

Of Envy and Complacency: ‘Why There Is No Chinese IR Theory’ Revisited

(Draft)

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Abstract

The study of international relations in China has witnessed phenomenal growth over the past few decades. In this context, it is all the more puzzling as to why there is no Chinese international relations theory. Important as this debate is, this paper seeks to critically engage with two emotive characteristics respectively underlying some Chinese and Western contributions to the debate: envy and complacency. By asking why there is no Chinese IR theory, many (certainly not all) Chinese scholars exhibit a sense of theory envy, notwithstanding their desire for local theory independence and maturity. Similarly, many (again not all) Western scholars in this debate, however well-meaning, tend to be unreflective of an implicit yet pervasive sense of complacency about the state of Western IR theory as the unstated benchmark for measuring the worth and progress of non-Western IR theory. These two emotive traits in the otherwise highly scholarly works in the debate constitute the two sides of the same coin, which together impede more fruitful debates and efforts on diversifying the ways in which we conceptualise the world and respond to its myriad challenges.

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Introduction

International Relations (IR) theory to the development of the IR discipline is like growth rings to a tree. How this discipline has grown has often been told primarily as a story of a series of great theoretical debates: the first great debate between realism and idealism, the second between science and tradition, and the third between rationalist and reflexive approaches.¹ While these debates may be the ‘official’ ‘growth rings’ of IR so far, in recent years another debate, though not counted as a great debate, has also attracted much attention. This debate focuses on ‘Why is there no non-Western IR theory?’² Under this broad umbrella are many sub-debates characterized by specific regional flavours. For example, scholars variously wonder why is there no Indian,³ Japanese,⁴ Korean,⁵ or Chinese IR theory. Among such regionally-focused debates, ‘why there is no Chinese IR theory’ is perhaps the liveliest. Indeed, judging by the recent progress in the development of IR theories in China, then one might even argue that this sub-debate has begun to bear the most fruit: already it is claimed that some nascent Chinese IR theories have been born. In recent years, Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* concept, Yan Xuetong’s moral realism (*daoyi xianshi zhuyi*), Qin Yaqing’s relational theory of IR, and Tang Shiping’s social evolution theory have attracted growing international attention in the IR scholarly circle. So much so that there have been even talks about the emergence of the ‘Tsinghua approach’ (if not yet the ‘Tsinghua School’) within the Chinese IR community.⁶

Against this backdrop, two points can be made here. First, there is much to be celebrated and recognized in this debate, which not long ago seems to be characterized more by puzzlement, frustration, and even a tinge of self-pity.⁷ Second, while acknowledging the significance of

¹ Peter Marcus Kristensen, ‘Discipline admonished: On International Relations fragmentation and the disciplinary politics of stocktaking,’ *EJIR*, 22 (2), 2016, 243-267.

² Acharya and Buzan; Tickner, A.B. and Wæver, O. (eds) (2009) *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*. London: Routledge.

³ Deepshikha Shahi and Gennaro Ascione, ‘Rethinking the absence of post-Western International Relations theory in India: ‘Advaitic monism’ as an alternative epistemological resource’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 2015.

⁴ Takashi Inoguchi, ‘Are there any theories of international relations in Japan?’ *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Volume 7 (2007) 369–390;

⁵ Chaesung Chun, ‘Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? Reflections On and From Korea,’ in *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, eds. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (London: Routledge, 2010), Jong Kun Choi, ‘Theorizing East Asian International Relations in Korea,’ *Asian Perspective*, 32, 1, 2008.

⁶ Feng Zhang, ‘The Tsinghua approach and the inception of Chinese theories of international relations’. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5 (1). pp. 73-102; 徐进, 孙学峰: “‘清华路径’与中国国际关系研究的发展方向”, 载《国际展望》2014年第6期; 上海国际问题研究院课题组: “海纳百川、包容共生的‘上海学派’”, 载《国际展望》2014年第6期.

⁷ Even Chinese scholars engaged in the debate about a “Chinese paradigm” have to admit that no systematic

the new Chinese contributions, it remains necessary to employ a more reflective approach to this debate, hence the subtitle: ‘Why is there no Chinese IR theory’ revisited. Revisiting this debate is necessary in that the question, while striking a chord among many scholars in the IR scholarly community, has been treated primarily as an empirical question, with the taken-for-granted premise that there is no Chinese IR theory. As a result, many of its concepts, such as ‘theory’, ‘international’, and ‘Chinese’, have not been subject to critical, reflective analysis. Fairbank once said that ‘as we phrase questions, so we get answers’.⁸ It is therefore important to get the phrases in the question right, or at least get them properly examined, rather than uncritically accepted as given. This is the main purpose of this paper.

My interrogation here is not designed to simply counter that there *is* Chinese IR theory in the first place. Rather, it takes a somewhat different angle by examining how the question of ‘why there is no Chinese IR theory’ is itself a normative statement. As such, at least two types of emotion are characteristic of those who uncritically ask this question: envy and complacency. The former emotion mostly captures a state of mind among some Chinese scholars. By envy, here I mean primarily ‘theory envy’. The latter emotion of complacency is more related to ‘Western’ IR scholars. By this, I mean that in asking this question, however well-meaning, some Western scholars exhibit a kind of implicit complacency that assumes that Western IR theory is the benchmark against which China’s lack becomes evident. Let me make clear that I do not mean to tar all scholars in this debate with these broad strokes of the brush. The point is not to call out any particular scholars, but to examine the emotive underpinnings of this seemingly innocent and worthwhile question in its two most relevant contexts: China and the West.

When using ‘China’ and ‘the West’ in this paper, I am very much conscious of the strongly implied binary associated with the terms, especially when they appear side by side. Given that I am not at all comfortable with this binary, I use ‘China’ and ‘the West’ to primarily designate the geographical locations of scholars, which should be relatively uncontroversial. On the other hand, when these terms are associated with IR theory, it is implied that Chinese and Western IR theories are separate entities, which in my view is less defensible and more problematic. Thus, wherever possible, I will use quotation marks around ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ when they appear before the term ‘IR theory’.

The paper is organised as follows. First, it provides a brief review of the ‘Why is there no Chinese IR theory’ literature, with a focus on the inadequacies of critical reflection on this question in the debate. Second, it examines how this dearth of reflection has enabled the existence of an unhealthy emotion of ‘theory envy’ among Chinese IR scholars, with ‘theory’ often narrowly defined as something meeting a particular type of scientific criteria. Third, it looks at the unspoken and perhaps unconscious complacency in framing this question among some Western IR scholars. In both sections, I will examine the implications and pitfalls of

“Chinese” IR theory or “theory with Chinese characteristics” has been formulated so far (Qin 2008; Zhang 2003; Su 2005). Song Xinning, ‘Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics’, JCC. Su Changhe argues that this question has made Chinese IR scholars of various generations feel regrettable, anxious, hard-pressed, and even helpless. Su Changhe, ‘Weishenme meiyou Zhongguo de guojiguanxi lilun?’ (Why Is There no Chinese IR Theory?), *Guoji guanCha*, 2005, No. 4, p. 26.

⁸ Fairbank, *China Perceived*, p. 85

these emotions for the development of ‘Chinese’ IR theory. The final section concludes by making a case for broadening this debate and reframing the question. It argues that one way of moving this debate forward is to interrogate and shift the terms of the debate (starting with interrogating this question) and allow for more equal and open-minded dialogue and cooperation between ‘China’ and the ‘West’ on the challenge of theorizing a world of their ongoing joint making.

The Debate on the Lack of ‘Chinese’ IR Theory

By engaging in the ‘why is there no Chinese IR theory’ debate, most scholars do not question the premise that China indeed has little indigenous IR theory.⁹ Instead, as China now emerges as a great power on the global stage, they are more intrigued by the ‘why’ question, with the aim to identify the causes so as to help Chinese IR scholars better address their theoretical deficiencies.

Qin Yaqing, in a widely quoted article, points to three major reasons as to why China lags behind in developing indigenous Chinese IR theory: ‘the unconsciousness of “internationalness” in the traditional Chinese worldview, the dominance of the Western IR discourse in the Chinese academic community, and the absence of a consistent theoretical core in the Chinese IR research.’¹⁰ Despite these problems, Qin argues that it is possible and indeed inevitable for a Chinese school of IR theory to emerge.¹¹ But as Nele Noesselt notes, Chinese scholars still ‘disagree as to whether it should be a theory “with Chinese characteristics,” lead to the formation of a “Chinese school of IR” or represent an attempt to “Sinicize” IR (= indigenization)’.¹² For example, Yan Xuetong, another leading Chinese IR scholar, dismisses the assumption that there can be a ‘Chinese school’ of IR theory. Yan gives at least three reasons for rejecting the ‘Chinese school’ project. He lists several reasons for his objection. First, it is usually not up to the theorists themselves to label their theory. Second, it is rare for theories to be named after countries. And third, no individual theory developed in China would be comprehensive and representative enough to warrant the sweeping name ‘Chinese’.¹³ Upon a closer look, it is clear that Yan takes issue with the ‘Chinese school’ label primarily for ‘semantic’ considerations.¹⁴ He has no problem with the call for Chinese scholars to contribute more to the development of IR theory per se. Indeed, he himself has spearheaded that effort.

While most scholars have focused on the ‘why’ question, I choose to focus on the starting point of this debate, that is, there has been no Chinese IR theory, at least until recently.¹⁵ The

⁹ There are a few exceptions to this view. See Weixing Hu et al., *China’s International Relations in the 21st Century*, p. 19; 张森林、吴绍禹:《关于建立中国特色国际关系理论的几点思考》,载《思想政治教育研究》,2005年第4期,第5页。

¹⁰ Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There No Chinese International Relations Theory?’ *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Volume 7 (2007), p. 313.

¹¹ Qin Yaqing, 2007, p. 329.

¹² Nele Noesselt: Is There a “Chinese School” of IR? 14.

¹³ Yan Xuetong et al., *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*.

¹⁴ Feng Zhang, p. 7

¹⁵ ‘In Chinese, the combination “China” and “IR theory” has a dual meaning: It can stand for “IR theory in China” as well as for “Chinese IR theory.” Whereas the latter illustrates China’s efforts to develop an

widespread agreement on this position implies that there is a consensus as to what constitutes theory in general and IR theory in particular. It seems that this debate is primarily an empirical issue based on a largely unproblematic conceptualisation of theory. Thus, some scholars look at the issue through a resources angle, treating the lack of ‘Chinese’ IR theory as a deficiency problem (in contrast to ‘Western’ adequacy) that needs to be remedied through the provision of more adequate resources.¹⁶ To be sure, even on this ground alone this debate is worthwhile, as it has moved beyond the previous practice of testing IR theory in the ‘non-Western’ world. So some have claimed that this debate serves as a fruitful ‘point of departure’.¹⁷ Not long ago, some leading IR scholars in the West had argued that general IR theories possess universal explanatory power and that there is no need to pursue alternative theoretical formulations.¹⁸ Now, at last, ‘the pairing of the two terms, theory and Asia [in this case, China]’, is no longer ‘considered oxymoronic’,¹⁹ Yan Xuetong’s reservation about the term ‘Chinese school of IR theory’ notwithstanding.

However important this debate may be, I argue that this still leaves out some important questions that, in my view, should be integral to the debate. These questions concern mainly conceptual issues surrounding such terms as ‘Western’, ‘Chinese’, ‘International Relations’, and ‘theory’. Inside China at least, such terms are often taken as given. In a broader context, the question of ‘why is there no non-Western IR theory’ has received more critical scrutiny. For example, in his contribution to the debate, Ching-chang Chen questions Acharya and Buzan’s largely unproblematic assumption about the terms ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’. He argues that the uncritical acceptance of such dichotomies is not ‘conducive to the purpose of democratizing IR’.²⁰

In this paper, rather than continuing to explore why there is no Chinese IR theory, I seek to interrogate how some unquestioned assumptions, especially about what constitutes theory, are not conducive to the production of ‘Chinese’ IR theory and the diversity of IR theory in general. This focus may seem slightly odd, as the debate itself clearly has the intention to stimulate the development of ‘Chinese’ IR theory. While that might be true, I argue that paradoxically the debate, if constrained at the empirical level, may have the unintended consequences of hindering the emergence of such theory it purports to encourage. Acharya and Buzan and others have rightly pointed out that the dominance of ‘Western’ IR theory is a contributing factor to the problem at hand, but few have asked how the dominance of Western conception of theory (as opposed to that of specific Western IR theory) may also be an obstacle to the development of ‘non-Western’ IR theory.

autochthonous IR framework, the former also includes Marxist-Leninist and “Western” IR’. Nele Noesselt, ‘Is There a “Chinese School” of IR?’, p. 13fn8

¹⁶ Song Xinning, ‘Building IR Theory with Chinese Characteristics’, pp. 71-2.

¹⁷ See James Mayall, Review of *Non-Western International Relations Theory*, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*, 2011, p. 332.

¹⁸ Ikenberry and Mastanduno, ‘Introduction: International Relations Theory and the Search for Regional Stability,’ 2003, p. 19

¹⁹ Shu-Mei Shih, ‘Theory, Asia and the Sinophone,’ *Postcolonial Studies*, 13 (4), 2010, p. 467.

²⁰ Ching-chang Chen, ‘The absence of non-western IR theory in Asia reconsidered’, p. 3.

To their credit, Acharya and Buzan have broadened the criteria of theory in their analysis. As well as defining theory as ‘a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about the subject matter of IR’, they also include attempts either widely acknowledged by others as being theory, or claimed by their creators as such.²¹ However, such broadening is largely functional or instrumental, mainly for the sake of their particular discussion of the question at hand. In his contribution to the debate in the special issue edited by Acharya and Buzan, Qin does spend much time discussing the definition of theory. Following Acharya and Buzan’s differentiation between ‘the harder positivist definition of theory dominant in the United States and the softer reflectivist definition prevalent in Europe’, he argues that both in essence are ‘a knowledge-oriented definition’, a definition which he adopts.²² In his discussion of why there is no Chinese IR theory, he means primarily this type of knowledge-oriented theory.²³ In doing so, he not only distances himself from a largely ‘Chinese’ understanding of theory, which is ‘action oriented’, but also subscribes to what he calls the first-type of theory-related research: original theory.²⁴ At this point, however, it is not entirely clear whether by ‘original theory’ is meant the ‘harder positivist definition’ or the ‘softer reflectivist definition’ or both. Qin’s case is illustrative as it demonstrates the lack of a clearer examination of the concept of theory in the ‘why there is no Chinese IR theory’ debate more broadly. This lack does not mean that Chinese IR scholars have no ideas about what constitutes theory. Much rather, this illustrates that in this debate, most Chinese IR scholars have already subscribed to a particular type of conception of theory, which is modelled on mainstream Western IR theory. This is what I would like to call China’s ‘theory envy’.

Theory Envy in the Pursuit of Chinese IR Theory

In explaining why there has not been ‘non-Western’ IR theory, Acharya and Buzan write that ‘Western IRT has been carried by the dominance of Western power over the last few centuries, it has acquired a Gramscian hegemonic status that operates largely unconsciously in the minds of others, and regardless of whether the theory is correct or not’.²⁵ While the dominance of ‘Western’ IR theory can explain the absence of ‘non-Western’ IR theory, the popularity of mainstream Western conception of theory among ‘non-Western’ IR scholars perhaps is perhaps a more important factor. Indeed, this conceptual dominance has not only achieved an unconscious hegemonic status among Chinese IR scholars, but also been explicitly accepted and even promoted in the study of Chinese IR theory, which may be described as ‘theory envy’.

²¹ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction,’ p. 292.

²² Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There no Chinese International Relations Theory?’ p. 314.

²³ Song Xinling agrees, as he writes, ‘In academic research what China needed was the former [general theory], not the latter [practice- or policy-oriented theory]’. Song Xinling, ‘Building IR Theory with Chinese Characteristics,’ *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2001, p.65.

²⁴ Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There no Chinese International Relations Theory?’ p. 314.

²⁵ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why Is There no Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction,’ *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* Volume 7 (2007), 294

‘Theory envy’ is not unique to Chinese IR scholars as there is wide consensus in the broader scholarly community that ‘You become a star only by doing theory’.²⁶ But in the Chinese context, the object of envy is a particular type of theory which differs from the traditional ‘Asian/Chinese’ conceptions of ‘theory’.²⁷ In this sense, it can be likened to the ‘physics envy’ in the fields of Political Sciences and IR in general. To many political scientists and IR scholars, studying international relations should aim to discover, however difficult, law-like patterns and causal relationships like those found in physics.²⁸ What is physics to IR is theory to Chinese IR scholars. To the latter, theory is, not unlike physics, the highest achievement any IR scholars could dream of. But ‘theory envy’ in China bears more than a superficial resemblance to physics envy in IR. At the ontological and epistemological levels, the two are closely linked as well. Underlying physics envy is the ontological assumption that the natural and social worlds share fundamentally the same characteristics and both are subject to objective and detached observations. This ontological assumption then leads to the positivist epistemology about how to study the social world. And positivism is precisely at the core of the ‘theory envy’ among many Chinese IR scholars. In their view, the essence of the lack of Chinese IR theory is the lack of positivist theories about international relations that contain testable hypotheses and are falsifiable and generalisable into universal scientific knowledge about international politics.

As noted earlier, Yan Xuetong is openly opposed to the development of a Chinese school of IR theory. But this does not prevent him from upholding a positivist understanding of what counts as IR theory. In his view, IR theory, like mathematics and chemistry, should be universally valid knowledge. On this ground, he thinks it is inappropriate to establish a Chinese school of IR theory, just as it is absurd to found a Chinese school of chemistry or physics. As Feng Zhang notes, ‘In promoting what he calls a ‘scientific method’ Yan is influenced by a positivist understanding of social science, with an emphasis on quantitative methods. Although he acknowledges that different questions need different methods of study, his emphasis on hypothesis testing, causal analysis, objectivity, and verifiability places him firmly in the positivist camp’.²⁹ Qin Yaqing, dubbed by some as the ‘most sophisticated thinker on the “Chinese school” project’, can be seen in a similar light. Although Qin does not openly identify himself as a positivist (after all, he is best known in China as a constructivist), some implicit assumptions about theory and reality do suggest that he is a positivist constructivist. For example, he insists that new theory be created with ‘distinct core assumptions and serves as a powerful explanation of the reality’.³⁰ As well as subscribing to a reality/theory binary, Qin also believes that IR theory drawn from Chinese culture and history can become a universally valid theory.³¹ Meanwhile, as Gerald Chan points out, the more liberal school of Chinese IR scholars affiliated with Fudan University in Shanghai argues that

²⁶ Ole Waever, ‘Still a Discipline After All These Debates?’ in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, eds. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 306.

²⁷ This ‘Asian/Chinese’ notion of theory ‘has a predominantly practical orientation with emphasis on understanding and interpreting the world to forge suitable national responses’ Alagappa 2011, p. 194.

²⁸ Richard Ned Lebow, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, p. 43.

²⁹ Feng Zhang, ‘The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese IR Theory,’ p. 2.

³⁰ Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There no Chinese International Relations Theory?’ p. 318

³¹ Feng Zhang, ‘The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese IR Theory,’ p. 8.

‘theory should serve to promote the forward-looking awareness or predictive power of international affairs and to serve [sic] to accumulate knowledge’.³²

On appearance, these leading Chinese IR scholars may be anything but keen imitators of Western IR theory. After all, they are at the forefront of advocating the use of local experience and knowledge to enrich the edifice of IR theory. Tang Shiping, another leading theorist in Chinese IR, seems to try to distance himself from what he calls ‘the increasingly deductive approach in the United States and the grand theorising approach in Europe’, since these approach ‘have traditionally paid less attention to empirical facts’. He argues that ‘empirical facts provide the ultimate foundation for theorising about international politics’.³³ Despite these scholars’ call for incorporating Chinese culture, history and practice in the development of IR theory, their implicit or explicit acceptance of the fact/theory dichotomy is precisely what defines the ontology and epistemology of mainstream Western IR theory.

Apart from these mainstream definitions of theory and epistemology by leading Chinese IR theorists, there is little critical discussion on the concept of theory as well as epistemology in the Chinese IR theory debate.³⁴ In China Academic Journals Full-text Database, there appear just a handful articles discussing Chinese IR theory and epistemology.³⁵ Although some of these articles challenge the ontological foundation and epistemological soundness of Western IR theory, they do not have significant impact on the wider debate. Another sign of the (mainstream) theory envy can be demonstrated in the numbers of Chinese IR articles engaging with various IR theories. As shown on the next page, the vast majority of articles discussing IR theory are concerned with realism, constructivism, and liberalism, with virtually no IR-theory-focused articles on poststructuralism, postcolonial studies and posthumanism.

³² Chan 1998, p. 16. ‘For most younger scholars and a small number of senior scholars, an IR theory should be a scientific framework for analyzing international politics and international relations. There are many generalities in theorizing international issues. In order to construct Chinese theoretical frameworks of IR, Chinese scholars must learn from Western theoretical achievements’. Song Xinning, ‘Building IR Theory with Chinese Characteristics,’ *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2001, 64, p. 68.

³³ Shiping Tang, ‘Introduction: Understanding “Living with China”’, in *Living with China: Regional States and China through Crises and Turning Points*, eds. Shiping Tang, Mingjiang Li, and Amitav Acharya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 3.

³⁴ In India, the non-Western IR debate has seen overt engagement with the issue of epistemology. See, ‘Rethinking the absence of post-Western International Relations theory in India’.

³⁵ Zhang Jipeng, ‘Dui Xifang guojiguanxi lilun de zhexue sikao: jianyi Zhongguo guojiguanxi lilun de jiangou’ (Philosophical Reflections on Western IR Theory and Discussion on the Construction of Chinese IR Theory), *Waijiao pinglun* (Foreign Affairs Review), 2005; Lu Peng, ‘Guanyu Zhongguo guojiguanxi lilun de renshilun gongshi jiqi wenti’ (On the Epistemological Consensus in Chinese IR Theory and Its Problems), *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), 2010, No. 12, pp. 101-118; Ren Xiao, ‘Lilun yu guojiguanxi lilun: yixie sikao’ (Theory and International Relations Theory: Some Reflections), *Ouzhou* (Europe), 2000, no. 4.

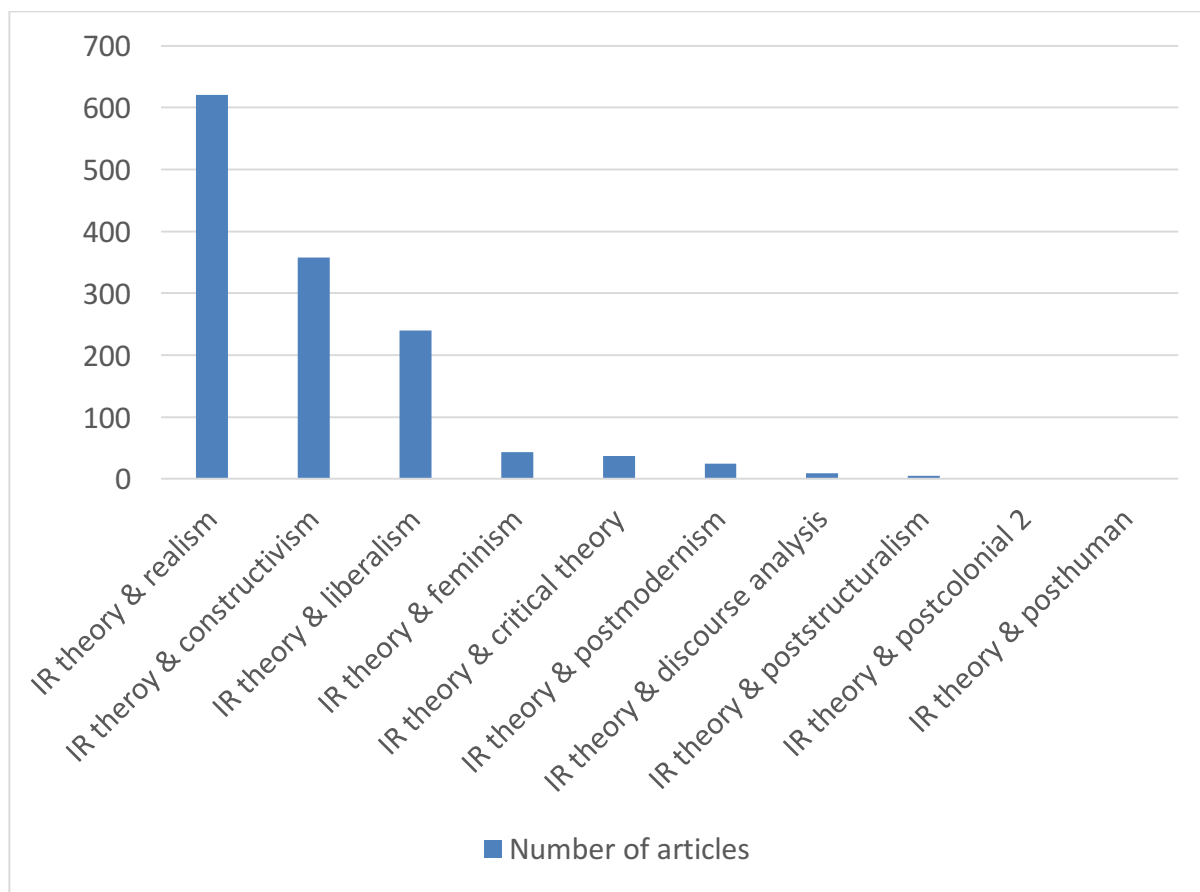


Figure 1. Numbers of IR theory articles in China Academic Full-text Database

How does theory envy in China matter as far as developing Chinese IR theory is concerned? It matters at several levels. First, this positivist theory envy puts Chinese IR scholars at a theoretically ‘inferior’ position vis-à-vis their Western counterparts. Since positivism does not have a strong historical presence in Chinese social research, it is sometimes argued that the lack of Chinese IR theory is due to the lack of Chinese tradition of theoretical reasoning.³⁶ Although Chinese IR scholars do not explicitly frame it this way, this theory envy raises the soul-searching question of ‘Why can’t we think like them?’ or ‘Can we think theoretically?’ Such lingering self-doubt about the ability of the Chinese to think scientifically and theoretically may not have deterred scholars such as Yan Xuetong and Qin Yaqing from embarking on the challenging journey of building ‘Chinese’ IR theory, it does cast a shadow on the enthusiasm of most other scholars. Thus, one may explain why, apart from a few bright spots of Yan, Qin, and Tang Shiping, overall Chinese IR theory efforts have in fact stalled in the past few years. To gauge the level of scholarly interest in the topic of Chinese IR theory or Chinese school of IR theory over the past few decades, I did two searches, first by the keyword: 中国国际关系理论(Chinese International Relations theory), and second by the combination of the two keywords: 国际关系理论(International Relations theory) and 中国学派 (Chinese School). The returned results (see Figures 2 and 3) show that there was a spike in the numbers of articles containing these keywords between 2005 and 2009, and since

³⁶ Wang Yiwei, ‘Wenshenme meiyou Zhongguo guojiguanxi lilun?’ (Why Is There no Chinese IR Theory). *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi* (World Economics and Politics), 2004, No. 1, p. 21.

then, the numbers of such articles have dropped off. These results do not tell us why this is the case, and more research needs to be done on this question. At face value, the apparent epistemological consensus on the need for Chinese IR theory to be a kind of theory in the positivist tradition has not paid off as far as the building of Chinese IR theory is concerned. As long as the epistemological foundations of IR theory continue to be restricted to a ‘Western’ philosophy of science, it is unlikely that the discipline’s parochial bias can be resolved.³⁷

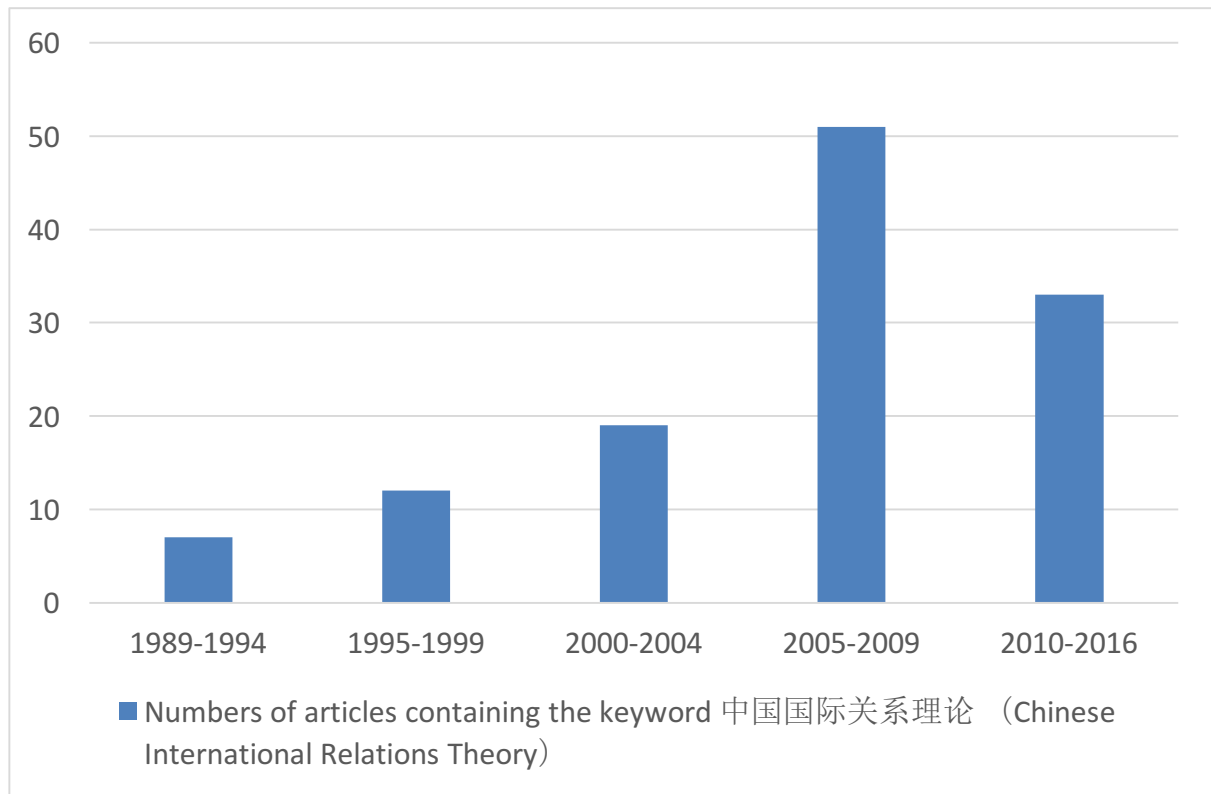


Figure 2. Keyword (中国国际关系理论) Search Results in China Academic Journals Full-text Database

³⁷ Nele Noesselt, 'Is There a "Chinese School" of IR?', 21

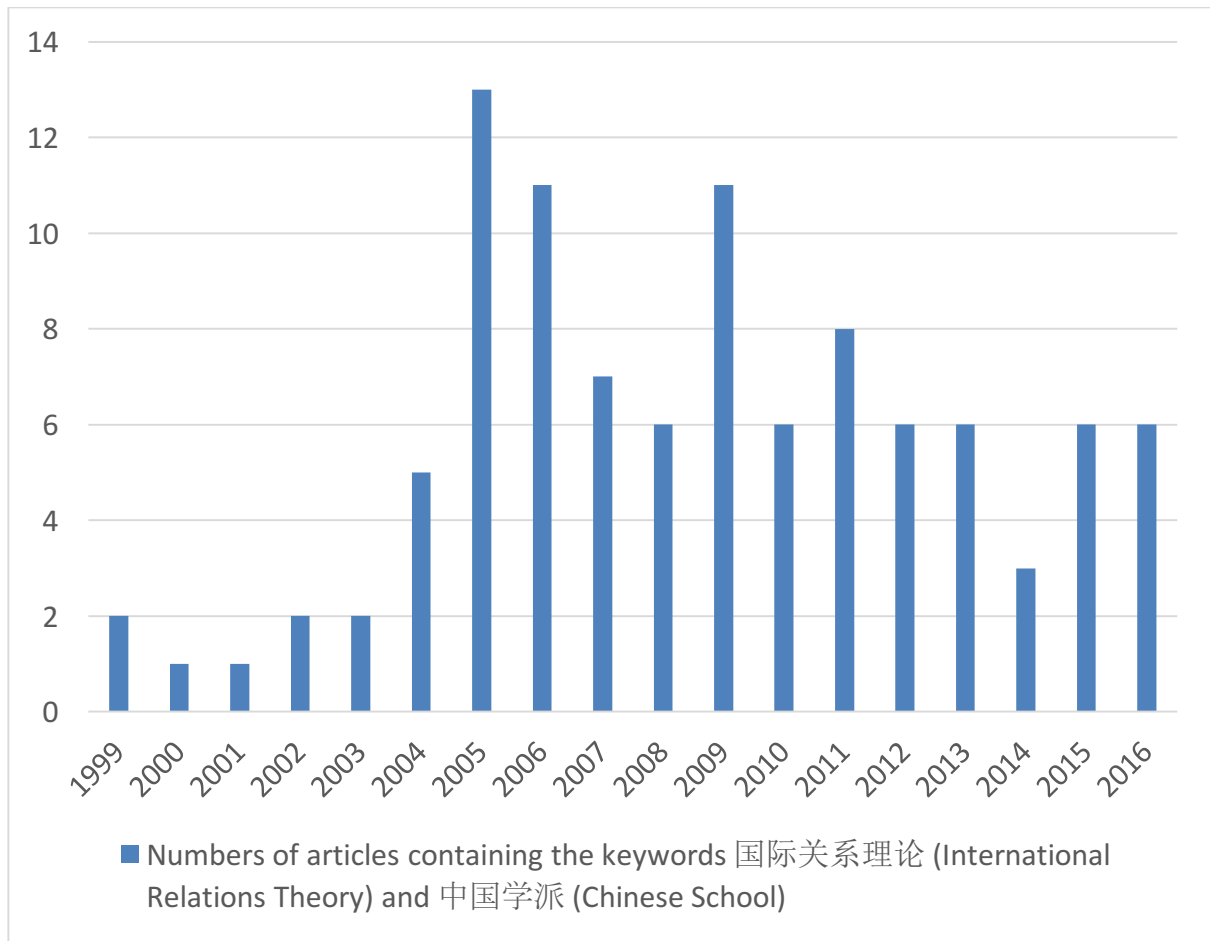


Figure 3: Keyword (国际关系理论 and 中国学派) Search Results in China Academic Journals Full-text Database

Second, the focus on theory as a knowledge-oriented attempt in the Chinese IR theory debate may have been a necessary rectification of China's previous over-emphasis on theory as a guide to specific national practice and foreign policy, its downplay of the connection between theory and practice may have allowed Chinese scholars to miss one of the most important factors in explaining why there is no Chinese IR theory. That is, by believing that theory (mainly Western IR theory) is a systematic *description* of reality, this conception of theory fails to fully recognise that Western IR theory has played a key role in constructing global reality, including reality in Chinese international relations. For example, a series of Western theoretical concepts such as balancing, power transition, hedging, alliance, democracy, and divide and rule are remaking Asian IR practice on the ground as we speak. To the extent that much of global reality has been constructed by 'Western' IR theory,³⁸ no wonder that it is difficult for alternative theories to emerge and to be regarded as equally 'realistic'

³⁸ 'To the extent that they are accepted, theories such as balance of power, hegemonic stability, democratic peace, or unipolarity cannot help but construct the world they purport to describe.' Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, 'Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction,' p. 294

generalisation of international reality. In this context, it is no longer astounding that ‘so much empirical material from non-Western settings did almost nothing to modify IRT.’³⁹

Third, as Qin Yaqing notes, because of the conceptualisation of IR theory around the knowledge-oriented model and the American model, particular types of Western IR theory works are more readily translated than other types of IR theory. ‘There have been, mainly because of the translation of Western IR theories, two conspicuous phenomena in the study of world politics in China. The first is the increasing emphasis on knowledge-based theory, stressing the academic dimension of disciplinary knowledge. The second is a strengthening of the dominance of the Western IR discourse, especially that of the United States (Hoffmann, 1997).’⁴⁰ Qin Yaqing cites the dominance of Western IR discourses as an obstacle to the development of Chinese IR theory. Qin traces this dominance back to the recent history of Western imperial dominance in China. While this may be true, the positivist understanding of what counts as theory in the debate has perhaps unwittingly contributed to this dominance. ‘Theory envy’ may have spurred Chinese scholars to learn from the West, but at the same time impeded the development of Chinese IR theory by shaping Chinese conceptions of what proper IR theory can be and should look like. In this context, even if Chinese IR scholars have apparently come up with some Chinese IR theories, such theories may be best described as Chinese mimicry.⁴¹ Thus, theory envy might result in ‘inadvertently generating a “derivative discourse” of Western IR’.⁴²

Finally, theory envy can lead to the understanding that theory is a luxury to which most Chinese scholars cannot afford to devote their day-to-day research. Even Chinese elite universities such as Peking University, many supervisors discourage PhD students from engaging in overly theoretical research – ‘you need only explain the issues clearly and in a logical fashion’ is often the advice given to ambitious young students. As a result, theory becomes something of a holy grail, which may inadvertently discourage theorising. Though related to the Korea case, what is said below is similarly applicable to China: ‘IR theorizing could be a kind of luxury for a society that has gone through decolonization, national division, war, military dictatorship, democratization, and security threats.’⁴³

Theory Complacency: A State of Mind in Mainstream Western IR Theory

By asking and actively engaging in the debate, many Western scholars no doubt have the welcome intention of trying to broaden the geographical contributions to the development of IR theory. Many have been struck by the largely Euro- or American-centric nature of existing IR theory, and feel that ‘the dependence of much IRT on a specifically Western history’⁴⁴ is no longer (if it ever was) justifiable in light of the rise of many non-Western powers and the

³⁹ Kamila Pieczara, ‘Two Modes of Dialogue in IR: Testing on Western versus Non-Western Engagement with IR Theory,’ Millennium Annual conference, London School of Economics, 2010 pp. 1-17, at p. 4.

⁴⁰ Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There no Chinese International Relations Theory?’ p. 317.

⁴¹ Ching-chang Chen, p. 13.

⁴² ‘Rethinking the absence of post-Western International Relations theory in India’,

⁴³ Jong Kun Choi, ‘Theorizing East Asian International Relations in Korea’, Asian Perspective, p. 211.

⁴⁴ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Preface: Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia,’ p. 285.

globalisation of IR as a discipline. If Robert Cox is right that ‘Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’,⁴⁵ then Western IR theory can be ‘seen as speaking for the West and in the interest of sustaining its power, prosperity, and influence.’⁴⁶ This questioning of the parochial limitations of Western IR theory is valuable and timely. However, there exist at least two assumptions in the ‘Why is there no non-Western IR theory’ question: the problem for Western IR theory is that its empirical base is not universal enough, whereas for non-Western IR studies, their deficiency is the opposite: they are not theoretical enough. This is certainly Buzan’s impression, after his ‘sporadic engagements with Asia’, ‘that there was little if any indigenous development of IR theory there’.⁴⁷ Granted that even if one day the Chinese can develop some indigenous theory, such theory is by definition parochial. So on balance, the West is still far ahead in the production of IR theory, or so it is implied in the debate question. Thus, in the framing of the question is a dichotomy between the West and the non-Western world (including China), with ‘the West [being] the sole producer of political thought, the lone source of theory.’⁴⁸ This implied self-identity about the West in general and Western IR in particular is very much in line with the longstanding Western self-image as the rational knowing subject.⁴⁹

Thus, while ‘Why is there no non-Western IR theory’ may seem to be an entirely valid question, it is not based on purely empirical grounds and does not come about after having systematically studied non-Western thought on ‘international relations’. Rather, it is asked mainly in the context of the above-mentioned Western self-image. In this spirit, there has been a relatively long line of similar questions posed about China, though not all are IR-related. For example, Joseph Needham once asked: Where was no Chinese version of modern science? Similarly, John Fairbank was puzzled with the question of why there was no capitalism emerging in imperial China. Similar puzzles also exist with regard to China’s lack of democracy and modernisation at various stages of its ‘development’. All such questions may to some extent be justified, but one cannot help but wonder whether there is a recurring style of thought in the West in keeping such questions coming. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to investigate this puzzle, but put in this broader context of Western observers’ perceptions of non-Western societies along a range of ‘development’ criteria, the ‘Why there is no non-Western IR theory’ question does lend itself to the probable charge of theory complacency or even arrogance.

This is not to deny that as far as IR theory is concerned, China does need to lift its game. But one has to be clearer about what one means by ‘IR’ and ‘theory’, and has to ask whether ‘IR theory’ as ‘we’ know it in the West should constitute the main criteria for measuring the adequacies or otherwise of ‘non-Western’ IR. For many Western IR scholars, the answer

⁴⁵ Robert Cox, ‘Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory,’ in *Neorealism and Its Critics*, p. 207.

⁴⁶ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction,’ p. 290.

⁴⁷ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Preface: Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia,’ p. 285

⁴⁸ Shaoguang Wang, To ‘Fall in Line’ or to ‘Grab’: Thoughts on the Indigenization of Political Science, 308.

⁴⁹ Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China’s Rise*, p. 44.

seems to be in the affirmative; otherwise, one would expect more self-reflective analysis on the premises of this question.

Qin Yaqing lists the unconsciousness of ‘international-ness’ as the first reason why there is no Chinese IR theory. Though he probably does not mean to challenge the narrow focus on ‘international-ness’ among established Western IR theories, this reason can be turned around and become an indictment to the state-centric characteristic of mainstream Western IR. If ‘IR theory’ should not be limited to an ‘international’ ontology, then whether there is Chinese ‘IR’ theory remains an open question. In this sense, to insist on the presumption that there is no Chinese ‘IR’ theory evinces a sense of complacency on the part of certain Western IR theorists.

If China’s lack of IR theory is at least partly due to its lack of understanding of international-ness, then, this may not be entirely a disadvantage in the development of IR theory, broadly defined. If ‘from the very beginning [Chinese thought] does not assume a jungle, but a society, [and] what hangs the members together is the rituals, norms, and institutions contained in Confucianism and practiced in the Chinese dynastical system’,⁵⁰ then it may be possible to treat the thought of Chinese philosophers and thinkers as an IR theory in reverse. Mainstream Western IR theory starts from anarchy and the state of nature whereas Chinese thought starts from order and society. However, the two do meet in the middle as the perplexing question for generations of Chinese thinkers was how to restore an order that was lost. In many ways, this is not dissimilar to the concern about global governance in the face of the myriad challenges. As Yongjin Zhang points out, in China order has been taken as ‘a moral and political pursuit’.⁵¹ Thus the loss of order is not due to the state of nature, but due to human failure, and so it is up to humane authority and moral behaviour to help restore order. Therefore, human action, rather than some transcendental forces or timeless law, bears the responsibility for what happens. Such a conception of cosmic and social order, therefore, affords man ‘the capacity to order life without appeal to the transcendent, whether as pre-existing and universally applicable moral principle, legal enactment or law of nature’.⁵²

Such thought is profoundly constructivist, to use a contemporary label. It is a normative, rather than scientific, way of theorising, but theorising nevertheless. If the idea of *Tianxia* can remove its Sinocentrism, and if the tributary system is seen as fundamentally a practical and ideational arrangement based on reciprocity, I suspect that there is much potential in the Chinese worldview for developing alternative theoretical insights about world politics. It is not this paper’s main purpose to tease out the potential relevance of traditional Chinese thought to contemporary global practice, but suffice it to say that it is premature to declare that there is no Chinese ‘IR’ theory. Such a statement may be true in the narrow sense, but then the whole point of asking this kind of question is to broaden the narrow confine of IR theory.

⁵⁰ Qin Yaqing, ‘Why Is There no Chinese International Relations Theory?’ p. 330-1.

⁵¹ Yongjin Zhang, ‘The idea of order in ancient Chinese political thought: a Wightian exploration’, p. 171.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

I agree with Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan that ‘the development of non-Western IRT need not be a matter of projecting pure indigenous ideas, nor should it be a matter of wholesale adoption/ borrowing of foreign ones, but that it can proceed through mutual adaptations and localisation between the two.’⁵³ But the idea of mutual adaptations should be given more emphasis. For otherwise it is easy for scholars to think that it is mainly up to non-Western IR theory to learn and adapt. Institutionally, there are already disincentives for Western IR scholars to engage with non-Western IR. As Pamila Pieczara asks, ‘If knowing English and operating from the centre is sufficient to make a stellar career in today’s IR, is there anything to motivate Western scholars to go beyond the West? In other words, is all the job of diversifying IRT to be made by “peripheral” scholars?’⁵⁴

Another disincentive is more ideational in nature, when one believes, as Acharya and Buzan apparently do, that ‘the contemporary equivalent of “good life” in international relations – democratic peace, interdependence and integration, and institutionalized orderliness, as well as the ‘normal relationships and calculable results’ – is found mostly in the West, while the non-West remains the realm of survival’.⁵⁵ If we continue to believe that the West and the non-Western world are on a linear evolutionary scale, then from the beginning one would not expect much useful contribution coming out of the non-West which continues to be mired in a realist trap. But such a dichotomy no longer, if it ever did, bears much resemblance to the world we face today. Indeed, as a leading Western theorist has pointed out, IR theory in the West seems to have ‘reached a deadlock, because the existing ways to conceive world politics — both the nature of politics and what counts as the world — needed to ‘come to terms’ with social and historical changes’.⁵⁶

Theory complacency (or arrogance) may also be manifested in Western IR theorists’ conscious or subconscious role as gate-keepers who determine what count as IR theory. This is because no matter whether there emerges Chinese IR theory or not, the seal of approval remains at the hands of Western IR scholars, and Chinese IR theory is to be judged. A case in point is William Callahan’s suspicion of Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* concept as a disguise for China to return to the Sinocentric world order.⁵⁷ The *Tianxia* concept is certainly not without its problem. Like any political concepts, it is essentially contested. Zhao Tingyang’s notion of *Tianxia* may not be the only way of interpreting this term. Thus, it is unadvisable to jump to the conclusion and short-circuit the debate. What this case illustrates, however, is that ‘when attempting to develop “post-Western IR” that takes into account more adequately the concepts and issues that matter in other parts of the world, a new dilemma immediately emerges: this kind of scholarship will be stronger if recognised by the discipline as being IR’.⁵⁸ So in this sense, whether there is Chinese or non-Western IR theory is not entirely

⁵³ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Conclusion: On the Possibility of a Non-Western International Relations Theory,’ 233.

⁵⁴ Pamila Pieczara, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why is there no non-Western international relations theory? An introduction,’ p. 288.

⁵⁶ Guzzini, ‘The Ends of IR Theory and Stages of Reflexivity and Theorizing’, p. 531-2.

⁵⁷ William A. Callahan, ‘Chinese visions of world order: Post-hegemonic or a new hegemony?’ *International Studies Review* 10(4), 2008, 749–761.

⁵⁸ Waever, ‘Still a Discipline After All These Debates?’ 303

dependent on unilateral improvements made in China or the non-West, but also on necessary changes made in the West as to what constitutes IR theory.

Conclusion: Why There Is no Chinese IR Theory as We Know It

This paper has re-engaged with the debate of why there is no Chinese IR theory. Its re-engagement takes a slightly different approach by exposing the problematic assumptions and their associated emotive states of mind: in the case of China, theory envy, and in the case of the West, theory complacency. Both, I have argued, are not conducive to the development of Chinese IR theory, if such is indeed the purpose of this debate. Until these issues are closely and critically examined in the debate, ‘Chinese IR theory’ may remain the holy grail for many Chinese scholars. What theory envy does is to reinforce a universally scientific way of theorising IR, albeit with Chinese input and contribution. However, ‘In a scientific field attuned to the idea that there can ultimately be only one truth, a plurality of equally justifiable theories is not easy to accept’.⁵⁹ While scholars have pointed out various reasons why there is no Chinese IR theory, my concern has been why this debate itself may paradoxically undo its well-intended goal of encouraging diversity in theory and knowledge production. One way of overcoming theory envy is to diversify the conception of theory itself. Acharya rightly notes that ‘There are lots of alien ways of producing knowledge out there, including the wisdoms of other civilisations which are wonderfully and creatively “unscientific”’.⁶⁰ Also relevant are a wide range of critical, post-positivist theories (broadly defined as opposed to mainstream positivist theories), be they Western or non-Western in origin, which as shown in Figure 1 have been taken very seriously in China. This is not unique to China, as there is also the absence of a direct dialogue between Asian IR experts and the group of post-structuralist IR scholars.⁶¹ In fact, a Chinese contribution to IR theory is unlikely to emerge out of Chinese scholars’ efforts alone, and it is an illusion to try ‘to find radical ‘difference’ in ‘non-Western’ ways of thinking about and doing world politics’.⁶²

‘Theory envy’ in China is closely linked to ‘theory complacency’ in the West. As noted in the previous section, ‘theory complacency’ in the Western IR context is manifested in a number of different ways, among which is the taken-for-granted assumption of ‘international-ness’ as an ontological starting point for theorising. Also the implicit assumption that Western IR theory is the model to which non-Western IR theory should look up is inhabiting, rather than facilitating the emergence of alternative theories. A case can be made that the dominant conception of theory (e.g., ‘Theory explains regularities of behavior’⁶³) may need to be rethought. For example, it may be necessary to ask: Why only regularities? Why not change? Why is there so much focus on *International Relations* theory? Why not world theory? And when we ask why is there no Chinese IR theory, it is worth asking a different question: Why

⁵⁹ Guzzini, ‘The Ends of IR Theory and Stages of Reflexivity and Theorizing’, p. 531.

⁶⁰ Acharya, ‘Dialogue and Discovery: In Search of International Relations Theory beyond the West’, *Millennium*, 39, 3, 619–637, at p. 636.

⁶¹ Alagappa, Muthiah (2011), *International Relations Studies in Asia: Distinctive Trajectories*, in: *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11, 2, 193–230.

⁶² Bilgin, ‘Thinking Past Western IR,’ p. 19.

⁶³ Waltz, 1979, 68

is there no adequate IR theory on China/Asia?⁶⁴ In this context, the debate question should best be rephrase as ‘Why is there no Chinese IR theory as we know it?’ And there is much that we still do not yet know.

⁶⁴ James Hsiung; David Kang, *China Rising*; Steve Chan, *Looking for Balance?*