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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Noesselt, N. (2015). Revisiting the debate on constructing a theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics. *The China Quarterly*, 222, 430-448. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741015000387

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Revisiting the Debate on Constructing a Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics*

Nele Noesselt†

Abstract

After decades of policy learning and adoption of "Western" theories of international politics, the Chinese academic community has (re-)turned to the construction of a "Chinese" theory framework. This article examines the recent academic debates on theory with "Chinese characteristics" and sheds light on their historical and philosophical foundations. It argues that the search for a "Chinese" paradigm of international relations theory is part of China's quest for national identity and global status. As can be concluded from the analysis of these debates, "Chinese" theories of international politics are expected to fulfil two general functions – to safeguard China's national interests and to legitimize the one-party system.

Keywords: foreign policy; Chinese model; Chinese school of international relations; fifth generation of political leaders; legitimation strategies

China's rise to global power status has triggered a debate about the interests and orientations of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in world politics. International China watchers examine continuities and shifts in China's foreign policy to make predictions about China's future international positioning strategy. Whereas one school of thought assumes that conflict between the US, the old power centre, and the currently rising PRC is inevitable, others argue that, owing to increasing global interdependencies, an open conflict is unlikely to occur. The most recent research puzzle concerns the impact on China's foreign policy behaviour of the power transfer to the next generation (2012–13). Some analysts predict a turn to more assertive behaviour and expect confrontations between China and the West to rise.

Almost unnoticed in the Western research literature, Chinese political scientists are concerned with the same research puzzles. On the one hand, they try to define

* For helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, I would like to express my special thanks to Zhang Yongjin, Shih Chih-Yu, Huang Chiung-Chiu, Wang Yiwei and Ren Xiao, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers. I would also like to thank Joanne Phillips for her circumspect copyediting of the final manuscript.

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China's new identity as an international player and its strategic role in global politics. On the other hand, under the label of "constructing a theory with Chinese characteristics" (or even a "Chinese school"), they conceptualize and interpret the international system from a Chinese perspective and develop visionary interpretations of a future world order.

Chinese foreign policy think tanks not only analyse recent changes and development trends in the global system, but they also include perceptions and images of the "self" and the "other" as well as the roles attributed to China by the outside world in their strategic calculations. The debate on developing a "Chinese school" of international relations (IR) thus should not be misread as an abstract theory discussion, but rather as a reflection of current constellations and shifts in global politics and their impact on the PRC. While the IR debate takes place in the socio-philosophical context of "Chinese" social science, it simultaneously mirrors the international China debate and theories of international relations that guide the behaviour of other states vis-à-vis the PRC. In fact, there is not only one but a multitude of debates somehow associated with the "Chinese" paradigm. The following analysis of these inner-Chinese IR discourses sheds light on their epistemological and ontological foundations and proposes a subcategorization of the different discourse elements according to their functional dimension(s) and/or policy relatedness.

Inquiries into the Philosophy of Science and Research Traditions

Two cognitive sources can be said to underlie the current attempts to develop a "Chinese" theory of international relations: Sinicized Marxism[1] and (reinvented) Confucianism.[2] At first glance, this (re)turn to the past – to the early 20th century, when Marxism-Leninism was reformulated into Mao Zedong Thought,[3] or, respectively, to the times of the Hundred Schools in the pre-Qin era, which is seen as the breeding ground for Chinese thinking about "inter-national" relations[4] – appears quite paradoxical given the iconoclasm of the early Maoist period and Chinese scholars' current attempts to establish innovative and independent indigenous research approaches and theories. While Confucianism belongs to the old order that Chinese communism claimed to overcome, Marxism, being imported from the "West," can certainly not be considered as a distinct "Chinese" research tradition.

However, these two "traditions" of knowledge have guided theory as well as policy formulation in China over the last few decades. They have been merged into the concepts of a "(socialist) harmonious society" and a "(socialist) peaceful rise," put forward by the Hu–Wen administration.[5] Nonetheless,

1 Cheng and Guo 2012; Wang, Cungang 2009; 2011.
2 Wang, Rihua 2011.
3 Schram 1989.
4 Chan 1999; Ye 2003; Xu, Jielin 2004.
5 Yu, Jianrong 2006.

incompatibilities between the materialist legacy of Marxism and the more philosophical legacy of pre-Qin state philosophy still persist – as the twists and turns in Chinese foreign policy illustrate. It goes without saying that any analysis of the "Chinese school" debate must begin by considering the ideational backbones of the current debates among China's political and academic elites.

Re-Marx: theory innovation for the 21st century

Even today, "Marxist" terminology and philosophy is still omnipresent in Chinese IR debates. Following the modernization of IR research in China during the 1980s – when decisions on the reform of the education system were implemented, milestones of Anglo-American IR studies were translated into Chinese and the Chinese IR community generally took "Western" (mainly US-born) methods and theories as their universal standard[6] – Marxist IR approaches were reduced to a side phenomenon in modern IR research, but they never completely vanished from the scene. Official diplomatic and political discourse continues to use foreign policy terminology inherited from Maoist times, which is deeply inspired by Marxist epistemology. Consequently, academic papers investigating recent developments and the main orientations of Chinese politics integrate these official terms of Chinese-style Marxism – such as "contradictions" (*maodun* 矛盾) or the "characteristics of the era" (*shidai tezheng* 时代特征) – into their analyses.[7]

Furthermore, as the majority of people working in universities or think tanks in the 1980s and 1990s had been socialized in Maoist times and were trained along the lines of Marxist philosophy, the reception of "Western" IR research did not immediately result in a substitution of the general research frames used for the analysis of world politics.[8] Even though the younger generation of Chinese IR scholars now often looks at the world through neo-realist glasses, their research is at the same time deeply influenced by the remnants of Maoist-Marxist concepts. Apart from terminology, Marxist IR approaches provide a certain view of world politics that engages in the critique of hegemony and inequalities of global power contributions, which explains the overall tendency of Chinese articles to condemn US hegemony and to vote for a "democratization of international relations."[9]

Bearing this in mind, the fact that a subject search for "Marxist IR" (*Makesizhuyi guoji guanxi lilun* 马克思主义国际关系理论) on the China Academic Journals database in May 2014 led to only 80 articles should not be interpreted as a victory for "Western" IR frames over Maoist-Marxist ones.[10] Articles on world politics and Chinese foreign relations are quite often just descriptive assessments that do not mention theory at all.

6 Yu, Zhengliang, and Chen 1999; Ni and Xu 1997, 11.
7 Chen 2012, 136–38.
8 For an overview of the characteristics of the different generations of Chinese IR scholars, see Fang 2005.
9 Li, Bin 2005.
10 Database available at: http://oversea.cnki.net/kns55/brief/result.aspx?dbPrefix=CJFD.

Moreover, even in the 21st century, Marxism-Leninism, together with Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the theory of the "three representations" and the concept of scientific development, continues to be a pillar of the Chinese party-state; all of these concepts have been written into the Party's official constitution. Marxism functions as an official state doctrine and as a formative element of the system's identity as a socialist (one-party) state. A document on the future of social sciences in China issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 2004 defines Marxism as an indispensable element of any innovative reformulation of IR theory by Chinese academia.[11] In 2004, in order to support the reactivation of Marxism and to use it as the starting point for a distinct "Chinese" theory formulation, Hu Jintao 胡锦涛 launched a huge Marx project that sponsors research on Marxist theory for the 21st century.[12] Chinese scholars involved in this project are currently working on historiographical assessments of the evolution of Marxism abroad and in China, and have to fulfil the challenging task of coining a Marxist theory that is based on China's past and more recent experiences. Along this line, the "China model," i.e. the hybrid mixture of plan and market under one-party rule, is identified as part of "Marxist" research.[13]

Marxism as such is definitely not a "Chinese" theory, but if it is adapted to the constellations in China (as done by Mao Zedong), it can at least be seen as an amalgam of different ontological and epistemological traditions that can move beyond the existing IR theory frames and could thus provide the starting point for a "Chinese school."[14] However, as Marxism itself falls under the category of "Western" theories, the argument that China's theory innovation presents an alternative to the "West" obviously lacks solid causal foundations.

Archaeological excavations

In addition to Maoist-Marxist epistemology and the research agenda derived therefrom (the focus on the objective laws of world development, historical and dialectical materialism, as well as the unity of opposites), in 2005, Qin Yaqing 秦亚青, one of the key proponents of the Chinese discourse to construct a "Chinese school," postulated that China's IR contribution should consist in theorizing the "peaceful rise" of a socialist country to global power.[15] The theoretical assumptions derived from China's "socialist" experiences could, so the argument goes, then serve as an orientation for other (non-democratic/non-capitalist) emerging powers. Qin's reflections are written as a counter-story to neo-realist scenarios of an inevitable conflict between old and new power centres as well as between different civilizations.[16]

11 Central Committee 2004.
12 Chen 2012, 136.
13 Su 2012.
14 Wang, Cungang 2009, 8.
15 Qin 2005.
16 On the "clash of civilizations," see Huntington 1996.

In recent post-colonial assessments of IR theorizing beyond the West, the "harmonious world" and the "peaceful rise" have been presented as potential "Chinese" contributions to IR theory. The theoretical validity of these concepts, however, is widely contested in, as well as outside, China. Both notions were first introduced by China's political leaders and subsequently developed by academic society – only selected advisers from universities and think tanks were involved in the shaping of these concepts.[17] As a consequence, in order to step out of the assumed political predominance of politics over political research, some scholars involved in the "Chinese" IR debate(s) have turned from policy-linked Maoist-Marxist frames towards ancient Chinese philosophy instead. Their main points of reference are the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) and the Warring States period (475–221 BC), during which several small Chinese kingdoms contended for leadership and hegemony. The interactions between those kingdoms (which were unified under the victorious Qin emperor in 221 BC) and the related writings of the political advisors and state philosophers of the time are seen as an historic example of "inter-national" relations in a regional context far from the West.[18]

While the majority of related analyses is limited to an historical reconstruction of structures and principles of interaction in ancient times, the "Tsinghua group," headed by Yan Xuetong 阎学通, looks at ancient Chinese philosophical texts to excavate guiding strategies for political action. What they find, however, is not a theory of international politics but rather a catalogue of "correct" ways of governing the country (and the world). Yan Xuetong has developed a threefold typology of political rule: "true kingship" (*wang* 王 or *wangdao* 王道) leads to a stable international order; "hegemony" (*ba* 霸) establishes hierarchies and asymmetries, and the international order oscillates between stability (relations between the hegemon and its allies) and chaos (confrontation between the hegemon and its opponents); and "tyranny" (*qiang* 强) will inevitably lead to disaster and decline.[19] "True kingship," also labelled "humane authority," is the only way to maintain a long-lasting and stable order. This resonates with the PRC's symbolic commitment to benevolence, peace and cooperation, as summarized under the label of "great power" (*daguo* 大国), which is held up as a Chinese alternative to the old-style idea of expansion-based empire (*diguo* 帝国).

The claim that China's international engagement does not follow the path of military struggle for hegemony and zero-sum power competition also underlies the current reinvention of the *tianxia* 天下. The meanings ascribed to the *tianxia*

17 Zheng Bijian (Central Party School) is said to have been the key architect of the idea of a "peaceful rise," which he first used in a speech at the Bo'ao Forum in 2003 (Zheng 2003). It became officially presented as a new foreign policy doctrine by Wen Jiabao in his speech at Harvard University in December 2003. The "harmonious world" was introduced by Hu Jintao at the 60th anniversary of the founding of the UN in September 2005. Chinese scholars, however, have pointed out that the notion had been tested before in various bilateral diplomatic meetings. See Zhao, Kejin, and Ni 2007, 253.

18 Chan 1999; Ye 2003; Xu, Jielin 2004.

19 Yan 2008, 137.

exemplify the Chinese imagination of what an "empire" should be about. *Tianxia* stands for: "the whole country," which, from a Western perspective, could be labelled "China" or "Chinese empire"; "the whole world," which did not represent the world in the geographical sense, but illustrated the geo-cultural construction of the world as the sum of territories and regions that had symbolically accepted the authority of the Chinese emperor; or "Chinese civilization," as opposed to the illiterate "barbarian" tribes across the four oceans that, in Chinese imaginations, surrounded Chinese territory.[20]

Translated into modern IR terminology, the notion of *tianxia* combines ideas about the identities and roles of the main actors in the international system with those of an idealized world order. While reflections on the *tianxia* have occupied Chinese historians and philosophers over the past centuries, its current reinvention and adaptation to the constellations of the 21st century have been inspired by the writings of Zhao Tingyang 赵汀阳. Contributing to the general bashing of the discursive hegemony of "Western" IR, Zhao identifies the Westphalian system as a degenerated order linked with negative attributes: the international system is anarchic; nation states compete against each other in zero-sum games; and wars and conflicts result from the absence of an ethical code of conduct.[21] In contrast to this dark scenario, he depicts the *tianxia* as a hierarchical but stable alternative blueprint for the 21st century.[22] And even though, in political practice, the Westphalian concept of the sovereign nation state has had a lasting effect on China's positioning in international politics, that China views itself as a "civilizational state," displaying the legacy of China's self-image as the centre of the *tianxia*, is still discernible in contemporary Chinese writings on Chinese foreign affairs and international politics. According to Zhang Weiwei, a "civilizational state," in contrast to a nation state, does not rely on military-based expansion. It does not copy any development model belonging to another state or empire, and the guidelines of its strategic behaviour are derived from its own – and distinct – cultural traditions and historical patterns.[23]

This utopian construction of the world and China from a Chinese culture-based perspective is not just a phenomenon of the 21st century, but has its historic roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when China's intellectual elites struggled to rebuild China's territorial integrity and its national sovereignty. Among these literati scholars was Kang Youwei 康有为, who, in his

20 See the entries in the encyclopaedic dictionaries *Hanyu da cidian* (Luo Zhufeng (ed.). 1990) and *Zhongguo da baike quanshu* (Hu Qiaomu (ed.). 1991).

21 Zhao, Tingyang 2005.

22 Zhao, Tingyang 2003. Zhao's critics remark that this argument – i.e. the failure of the "Western" concept of global order and the moral superiority of the *tianxia* – lacks empirical foundation and applies a dual standard to the evaluation of "Western" and "Chinese" IR concepts. See Zhou, Fangyin 2008; Xu, Jianxin 2007, 137. His supporters, however, try to integrate Zhao's *tianxia* with global IR theorizing. They argue that Zhao's writings, which upgrade the *tianxia* from a regional institutional framework to an abstract global model, overcome the shortcomings of theory approaches that continue to rely on a state-centric construction of the international order. See Liu and Wang 2011.

23 Zhang, Weiwei 2012.

Datongshu 大同书 (*Book of Great Unity*), lay down the draft for a utopian world community without any frontiers or territories – a global community beyond the nation state, similar to a reformulation of the *tianxia*, this time not as a local, but as a global order.[24]

Taking into account the historical circumstances under which Kang Youwei, Zhao Tingyang and Zhang Weiwei propagate(d) their visionary models of a world order derived from Chinese philosophy, it is more than obvious that, in all these cases, these utopian models are part of an ongoing and unfinished state-building process. The *Datongshu* was written in the shadow of the national humiliation by external forces and the growing internal dispute over which was the right path to modernize China. Only after the abolition of the "unequal treaties," forced upon the Chinese empire during the Opium Wars, did China regain its status as a sovereign state. But, the quest to regain its old position of power continues and determines China's politics to date. The debate about a "Chinese" IR theory thus finally reveals itself as a continuation of the late imperial intellectual debates on self-strengthening and reform.[25] Furthermore, it is at the same time also a variation of the "China model" debate.[26] The "China model" illustrates the PRC's claim to pursue an autochthonous development path in domestic politics – and as such corresponds with the debate on constructing a "Chinese" paradigm for international relations and world politics.

The Functional Dimensions of Theory Building

The above-sketched reflections on the functions of IR theorizing in China lead one to the question of how the term "theory" (*lilun* 理论) itself is understood among China's epistemic communities. Furthermore, one has to differentiate clearly between the meanings ascribed to IR theory in general and the particular ones attributed to Chinese IR by outside observers, as well as those developed and used in the inner-Chinese debates.

24 The ideational background of his utopian imagination is to be found in the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), which contains a whole chapter on the ideal order of society (*liyun*). The passage describes the decline of the old order and the subsequent transition from the era of the *datong* (great unity) to the *xiaokang* (well-off) society. The *Gongyang* commentary on the *Liji*, on which Kang Youwei bases his utopia, argues that the development from *datong* to *xiaokang* is reversible. The return to the paradise lost, the old order, has always been, and continues to be, a guiding principle in Chinese state philosophy. One of the most prominent examples comes from Sun Yatsen, the founding father of the Chinese Republic, who referred to the passage *tianxia wei gong* (meaning that all under heaven form a communality) from the *Liji* to illustrate his vision of China's future state constitution. See Bell 2008, 24.

25 In the late imperial era, China underwent a forced transformation and had to adapt to a "new" global environment. The changes in the international system since 2007–08, catalysed by the global financial crisis, pose a similar challenge that requires China's elites to rethink the country's foreign strategy and to reformulate its international role conceptions.

26 Chinese scholars trace the "China model" back to the writings of Deng Xiaoping. This term stands for a pragmatic and flexible development approach that integrates market economic principles with the overarching frame of a planned economy, and stands for high-speed economic growth. It is often contrasted with the "Washington consensus," a normative condition-based approach to national development, and is presented as an alternative orientation model for the developing world. See Wang, Yukai 2008; Yu, Keping 2008.

Quite recently, Chinese IR debates have caught the attention of international scholars engaged in a postmodern, post-colonial deconstruction and reconstruction of IR theory building. The assumption is that theory in general serves to analyse past events, to anticipate trends or, in a normative way, to guide or justify political action. However, with regard to "Chinese IR," Acharya and Buzan introduce a wider definition of IR theory that integrates "the harder, positivist, rationalist, materialist and quantitative understandings … and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern [understandings of the theory spectrum]."[27] They also concede that IR might include normative assumptions; even pre-theoretical concepts are viewed as elements of an emerging IR theory framework in Asia. As a working definition, Acharya and Buzan propose labelling any IR concept that is either recognized as a theory by the international academic community or identified as such by its progenitors or, regardless of academic acknowledgement, represents a systematic and abstract approach to IR as a contribution to IR theory.[28] While China's historical theory and practice of international relations have, with only a few exceptions, generally been ignored by the international English-speaking IR community,[29] the recent post-post trend in international IR theory seems to follow the other extreme and takes concepts as theory that, from a critical point of view, do not fulfil the basic requirements to be grouped under the label of "theory" as defined in "general" IR.[30]

In contrast to this all-encompassing definition, Alagappa reduces theory in the Asian context to a normative-constitutive function, which is directly linked to the policy level.[31] According to this understanding, theory does not function as a framework for analysis, but is instead a tool for exerting power in international politics. Alagappa assumes that "theory" in the Asian context "has a predominantly practical orientation with emphasis on understanding and interpreting the world to forge suitable national responses."[32]

If one takes a closer look at Chinese writings on "theory," one soon discovers that there is also no unified definition. Generally, a Marxist understanding of theory, which was imported during the early stages of Sino-Soviet cooperation and ideological proximity, is still discernible in quite a few IR publications. The "official" Chinese (Marxist) understanding of the meaning and function of (IR) theory is that it is a system of concepts and principles that reflects the objective laws of (political) processes. The main function of IR theory is to guide political action.[33] This definition has its roots in the Maoist era. In his essays, "On practice" and "On contradiction," Mao Zedong proposed a recursive interrelation

27 Acharya and Buzan 2007, 291.
28 Ibid., 292.
29 One of the few IR scholars who integrated the Chinese case with the comparative history of international relations in different regional contexts was Martin Wight. See Zhang, Yongjin 2014.
30 For a collection of post-colonial IR approaches that focus on non-Western regions, see Acharya and Buzan 2010; Jones 2006; Shilliam 2011; and Tickner and Wæver 2009.
31 Alagappa 2011, 222.
32 Ibid., 194.
33 Wang, Jisi 1994, 482.

between theory and practice based on dialectical materialism. Any theory has to be deduced from political practice and verified by political practice.[34] "Theory," according to Mao, was not something to be produced by the academic community; rather, it should be formulated by the political leaders. The main aim of these political "theories" was not to explain the world but to realize the socialist world revolution.[35]

In the reform period, IR theories in the Chinese context have continued to serve the dual function of guiding and legitimating political action. Obviously, this understanding of "theory" is different from the definitions commonly agreed upon in the general IR literature. If theory in China has to guide political practice, its main focus has to be on foreign policy, and not on international or global politics in general. Only frameworks applicable in the bi- and multilateral context of international politics are regarded as being worth studying.[36] Contrary to this practical, Marxist-inspired definition of "theory," the more liberal school of Chinese IR scholars affiliated with Fudan University 复旦大学 in Shanghai argues that "theory should serve to promote the forward-looking awareness or predictive power of international affairs and to serve to accumulate knowledge."[37] The field of IR theory research in post-Maoist China has become more fragmented and pluralized, reflecting the educational background of the different groups or networks of scholars. Those educated at US or European universities often tend to rely on the theory frameworks used at their foreign alma mater, while those engaged in theory innovation are noticeably inspired by postmodern, critical IR approaches.

Geeraerts and Men postulate that, in the Chinese political context, the validity of a "theory" is not measured in terms of its explanatory power but rather according to its ideological soundness and its ability to guide political action.[38] With regard to Chinese IR theory during the 1990s, Wang Jisi argued that "ideology" was an essential element of any theory, whereas in the "Western" discourse, ideological attributes were taken as evidence that non-"Western" IR lacks a scientific foundation and should instead be classified as strategy.[39]

While the majority of Chinese IR publications are rather descriptive and seldom operate with an abstract theory framework, articles belonging to the "theory" category are often overview articles of theory debates in the "West." Only 5 per cent of the articles published in Chinese IR journals deal with the formulation of a "Chinese" IR theory, whatever this term might stand for.[40]

In Chinese analyses of international relations theory, narratives such as the "end of history"[41] and the inevitable breakdown of communism, the "clash of

34 Mao 1937.
35 Chan 1997, 59.
36 Ren 2000, 20.
37 Chan 1998, 16.
38 Geeraerts and Men 2001, 252.
39 Wang, Jisi 1994.
40 Qin 2009.
41 Fukuyama 1992.

civilizations"[42] and the paradigm of "democratic peace" are all identified as elements of foreign strategy that help to cement and stabilize the predominant position of the US on the global stage.[43] This clearly shows that "theories," according to the "Chinese" understanding, bear a strategic connotation. If the assumptions were correct that the theory-formulating state generally tends to present its concepts as universally applicable frames and not as part of its national strategic calculations, Chinese publications could thus be expected to group the "Chinese school" debate under the rubric of "theory."

However, a closer look at Chinese academic publications reveals that concepts such as the "peaceful rise" or the "harmonious world" are simultaneously classified both as strategy (*zhanlüe* 战略) and theory (*lilun*) and that these two categories are often used interchangeably. Moreover, quite a few studies by Chinese IR scholars deal with the thoughts (*sixiang* 思想) on international politics of China's political leaders, which they regard as the main sources of "Chinese" IR – although these studies do not develop a systemic set of hypotheses and theoretical assumptions.[44] Some Chinese articles, however, operate with the logical differentiation between diplomatic strategy and IR theory, thus linking strategy to states' foreign relations and not to world politics, which is conceived as a more abstract category.[45]

The reference to "strategy" illustrates that this stream of IR research is still focused on the operational dimension of "theory" – understood as a tool for measuring and predicting developments in China's external environment and for configuring appropriate positioning measures. The mentioning of IR "thought," by contrast, stresses the ideational dimensions of IR theory building in China. The collected writings of China's political leaders on world politics operate with constructions and interpretations of the world that do not necessarily reflect political "reality," but are compatible with the system's ideological underpinnings and justify certain political actions.

Given the plurality of views and methodological approaches prevailing among China's epistemic communities, it would obviously not make sense to reduce the notion of "theory" to one single definition. There are definitely scholars who seek to overcome the perceived parochialism and hegemony of concepts derived from European history by adding frames derived from Chinese history to the ongoing global debate on the reformulation of IR in the post-Cold War period. It remains, however, questionable whether this approach might lead to the creation of a novel and universal IR theory, or will just broaden the historical-empirical repository of IR theorizing.

The main innovative potential of the Chinese IR debate is presumably not the formulation of any completely new analytical understanding or normative

42 Huntington 1996.
43 Hu 2003.
44 Observation based on searches for the combination of "theory," "strategy" and "international relations" on the China Academic Journals database.
45 Yang 2004.

construction of world politics. Chinese scholars who specialize in pre-modern China's history and philosophy of international relations identify many parallels and equivalents to "Western" IR. The greatest point of divergence between "Western" and "Chinese" theory-based IR research is to be found in calculations and projections of China's current and future posture in the global realm. These "theories," however, should not be misread as analytical frames. They develop an idealized image of the world that is favourable to national development interests. In order to avoid being misled by the term "theory," one should consider referring to IR debates in China not as systematic frameworks of analysis, but rather as "world views" that "do not reflect the world … [but] represent it, not only constraining our vision but also enabling us to develop a language of concepts and terms that in turn make it possible to talk intelligibly about IR."[46] A "Chinese" theory of international relations would thus look at the world from a "Chinese" perspective and include strategic calculations. As such, it would not only consist of visionary interpretations of how the world should be organized, but also comprise reflections on the "self" and the "other." Given that the emergence of the search for a "Chinese" IR theory is linked to the launching of the reform programme, one could expect that this debate, rather than formulate an abstract blueprint for international and global interactions, primarily reflects national and domestic concerns.

Chinese IR Theory and Political Action

The remaining tantalizing question is whether the formulation of "Chinese" IR theories can be expected to have any impact on China's foreign behaviour.[47] Analysts of China's strategic culture have argued that China's external actions are inspired by elements of Confucian-Mencian as well as legalist-realist "parabellum" calculations.[48] While Johnston's category of "cultural realism" acknowledges the existence of both traditions in China's security thinking, he identifies parabellum elements as the operational code, and classifies elements of Confucian-Mencian culture as part of the autocommunication among China's political and intellectual elites. Responding to these statements, Feng Huiyun argues that strategic culture is not a static, unchangeable frame, but is highly context-dependent.[49] Feng states that Johnston's selection of Chinese texts (the *Seven Military Classics*[50]) and the time frame chosen (Ming dynasty) lead to results that could not be taken as universal patterns of Chinese strategic culture. According to Feng, Confucian ideas of benevolence, justice and righteousness are still the key determinants of China's foreign politics, although they do not imply

46 Griffiths 2007, 1.
47 For a case-based examination of the relationship between "Chinese" IR theory and Chinese foreign politics, see Wang, Hung-Jen 2013.
48 Johnston 1995.
49 Feng 2007.
50 For an English translation, see Sawyer 1993.

that the political elites will accept actions directed against China that could harm its national sovereignty or territorial integrity.[51]Again, China's rather pragmatic conduct of foreign relations in the post-Maoist period has led many scholars to assume a predominance of "realpolitik" frames in Chinese IR thinking.[52]

The overall question under which this controversy over the identification of the operational code of Chinese foreign policy falls is, once more, whether China possesses a unique political (and strategic) culture *sui generis* or whether it emulates elements of strategic traditions similar to the ones practised (and reflected) by the "Western" world. Chinese scholars engaged in the archaeological excavation of Chinese IR traditions do not care too much about the similarities and dissimilarities between "Chinese" and "Western" political philosophy in general; they are more concerned with ascertaining the predominance of harmony over belligerence in China's tradition-based IR thinking.[53] Partly opposing this approach, Victoria Hui stresses that history, not abstract philosophy, should guide the search for a "Chinese school."[54] This statement, composed as a response to "Chinese" criticism of her comparative monograph on world order in the Chinese and the European historical context,[55] highlights an often overlooked aspect: not all of the texts and research approaches grouped under the label of a "Chinese school" operate on the same level. Studies on the ideational, philosophical traditions of the *tianxia* system or the interactions between the ruler and the ruled do not necessarily depict political reality. Following this line, literature on historical political philosophy might be seen as corresponding to "Western" research on Kant or Rousseau – who are not regarded as architects of any kind of systematic IR theory formulation but instead are seen as representatives of certain philosophical streams that inspired theory building. The reflection on political ideas and philosophy is often rather disjointed from "real" political practice. Theories as analytical frames and strategies, by contrast, are generally derived from concrete historical events (often critical junctures in world politics).

Furthermore, one should distinguish between the theoretical-philosophical narrative of China's foreign relations and the ideational patterns of foreign behaviour and practices of interactions deduced therefrom, and those frames used to calculate the strategic responses of other players in the international system. Foreign policy discourses often stick to ideational paradigms and present a country's foreign policy as legitimate interests. Likewise, studies on China's

51 Ibid.
52 Christensen 1996.
53 Given the movement of ideas and nomothetic assumptions between Asia and Europe and processes of learning, emulation and eclectic indigenization, it would be rather misleading to conceive of both philosophical traditions as insulated sets of norms and values. The Sinification of Marxism and its merging with Legalist, Daoist and Confucian-Mencian philosophy, as practised by contemporary Chinese IR scholars either intentionally or unintentionally, indicates that one has to think of China's strategic culture as a hybrid amalgam that combines different, often even antagonist, streams of thought.
54 Hui 2010; 2012.
55 Hui 2005.

participation in world affairs present its engagement as standing in line with its general moral and ethical foundations. The actions and moves of other players, by contrast, are often described by applying neo-realist frameworks that identify power maximization and national security interests as determinants of the behaviour of other powers in the international system.

If the ideational dimension of the Chinese IR debate is first of all a discursive, legitimating element, one might be tempted to assume a general incompatibility between the country's nomothetic-ethical ideas and its foreign policy conduct. However, as various scholars have pointed out before, China's reluctance to resort to military means could be taken as an indicator, although not final proof, of the predominance of "harmony" over "use of force."[56] Shih Chih-Yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu, who look at China's foreign policy through the analytical glasses of Confucianism, argue that China's external behaviour tends to achieve a "balance of relationships," and not a "balance of power" as realist theories would predict.[57] As they correctly highlight, China's (re)turn to Confucianism should not be misread as a general negation of the use of force, including the right of self-defence. One should not forget that Confucianism is only one of the various ideational streams that shape China's foreign policy in theory and practice. The combination of legalist and Confucian-Mencian ideas enhanced by elements taken from "Western" social science and political philosophy, which function as mind maps for China's elites, results in political practices that, despite their Confucian-Mencian ingredients, can be quite rational and strategic. At the same time, however, this rationalist dimension of Chinese politics should not be misunderstood as leading to a neo-realist practice of power politics.[58] What Shih and Huang label the "power of relationships" stands in line with earlier culture-based psychological explanations of Chinese politics.[59] The balance of relationship approach is based on the hypothesis that states' behaviour in bilateral interactions is not about maximizing power and pursuing national interests. Instead, it assumes that states will agree to make concessions to protect relational security and to reduce uncertainty – observable not only in Chinese foreign policy but likewise applicable, as the authors argue, to the US (whose foreign policy is identified as a combination of balance of power and balance of relationships).[60]

To grasp the different functional dimensions of the "Chinese school" debate, one has to differentiate clearly between the level of foreign policy and world politics. With regard to the former, the "Chinese" debate materializes as ex-post discussion, often including justificatory elements, about foreign policy decision making. If one conceives of IR theory as analytical lenses that help to select

56 Shih and Huang 2012. On philosophy and tradition in Chinese foreign policy, see the 2013 special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Political Science* (17).
57 Shih and Huang 2012.
58 Ibid.
59 Pye 1968; Shih 1990.
60 Shih and Huang 2012, 2.

data and to reduce the complexity of world politics, one could argue that Chinese scholars have already successfully developed their own analytical frames to make sense of the world from a "Chinese" perspective. Whereas neo-realist theories interpret the PRC's border disputes with the Soviet Union, India or Vietnam as an expression of hard-core power politics, Chinese scholars stress the overall focus on harmony and argue that all these actions were undertaken to restore order. The Chinese side argues that Chinese foreign policy remains determined by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and relies on harmony and stability. The maritime expeditions of Ming dynasty China, in contrast to Western colonial powers, did not end up with a military conquest of overseas territories. Again, if one looks at PRC history, the so-called "punitive mission" against Vietnam ended with the withdrawal of Chinese troops behind the old border lines.[61]

With regard to world politics, Chinese scholars have outlined normative incompatibilities between "Chinese" and "Western" views on world order.[62] Given these ideational gaps, these Chinese publications assume that states, even in similar situations, do not act in a similar way. Although most Chinese IR scholars agree that no systematic "Chinese" IR theory has been developed so far, abstract ideas and concepts that have been derived from China's political culture and philosophy more or less directly influence China's behaviour – and so define the way in which Chinese scholars (and the political elites) view the world and perceive the other players involved. The actions taken, however, certainly do not rely on "Confucian-Mencian" ideals but mirror rational strategic cost-benefit calculations.

Conclusion

This article has shown that, in order to make sense of the "Chinese School" debate, one has to differentiate between two functional dimensions of theory/strategy formulation. The academic debate still sticks to meta-theoretical reflections on the possibility of producing a distinct "Chinese" IR theory and discusses its conceptual sources. Even though there is no single unified understanding of theory, many researchers engage in rather abstract research on the history and philosophy of Chinese "international" politics and seek to identify potential add-ons or alternatives to the established "Western" theory frames. The foreign policy debate, also grouped under the "Chinese school" approach, by contrast, has produced a range of "new" IR concepts – which are presented as elements of Chinese ancient thought on order and principles of interactions.

61 Again, others, most likely (external) observers who operate with different analytical lenses, might argue that the official story that China never practised any kind of expansionism is easily disproved by comparing the territory enlarged by the post-Qin dynasties with the one currently claimed by the PRC (which inherits the border lines of the late Qing dynasty that incorporate Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang).

62 Pan 2012.

Given that leading scholars and think tank researchers serve as advisors to the Chinese government on issues of international politics, there are direct linkages between the academic debate(s) and the official political strategy discourse. Theoretical reflections on power distributions and principles of interactions are merged into policy recommendations. Chinese scholars calculate the impact of existing theories on the strategic decisions of China's regional and global neighbours. The "peaceful rise" and the "harmonious world" are coined as "new" frames to present an alternative labelling and interpretation of China's foreign policy that does not subscribe to the current neo-realist "new assertiveness" debate. Furthermore, Chinese scholars contributing to this stream of research reject any theory that would contradict the PRC's claim to pursue an independent development strategy that is different from the "West"[63] – as this would imply a transition towards democracy – and also draw a clear line between the theory and practice of the Chinese "model" and the development strategies of other (failed) socialist systems. By introducing an "independent" IR terminology such as *daguo* and *wangdao*, rooted in the Chinese classics, Chinese scholars implicitly deny the applicability of "Western" concepts (hegemony) and related scenarios (power competition, imperial expansionism) to the Chinese case. These narratives target two audiences: with regard to Chinese society, they consolidate the image of an independent Chinese approach to politics and justify China's development strategy by presenting it as a history- and tradition-based approach. Addressing the international community of states, and especially China's regional neighbours, Chinese IR concepts seek to defuse threat perceptions. Accordingly, these concepts function as elements of soft power building and public diplomacy.[64] However, it remains questionable how far this reference to a Confucian heritage of Chinese politics determines and constrains China's foreign behaviour.

One way to decipher the multiple coexisting "Chinese" strategy and theory approaches is to apply Johnston's distinction between ideational and operational dimensions of Chinese (foreign) strategy. Along this line, the reinvention of Chinese traditions and references to philosophical notions in China's official policy discourse serves domestic purposes. It contributes to national identity building and symbolically stabilizes political rule. The conduct of Chinese foreign policy, however, mainly relies on rational cost-benefit calculations and often operates with assumptions drawn from "Western" IR.

Apart from foreign relations, the "Chinese" IR debate also covers the world order dimension. This includes ideas on ordering principles, power distribution and the overall structure of the world system. The current international system is seen as unfair and unilaterally dominated by the US and its allies – the search for a "Chinese" paradigm of IR theory thus finally reveals itself as part of China's global positioning ambitions.

63 This has also been formulated in Hu Jintao's report to the 18th Party Congress in November 2012.
64 China's soft power approach has been elaborated by Li, Jie 2007 and Yu, Xintian 2008.

While the overall "Chinese" theory debate has remained rather abstract – the 2013 conferences on IR theory research in China stressed the need to develop a "Chinese theory" that might start from China's Confucian-Mencian culture, but failed to come up with systematic theory assumptions[65] – the field of international political economy is where "new" theory (or rather strategy) elements become manifest. Taking the global financial crisis of 2007–08 as a starting point, Chinese IR scholars, especially those who follow a Marxist IR approach, have recently referred to the crisis as empirical evidence of the failures of capitalism and the "Western" approach to global financial governance.[66] China is the most active advocate of a reform of international institutions and global financial governance. Since 2008, China has continuously reiterated its demands through the BRICS joint declarations, G20 meetings and Davos summits. In March 2009, the head of the National Bank of China, Zhou Xiaochuan 周小川, presented a proposal for replacing the US dollar with a new supranational currency unit.[67] Behind these public statements hides a huge controversial debate on theories of international political economy (as a subfield of international relations) and their Sinification as conducted by China's epistemic communities.

The various workshops and conferences on "Chinese" IR held over the last few years have had to fulfil the challenging task of elaborating add-ons that are compatible with China's official foreign strategy but that also pay tribute to China's new status as the world's second largest economy, the number one creditor of the US and a central player in the reform of the architecture of the global financial system. In highly generalized terms, the Chinese debate on international politics and the construction of a theory "with Chinese characteristics" can thus be subdivided into those articles that discuss the current state of international politics and criticize the existing structures, and those that define ways to reformulate China's foreign strategy and to upgrade China's status in world politics. Although both debates are highly heterogeneous, one can assume that at least some elements of these debates will be included in the re-evaluation and, potentially, also in the remodelling of China's strategy under the new fifth generation.

提要: 经过几十年的政策学习和采纳"西方"国际政治理论,中国学术界开始转向建立"中国"的理论框架。本文分析了中国学术界对"有中国特色"的理论的最新论述并揭示了其历史和哲学的根源。本文论证了寻求国际关系理论的"中国"范式是中国追求国家认同和全球地位的一部分。从对中国学术界辩论的分析中可以得出的结论是有中国特色的国际政治理论可以发挥两个作用 - 维护中国的国家利益和巩固中国一党制及其统治的合法性。

关键词: 中国对外战略; 中国模式; 国际关系理论的中国学派; 第五代; 合法性战略

65 Song 2013.
66 Wang, Xiangsui 2011, 21.
67 Zhou, Xiaochuan 2009.

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