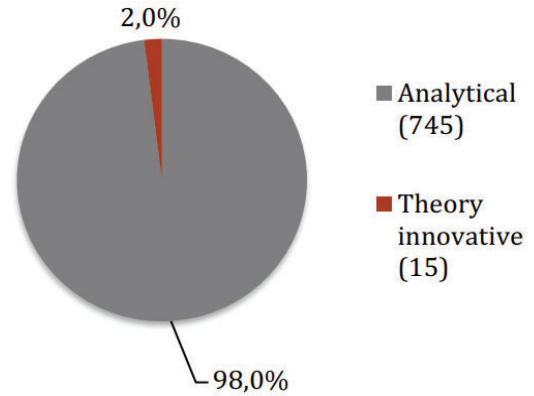
### **Analysis and Discussion**

Commenting on the nature of a stratified system, Amitav Acharya writes that, "dominance like hegemony, is sustained by coercion and consent, but consent may be the more important element"

### Sinophone publications: Orientation



### Anglophone publications: Orientation

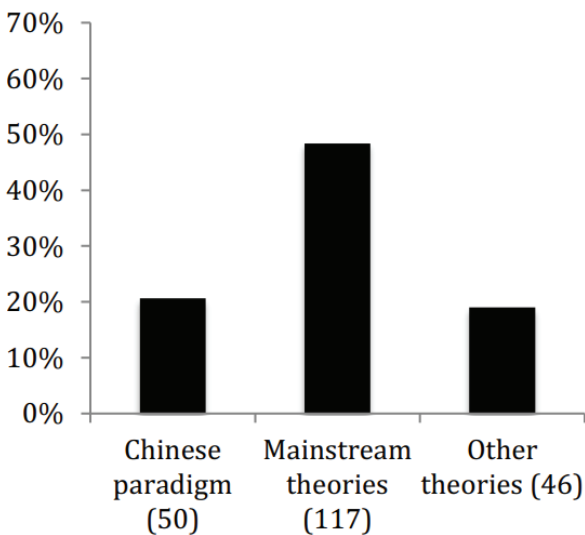


**Figure 3.** Orientation of content.

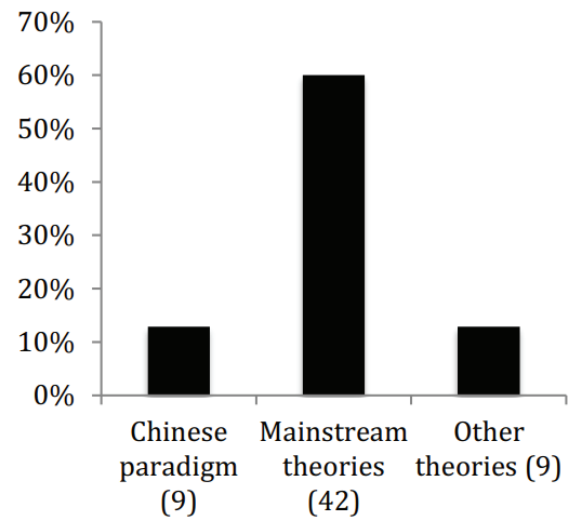
(Acharya, 2014, p.25). The prestige attributed to joining the club of the core, might explain why the Chinese IR community is so focused on the US community. Institutionally the Chinese IR community also retains strong bonds with its US counterpart through PhD scholarships and research foundations (Kristensen, 2015, p.238). So, what accounts for a Chinese paradigm emerging in spite of mainstream IR theories dominance? Apart from joining others

in specialising in the US-dominated mainstream theory, making new theory is another way to be recognised by the *Western gaze*. As Qin Yaqing puts it, “In reality, US IR theory has consistently held a leading position in the world, and US theoretical research over the last 20 years or so has created a powerful tradition – the mainstream theories of IR. It is difficult to become a part of mainstream IR theory *without* getting approved by US academic

### Sinophone publications



### Anglophone publications



**Figure 4.** Clear sources of theory.



circles” (emphasis added – Qin, 2012, p.16). Coining a new school that is not explicitly critical towards existing theories and does not purport to threaten the privileged position of Western IR theory represents another way of carving out a spot within the stratified structure of the academy. However, by taking Robert Cox’ (1981) maxim that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” to heart without critical evaluation, the sanctioned sources of Chinese IR theory run the risk of reproducing tropes that are also found in Western-centric IR theory.

#### *Cultural exceptionalism*

The sanctioned Chinese theories have been criticised for flirting with cultural exceptionalism. Zhao Tingyang’s *tianxia* concept has been severely attacked, in the words of one reviewer, for “distorting [the past] in order to advance an equally distorted political agenda” (Dreyer, 2015, p.1031). Beyond charges against the theory as politically biased, Hun Joon Kim points out that a metanarrative of Hegelian dialectics is still at work: “[A]ll that is good and desirable – order, legitimacy, voluntary submission – are clustered within the Chinese traditional system, and what is bad and undesirable – anarchy, disorder, war – are inherent in the Westphalia system” (Kim, 2016, p.74). A world dominated by China, or at least by Chinese principles, comes to represent a superior scenario to that of a Hobbesian world of nation states. In the same way, Yan Xuetong also stops short of putting his theory in any critical context, but sees China as being the natural heir to a system dominated by great states and empires. What makes China different from former dominating powers is the potential for following the lessons from ancient philosophy and becoming an ultra-moral power. However, the claim of moral superiority has, as some scholars point out (Hui 2012; Cunningham-Cross and Callahan, 2011), also been a staple of former empires, whether it was referred to as the *white man’s burden* or a *civilising mission*.

#### *Representational dilemmas*

A problem of representation also becomes clear by mainly identifying a *Chinese School* of IR with three scholars. All of them are male, ethnically Han Chinese and working at elite institutions in Beijing. Furthermore, they all take departure in ancient Chinese, mainly Confucian, philosophy. As a mirror image of the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci’s mistaken assumptions of religion in China as dominated by a monolithic Confucianism towering over Buddhism and Daoism (Chen, 2015), a label like a *Chinese School* also serves as a catch-all phrase to collapse nuances into one impossibly broad concept. Limiting a Chinese School to sanctioned sources prematurely excludes other potential sources such as those from China’s own cultural periphery: the Daoist feminism of L.H.M Ling (Ling, 2014), perspectives from Taiwan (Shih, 2017; Chen, 2011) or possible crosspollination from other social science fields such as the Chinese New Left (Weber 2014). Lastly, there is a total erasure of non-Han perspectives despite large parts of Chinese history being dominated by nomad people – the Khitans, Xiongnu, Tibetans, Turkish, Mongols, and Manchus to name a few. Instead, Chinese culture is portrayed in an idealised, Confucian, Han-dominated form.

#### *Historical limitations*

Apart from the erasure of non-Han history, the Chinese School also excludes more recent history. Even though Qin Yaqing includes revolutionary history in the development of IR in China (Qin, 2011a, p.455), none of the sanctioned sources really make use of Chinese socialism or Maoism. An explanation might be a revolt against the ideological straitjackets of previous decades. One scholar’s evaluation of the previous decades is that, “Before the 1980s no real IR theory was taught in China. The so-called theory of international politics before then was just interpretations of the viewpoints of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong” (Song, 2001, p.63). The political socialist thinkers have largely “been pushed to the margins

of IR” (Wang and Buzan, 2014, p.16). Marxist theory is now often categorised as *pre-theory* (Hu, 2016; Wang and Buzan 2014; Qin 2011b). However, there might be a case for looking to recent intellectual, political thinkers to enrich a Chinese IR. As Daniel Vukovich argues, “[I]f postcolonial studies can read, say, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire as inspirational historical figures, it is high time it did the same with Chinese and other Asian voices, from Hu Sheng or Mao himself to Ho Chi Minh” (Vukovich, 2017, p.10). As an example, Mao was influenced by Chinese tradition but had an outspokenly international outlook – drawing on Chinese tradition, hybridising theories and recognising the role of subalterns in history and politics (Dirlik, 2014). Overcoming cultural essentialism, Mao has been instrumental in the ‘sinicisation of Marxism’ making it an at once distinctly Chinese and Marxist product. Furthermore, Mao structured his criticism of imperialism from a specific Chinese vantage point (Deckers, 1996). As an intellectual figure, Mao might still contribute to develop a Chinese take on critical and postcolonial IR theory.

### Conclusion

The international IR community remains Western-centric whether viewed from an institutional or an ideational perspective. For all the debate about a Chinese School of IR theory, this paper shows that Western mainstream IR theory continues to dominate within China. Striving for global IR is an exciting and worthwhile project, but more problems than possibilities arise from forming national schools that are defined in exclusive terms. Despite its goal of being seen as a wholly indigenous movement, the Chinese School of IR does not exist in a vacuum. Non-Chinese scholars initiated the research project that sparked Qin Yaqing’s research (Acharya and Buzan, 2007), just as several non-Chinese scholars seek to develop *tianxia* theory using the case of US hegemony (Babones, 2017; Khong, 2013). The Chinese School also does not exist as a purely intellectual pursuit removed

from domestic political interests (Xie, 2011). It is influenced by the drive of younger scholars to gain recognition globally (Kristensen 2015, p.243) and by prominent scholars, who wish to carve out a spot in the stratified international IR structure. As a result, the sanctioned Chinese theories almost seem to reproduce mainstream IR theory only with Chinese characteristics such as the great power politics of moral realism (realism), the hyper-institutionalism of *tianxia* (liberalism) and Qin Yaqing’s subjective-focused relationalism (constructivism). This is the consequence of joining a stratified system on its own terms. The social process of achieving recognition delineates what constitutes Chinese IR theory and reproduces the system by unavoidably leaving non-sanctioned theories on the fringes. As Kristensen points out, *theory speak* from non-Western IR scholars does not deliver the radical difference usually expected from scholars based in a different context. There are no “‘third world radicals’ or indigenous theorists in mainstream journals, rather it often looks like ‘social science socialised’ disciplined by a mainstream discipline” (Kristensen, 2015, p.236). If the discipline truly wants to let *a thousand flowers bloom and a hundred schools contend*, it might be beneficial to look beyond the national school narrative and work to foster new connections between peripheral actors within the stratified system.

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**Thøger Kersting Christensen** has a Master degree in International Relations from Yenching Academy, Peking University and a Bachelor’s degree from University of Copenhagen. His field of interests are international relations and postcolonialism.

**Email:** [Thoeger.christensen@gmail.com](mailto:Thoeger.christensen@gmail.com)

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