



# Theorising Chinese International Relations and the Rise of China: A Preliminary Investigation<sup>1</sup>

## *Teorizando las Relaciones Internacionales y el ascenso de China: una investigación preliminar*

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**Abstract:** This paper critically analyses the case study of Chinese international relations theory through the lens of a non-Western International relations theoretical framework. There should be an attempt to democratise the existing international relations discipline because societal interactions among the countries across the globe cannot be judged by the yardstick of Western experiences. Non-Western international relations theories can be also generated under the post-positivist methodological framework, as 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<sup>3</sup>.

**Key words:** International Relations Theory - Tribute System – Confucian Model of Governance – World Order

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza críticamente la teoría china de las relaciones internacionales, como estudio de caso, desde la perspectiva del marco teórico de las relaciones internacionales no occidentales. Debe haber un intento de democratizar la disciplina existente de las relaciones internacionales ya que las interacciones sociales entre los países del globo no pueden ser juzgadas desde la perspectiva de las experiencias occidentales. Las teorías de las relaciones internacionales no occidentales también pueden ser generadas dentro del marco metodológico post-positivista ya que es igualmente importante incluir las voces y experiencias localizadas de los países asiáticos, africanos y latinoamericanos a partir de la reactivación de sus tradiciones históricas locales y sus filosofías antiguas, la perspectiva sociológica y la dimensión ontológica, epistemológica y axiológica de las teorías de las relaciones internacionales.

**Palabras Claves:** Teoría de las Relaciones Internacionales - Sistema de tributo – modelo confuciano de gobernanza – orden mundial

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## 1. Introduction

The rise of China and its integration to the global community are two of the most important phenomena in the post Cold war era. Although there are several studies from the Western international relations theories, the basic problem lies on the existing Western international relations theories (IRT), which were primarily based on the geo-political, geo-cultural, and historical experiences of European modern nation-states. Hence they are not sufficient to explain the international affairs of civilisation states like China, India and Iran, among others. It can also be claimed that the understanding of the rise of China depends on the kind of international relations theoretical framework employed. In fact, there are various debates on the western form of democracy and the developmental trajectory of China. This study, however, is an attempt to examine the nature and implications of theorising Chinese international relations and explaining the Chinese foreign policy decision making process.

Initially, Chinese International Relations (IR) were controlled by the Chinese Communist party, especially during the Maoist era (1949-76). Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought was the official guiding force in dealing with other countries. But only after the Fourteenth Party Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1992, did Deng Xiaoping's 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' become the guiding ideology, where special attention was given in order to establish IR as an academic discipline for theoretical and empirical research. As a result, the 'National Association of History of International Relations' (NAHIR) was set up in 1980, changing its name 1999 into 'China National Association for International Studies' (CNAIS) on account of its wide coverage and clear objectives. Over the years, China as a civilisation state started realising that there was a need to develop its own Chinese international relations theories (IRT). For Chinese IR scholars, Chinese IRT should be rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy and Western theoretical achievements, as we see in the case of Western IRT.<sup>4</sup> Now we see the dialogues between different Chinese schools as well as a dialogue between Chinese schools and western IRT. This ultimately can give birth to the possibility of Chinese international relations theory under the non-Western international relations perspective, which will help to pluralise the epistemological bases of Western international relations theory by adding rich and diverse ontological assumptions. Here, one can argue that the local traditions of such civilization states are going to help in developing a more inclusive, democratic, and progressive methodology for theorising international relations.

## 2. Phases in Chinese IR Theories

Since we have already discussed the institutional building for the establishment of IR as an academic discipline in China, let us now have a closer look at the different phases involved in this process in this section. With reference to Professor Qin Yaqing, who argues that the development of IR as an academic discipline has taken place in three phases in China, namely: the pre-theory phase (1978-90), the theory-learning phase (1991-

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<sup>4</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2009), "Development of International Relations Theory in China", *International Studies*, Delhi, v.46, No.2, pp. 185-201.

2000) and the theory-innovation phase (2007 till today).<sup>5</sup> In the pre-theory phase (1978-90), both Marxism and Leninism were dominant, but no conscious attempt was made to build a theoretical paradigm. This was the period when Mao Zedong developed his 'Three World Theory'.<sup>6</sup> Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought were the guiding principle using dialectic materialism as a tool to gauge the contradictions in international affairs. How come Marxism as a theory is not considered to be pragmatic or realistic? Why can we not develop a theoretical paradigm under the existing Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thoughts?

Under the theory-learning phase (1991-2000), dominant western IRT like liberalism and realism became the guiding force among the Chinese IR communities for explaining Chinese foreign policy's decision-making processes. After the fourteenth party congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1992, special attention was paid to establish IR under Deng Xiaoping's Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for theoretical and empirical research. Attempts were made to develop 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'.<sup>7</sup> The focus of IR in China has somewhat shifted from classical mainstream IR theories to the English School of IR in particular.<sup>8</sup> These were the times when CPC was trying to learn from the dominant western IRT, but Chinese IR scholars were really looking for alternative narratives to explain Chinese foreign policy, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident. Actually, this phase compelled Chinese IR scholars to creatively work on existing dominant western IRT and Chinese philosophy together.

After the theory-learning phase, the deepening stage (2001-07) developed an interest in constructivism, which coincided with the debate on the 'peaceful rise of China' under the Chinese philosophy of *yi jing* or *I Ching*, which implies that identity and behaviour are changeable. Also, Chinese IR scholars realised that IR theories were not only a tool for interpretation of foreign policy but also a means to understand the complexities of international politics.<sup>9</sup> There is no doubt about this being the phase when Chinese IR scholars learned western methodology and analytical frameworks, but they tried to derive the ontological essence from the ancient Chinese philosophy in order to explain the integration of Chinese economy into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001.

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<sup>5</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2009), "Development of International Relations Theory in China", *International Studies*, Delhi, v.46, No.2, pp. 185-201.

<sup>6</sup> Three World Theory consists of the US and the USSR as first world; the second world consists of the US and Western allies, on the one side, and the USSR and Eastern European allies, on the other side; and the third world includes Asian, African and Latin American countries.

<sup>7</sup> "Three Represents" is referred to as a political thought in the party documents, where the Chinese communist party was expected to represent the advanced social productive forces, advanced culture and representing people's interests.

<sup>8</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2009), "Development of International Relations Theory in China", *International Studies*, Delhi, v.46, No.2, pp. 185-201.

<sup>9</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2009), "Development of International Relations Theory in China", *International Studies*, Delhi, v.46, No.2, pp. 185-201.

In the theory innovation phase (2007 till today), the focus is more on ‘how to build Chinese IR theory’ than on ‘whether to develop Chinese IR theory’, where - how to - questions marked the beginning of theory innovation phase. 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 placed on ‘harmonious world’ and ‘harmonious society’, which cannot be achieved without peaceful development. One can see clearly that Jiang Zemin’s emphasis was on building a ‘well off society’ by 2020 through maintaining a high growth rate, but Hu Jintao’s stress was on balanced and sustainable economic development. Moreover, the interest in Constructivism coincided with the official debate on a peaceful rise of China, which led to redefine both China’s national interests and Chinese strategy for peaceful development in the world.<sup>10</sup> After the Eighteenth Party Congress of Chinese Communist Party (CPC) in 2012, President Xi Jinping talked about the ‘Chinese Dream’ and the ‘Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’. Internally, he stressed more the building of a well-off society by eradicating poverty for around 50 million people under the supply side reform of the Chinese economy by 2020. Externally, he talked about the positive roles of the BRI by connecting Europe with Asia and reviving the ancient silk routes. Now, there are talks about the possible inclusion of west-Asian or Middle Eastern, Latin American and African countries in China’s BRI too. The establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRICS New Development Bank, the hosting of G-20 summit in Hangzhou and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s speech in the World Economic Forum this year, where he highlighted the benefits of globalization, as well as China’s leadership role in Paris Climate Deal 2016 for building an inclusive, equitable and just world economic order cannot be ignored. Hence, there is clearly a shift in Chinese foreign policy from Deng Xiaoping’s 24 characters strategy, which constitutes ‘keeping a low profile and bide for your time’, to Xi Jinping’s the global leadership role in geo-political and geo-economic affairs.

### 3. Sinicization of the IR Theories Debate

This section deals with the development trajectories of Chinese International relations, where prominent Chinese scholars like Yan Xuetong, Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing are constantly pressing for the need of either a ‘Chinese school’ of International Relations or ‘IR theories with Chinese characteristics’.

Yan Xuetong emphasized the need to first develop theories and then work towards the gradual development of a ‘Chinese school of IR’. He takes into account the traditional thoughts from the ‘spring & autumn period’ and ‘warring states period’ by stressing social scientific methodology and theoretical universalism. His emphasises lies on quantitative methods with the acknowledgement that different questions need different methods of study, including hypothesis testing, causal analysis, objectivity, and verifiability. Therefore, he endorses Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realist concept that international politics is all about hard power and can be understood effectively through ‘level of analysis’ tools. As a result, he puts the analytical perspectives of ‘Mozi and Laozi’ on the level of system,

<sup>10</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2011), “Development of International Relations theory in China: progress through debates”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Oxford, v.11, No.1, pp. 231-257.

those of 'Guanzi and Hanfeizi' on the level of the state, and those of 'Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi' on the level of the individual. His greater emphasis, however, is 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 which led to 'realism with Chinese characteristics'.<sup>11</sup> He is undoubtedly using a scientific quantitative research methodology but, at the same time, he is also trying to use ancient Chinese thoughts to explain the foreign policy decision making process of China. But it would be interesting to see how far his usage of Kenneth Waltz's level of analysis tool will critically analyse the rise of China. Does it really make the use of quantitative methodology compatible with ancient Chinese thoughts and concepts?

Zhao Tingyang argues that the existing world-order is a 'non-world' due to the absence of a transnational governance structure in existing Western inter-state institutions; hence, the various international organizations and regional organizations cannot solve the current issues and affairs of global nature. Under Confucianism, the term *Tianxia* (meaning "all under heaven") has a triple meaning: as the land of the world, as all peoples in the world, and as a world institution. And, the *Tianxia system* emphasizes the unity of the physical world (land), the psychological world (the general heart of the peoples'), and the political world (a world institution). As a result, *Confucian Tianxia Institutions* are world institutions in the real sense, and can therefore be used for establishing a global world and solving global problems in effective ways. The Chinese worldview is also different in the sense that it emphasises political characteristics of a worldview, which favours hierarchy. For him, social factors like ethics, hierarchy and identity, which are shared amongst all people in the world, are key to the *tianxia system*. He also sees the 'Chinese School' as the assertion of cultural sovereignty to protect China's unique way of understanding the world.<sup>12</sup>

His advocacy for a Chinese school comes from the vantage point of culture, where he argues that globalisation is a danger in the process of conceptualising a new world order. He does talk about knowledge as the function of power, but can this school of international relations lead to the emergence of non-Western international relations theories? How is this creation of a Chinese school of International Relations as an academic discipline not a reactionary response against the so-called existing dominant western international relations theories? In fact, one can also argue that knowledge is interdependent, pluralistic, cross-cultural and fluid in nature, but what he is trying to do is to create an epistemology based on the ancient Chinese world order, that is, the *Tianxia* worldview.

Qin Yaqing talks about the combination of Western and Chinese ways of logical reasoning and theory development. Informed by both Chinese and Western thoughts, he has made an effort to conceptualise the core Chinese thought for constructing a theoretical system, and to use Chinese practices to enrich established IR theories. While the core theoretical problematic of American IR theory is hegemonic maintenance; the core theoretical problematic of British IR theory is the formation and development of international

<sup>11</sup> Xuetong, Yan (2008), "Xun Zi's Thought on International Politics and Their Implications", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Oxford, v.2, No.1, pp. 135-165.

<sup>12</sup> Tingyang, Zhao (2009), "A political world philosophy in terms of All-under-Heaven (tian-xia)", *Diogenes*, California, v.56, No.1, pp. 5-18.

society under the European concept of *rationalism*. Here, he explores a 'core theoretical problematic' based on the ancient Chinese thought of *relationalism* to build both informal networking and *relational governance*, which is strongly influenced by Imre Lakatos's hard core-protective belt argument about research programs in research methodology. Furthermore, he elaborates three basic characteristics for developing a distinct Chinese theory, as follows: a) It should be based on Chinese culture, historical traditions, and practical experience. b) It should be universally valid, transcending local traditions and experience. c) Its core assumptions must be distinct from those of other theories.<sup>13</sup>

He focuses more on the development of a Chinese theory under the larger framework of non-Western International Relations theory by using a scientific methodology. He stresses the importance of dialogues between Chinese International Relations scholars and Western International Relations scholars; between existing dominant Western International Relations scholars and non-Western International Relations scholars, and finally among Chinese International Relations scholars. But it would be interesting to see how this process of Chinese International Relations theories can be accommodated under the larger framework of non-Western International Relations theories as non-Western International Relations discourse, which is still in its nascent stage.

#### 4. The East Asian World Order and the Relational Governance Model

It is important to note how the rise of China is going to locate its ancient tributary system worldview in relation to East Asia countries and the other countries of the world, e.g. that the tribute system is not just a division of territories among sovereign modern nation-states. In ancient Chinese thought, history has always been the guiding force to conduct foreign affairs. Therefore, understanding ancient Chinese thoughts on intra-state relationships, i.e. Sino-centrism, is crucial in order to understand the Chinese foreign policy decision making process today. In fact, the East Asian world order was also based on the notions of Chinese centrality and superiority, which were hierarchical and non-egalitarian, similar to Chinese society itself. Terms such as *Tianxia* (all under heaven), *Tianzi* (son of a heaven) and *Zhongguo* (middle kingdom) highlight this fact. Historically, East Asian Order was based on the tribute system language. But one can also analyse these inter-state relations without adhering to these terms in a literal sense, because the main reason behind this language system was western scholar John King Fairbank's interpretation of the Chinese worldview. The tribute system, however, dates back to the traditional Chinese historical source as *chaogong tixi*, and not even the Chinese people had any idea about its conception. In this scenario, one can argue that the East Asian world order needs to be understood in a much broader sense, and that any attempt to apply the Fairbankian notion of tribute system would be insufficient. So an important question arises here: to what extent was the relationship under the tributary system justifiable? It is undeniable that there is a need to develop creative methods for transcending the existing tributary system paradigm in order to make conceptualisations un-

<sup>13</sup> Yaqing, Qin (2010), "International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Oxford, v.3, No.1, pp. 129-153.

der such ancient concepts as *chaogong tixi*. In fact, one can question the purpose of the tributary system, as there was no element of territorial conflict in it.<sup>14</sup>

In order to conceptualise *chaogong tixi*, emphasis is given to looking at Chinese intellectual traditions, which are deeply rooted in their ancient culture. The convergence and divergence of Chinese imagination and Western imagination of the world order in the past and future can be another way to look at it. But can we map the Chinese imagination of world order today? How do we need to apply today's tributary system's concrete material conditions? How can this ancient concept of tribute system be transformed in order to understand Chinese foreign policy decision-making process today?<sup>15</sup>

One possible way is through the idea that the ancient Chinese state was based on Confucius's principle of *datong* (meaning "Universal Great Harmony") with cultural harmony. That is why we see a big influence of these ancient Chinese thoughts on the theme of government policy from the second to the fifth leadership generation in the Chinese communist party. In their government policy, they always strive for peace and broad development. China as a nation-state no longer follows ancient concept like *zhongguo* (meaning "middle kingdom") today, but one can also wonder to what extent the Chinese foreign policy decision-making process is guided by tribute system worldview. For many Chinese scholars, the tribute system is still a relevant concept because China is trying to constantly transform and conceptualise as a learning state in the realm of world politics.<sup>16</sup>

Since the liberation of New China in 1949, one can witness the irrelevance of the tribute system as a sovereign modern nation-state. Another question can also be asked: under the Sino-Soviet rapprochement, was Mao in a position to establish China-centred foreign relations with other countries of the world? In 1971, China established diplomatic relationship with the US; then, China moved more closely to the Western world with the permanent membership to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). In fact, Chinese political culture was also gradually influenced by the norms and political culture of these international organizations and the existing world order after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991. But even today the ancient concept of *Datong* (Universal Great Harmony) and Cultural harmony are guiding cultural forces to protect Chinese sovereignty and national integrity. This shows China's cultural confidence to learn from western cultures without any insecurity. Despite Chinese attempts to avoid great power politics under the tribute system, one can question the relevance of Francis Fukuyama's end of history and last man thesis. China, with its one party rule, is projecting an alternative model of politi-

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<sup>14</sup> Gungwu, Wang (2008), "China and International Order: Some Historical perspectives", in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.) *China and the New International Order*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 21-31.

<sup>15</sup> Gungwu, Wang (2005), "China and Southeast Asia: Changes in Strategic Perceptions", in Ho Khai Leong and Samuel C.Y. Ku (eds.) *China and Southeast Asia: Global Changes and Regional Challenges*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 3-14.

<sup>16</sup> Yongnian, Zheng and Sow Keat Tok (2008), "Intentions on trial: Peaceful Rise and Sino-ASEAN Relations", in Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne (eds.) *China Turns to Multilateralism: Foreign Policy and Regional Security*, New York: Routledge Publications, pp. 175-197.

cal and economic development and the main reason behind this is the ancient Chinese cultural belief in the inevitability of change.<sup>17</sup>

The main reason behind the Chinese cultural belief is change as a dialectical process, which influences both China as a civilisation state and the Western modern nation-state in the course of its rise and integration with the global community. The ancient Chinese concept of *I Ching* or *yi jing* has been the guiding force for this Chinese cultural belief in the 'inevitability of Change' for more than 5,000 years. Moreover, China's integration into the existing world order (i.e. *jiegui*) can be interpreted in many ways: some Chinese scholars believe that Chinese integration has its own benefits and is good for the interests of the global community as a whole. But these Chinese scholars are also determined to use ancient Chinese concepts, such as the tribute system, as a tool to protect New China's national interests. In fact, China has carefully chosen to join the global community in order to obtain benefits from it so as to safeguard the economic interests of their population.<sup>18</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

As Michel Foucault rightly points out, knowledge production is the function of power. One can argue that the existing dominant Western International Relations theories are colonial in nature and thus deny space for the localised traditions and historical experiences from the non-Western world. At present, International Relations scholarship is primarily dominated by North American (known as the 'West') with some European scholars, but as of now European countries have yet to receive their due share in the creation, formation and influence on existing western International Relations theories. There are many countries that make up the western world, but it is primarily North American International Relations theorists who are projected as the sole representatives of the entire European and North American International Relations Scholarship. This raises a concern about the whole task of theorising and establishing the methodological, ontological and epistemological bases of Western International Relations theories; but, at the same time, there is a need to allow for the realisation and formulation of non-Western International Relations theories. There should be an attempt to democratise the existing International Relations as an academic discipline, where the global heritage of International Relations theories can also be derived from the post positivist non-Western International Relations perspectives based on the historical experiences of Asian, African and Latin American countries (known as the 'non-West'). Hence, the societal interactions among these non-Western countries cannot be judged only with the yardstick of North American and European historical experiences. If the 'West' is successful in projecting their International Relations theories as universal and homogenous, then the 'non-West'

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<sup>17</sup> Gungwu, Wang (2008), "China and International Order: Some historical perspectives", in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.) *China and the New International Order*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 21-31.

<sup>18</sup> Gungwu, Wang (2008), "China and International Order: Some historical perspectives", in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds.) *China and the New International Order*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 21-31.



can also create and project their own International Relations theories in order to pluralise the epistemological bases of existing International Relations theories. It is equally important to give proper attention to the alternative histories and different trajectories of socio-political-economic development, as well to apply the traditional philosophies of Asian, African and Latin American countries with the aim of enriching the ontological, epistemological and axiological dimension of existing International Relations theories.

In this context, there is a need to ask how this conceptualisation of Chinese international theories can be realised under a broader framework of non-Western International Relations perspectives. In fact, a non-Western International Relations perspective does not have any approach towards feminism or reflexivism. How are they going to apply a quantitative research methodology, like testable hypotheses and research programme? One should not forget that the generation of any theory has its own context; hence, it is crucial to debate, dialogue and discover the context behind the generation of non-Western International Relations theories from a civilisation state's perspective in general and Chinese International Relations theories under the phenomenon of the rise of China in particular.

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