The ‘International Turn’ in the Chinese and the Trans-Atlantic IR
--Towards Global Renaissance in the History of International Thought

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Introduction
In the last decade or so, theoretical contestations in the Chinese IR epistemic community have led to imaginative and innovative production of IR scholarship in the context of a rising China and with the intensified mutual engagement between Chinese IR and global IR epistemic communities. As an important thrust of these theoretical contestations, some Chinese scholars have made conscious efforts to engage purposively with ancient Chinese history and philosophy as critical intellectual resources to produce theoretically innovative scholarship and valuably alternative knowledge of IR. In this notable development, ancient Chinese history and philosophy have been rediscovered, excavated, explored and interrogated in recent Chinese international studies, which have seen some encouraging development and offer promising prospect of original contributions to global IR knowledge production. Such an intellectually creative endeavour has been sometimes labelled as a ‘cultural turn’ or ‘a historical turn’ in Chinese international studies and as a deliberate attempt at constructing a Chinese school of IR (Zhang and Chang 2016).

Parallel to this notable turn to ancient history and philosophy in Chinese international studies is ‘a renaissance in the history of international thought’ in the trans-Atlantic IR, as the fifty years’ rift between intellectual history and international relations came to an end with the ‘dawn of a historiographical turn’ in the studies of international relations at the turn of the century (Bell 2001; Armitage 2004). In David Armitage’s (2013: 1) rather upbeat assessment, international intellectual history — i.e. intellectual history of the international — has developed within just over a decade between 2000 and 2013 to become ‘an identifiable field, with an expanding cannon of works, a burgeoning set of questions and a fertile agenda of research’ from a field that ‘had neither a local habitation nor a name’, ‘had no common agenda, no coherent body of scholarship and no self-identifying practitioners’, and ‘occupied no territory on the broader map of contemporary historiography’. This is a return to a tradition in social science research, which sees that history and theory ‘are inextricably linked’, and ‘not only are they both inseparable; they are also in a specific sense interminable (Runciman 1969: 174).’
These two seemingly unconnected yet parallel intellectual developments in the trans-Atlantic and the Chinese IR scholarly communities raise a number of intriguing and challenging questions. In what sense can the recent engagement with ancient Chinese history and philosophy by Chinese IR scholars be read as an ‘international turn’, i.e. as their conscious attempts at (re)discovering the ‘international’ in ancient Chinese political thought? More broadly, can international thought be found in Chinese intellectual history? If so, what is it like? Is there a distinctive Chinese (call it Confucian, if you like) tradition of international thought? What are the limits of current renaissance in the intellectual history of the international exposed by an exploration of the international in the ancient Chinese political thought? And how can the studies of Chinese international thought be integrated into the global intellectual history of the international?

In the rest of this paper, I conduct three brief discussions to further open up, rather than to answer, these questions. In the first part, I provide an analytical reading of three particular engagements with ancient Chinese history and philosophy undertaken respectively by Yan Xuetong (and his Tsinghua associates), Qin Yaqing and Zhao Tingyang as exemplary of the international turn in the studies of ancient Chinese political thought. This is followed, in the second part, by a consideration of the drivers for and the explanations of this international turn. The third part looks at the limits of this critical move taken by Chinese scholars and it teases out challenging questions it helps raise to in regard to the international turn in intellectual history in the trans-Atlantic IR.

**The ‘International Turn’ in the Studies of Ancient Chinese Political Thought**

Much has been said about the search for a Chinese international relations theory and the construction of a Chinese School of International Relations. (Qin 2007, Paltiel 2011, Kristensen and Nielsen 2013, Wang and Buzan 2014, Nosselt 2015, Zhang and Chang, 2016) Behind the hype of the Chinese School of IR and their critics is an unfolding scholarly struggle to wrestle with an intellectual dilemma, i.e. that the trans-Atlantic IR, which is dominant in the discipline, has become both indispensable and inadequate in advancing Chinese knowledge of IR. Surely, it has not escaped the attention of the critically minded Chinese IR scholars that European history from
Thucydides’ *The History of the Peloponnesian War* to the treaty of Westphalia and conversations among European philosophers from Plato to Kant are central to and constitutive of the disciplinary genealogies of IR and its theory construction. (Bagby 1994, Welch 2003) Whether the use of history and philosophy in the trans-Atlantic IR theorization is a source of inspiration for Chinese scholars to explore local Chinese history and philosophy for theoretical innovation is likely to remain, however, a matter of debate. What is less disputable is that it does lend considerable epistemological legitimacy to the Chinese historical and philosophical explorations as they are seen as parallel to the well-trodden paths to theorizing IR in the discipline.

Viewed in hindsight, it is perplexing that ancient Chinese history and philosophy should have been largely neglected for so long in the scholarship produced in both the Chinese and the trans-Atlantic IR epistemic communities; and that such paucity of engagement in the production of relevant scholarship as an intellectual anomaly has not been noted earlier. This is in spite of the fact that ancient Chinese history and philosophy have been and continue to be intensively studied by a host of Chinese and Western scholars in humanities, producing new interpretations and enriched understanding. Yet, with a few exceptions, IR scholars in both the West and China have not, until recently, explored this rich heritage—historical and philosophical—in any meaningful way either in their attempts at theorizing IR or in their approach to historicizing the idea of the international. This unique social order in deep world history, which is characterized by three intertwining and legitimated foundational institutions, namely, anarchy, hierarchy and society, has been largely left unexplored as a valuable source for theoretical innovation of IR and richer historical understanding of the evolution of contemporary international society. It is therefore immensely encouraging to see that the exploration of ancient Chinese history and philosophy as rich indigenous sources for theoretical innovation has been one productive thrust in Chinese scholarly search for alternative knowledge of IR (Sun, 1999; Ye, 2003, Ye and Wang 2006, Zhang 2009). Recent scholarship published in both Chinese and English has started to open up both the historical and the philosophical investigations of ancient China for IR scholars.
In claiming an ‘international turn’ in the studies of ancient Chinese political thought, I take ‘international thought’ to mean, following Robert Jackson (2005: 1), principally three inquiries, namely, ‘an inquiry into the fundamental ideas and beliefs involved in the arrangement and conduct of world affairs over time’; ‘an inquiry into the values at stake’ such as peace, security, independence, order, and justice, among others; and an inquiry ‘into the language and discourse of world affairs’. Such an understanding of international thought is transtemporal as well as transhistorical. It does not necessarily share the assumptions taken to be fundamental and foundational for modern international thought, namely, ‘the separation of the domestic and the foreign; the primacy of states over all other actors in the external realm, …; international law as the positive law of a system of states under conditions of international anarchy; and the states-system as a self-policing club with its own hierarchical standards of admission and exclusion (Armitage 2015: 117)’. This claim of an international turn also assumes that international thought as a body of knowledge as understood above can be (re)discovered and (re)constructed through close and contextual readings of classical canons of ancient Chinese history and philosophy and by creative interpretations of ideas and concepts articulated by key classical thinkers in ancient China. This is no doubt a contestable assumption, if it is not entirely controversial.

For the analytical brevity of this paper, a brief account is provided blow of three distinctive research programmes as representative of the international turn in the exploration of ancient Chinese political thought and as exemplary of the collective efforts of Chinese scholars to assert the subjectivity of Chinese IR. They are undertaken by three influential Chinese scholars working at the forefront of producing innovative IR scholarship in China. They are respectively, Yan Xuetong, Qin Yaqing and Zhao Tingyang.

Yan Xuetong and the Tsinghua Approach: (Re)discovering International Thought in Ancient China

The so-called Tsinghua approach has been led and advocated by Yan Xuetong, a leading Chinese IR scholar and a self-identified realist. It is labelled the Tsinghua approach because a distinctive research program aimed at rediscovering ancient
Chinese international thought has been conducted by a small group of researchers with institutional links with Tsinghua University’s Institute of International Relations headed by Yan. The Institute runs two key journals, one in Chinese 国际政治科学 (International Political Science Quarterly) and the other in English The Chinese Journal of International Politics now published by Oxford University Press. It is through these two journals that new scholarship and knowledge produced by this research program has been disseminated both in China and internationally. The publication by the prestigious Princeton University Press in 2011 of Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power edited by Daniel Bell makes available to a global audience selected works by Yan as well as works by his associates and critics. It helps stimulate further debates about the promise and the peril of the Tsinghua approach to theorizing IR in the global discipline.

Empirically, the historical period in ancient Chinese history that the Tsinghua approach chooses to focus its attention on is the so-called Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (771-221 BC), a prolonged period of incessant warfare when anarchy prevailed in a highly competitive inter-state system with the fragmentation and annexation of states the order of the day. This period happens to overlap with the age of philosophers (551–221 BC) in ancient Chinese history, which is closely identified with the wellspring of Chinese philosophical, political and social thought. The ‘battle of ideas’ among ancient philosophers in this period produced substantially different propositions for dealing with the problem of war and peace, power and authority and order and justice and led to plurality and variety of Chinese political thought, which the doxographers of the early Han (206 BC–AD 220) would retrospectively categorize as Rujia (Confucianism), Daojia (Daoism), Fajia (Legalism), Mojia (Moism) and Zajia (Eclecticism). For Yan and his associates, it is the common philosophical and political discourse on relations among states shared among all contending schools of thought that they are interested in exploring, which constitute what they call the inter-state political philosophy.

For this purpose, seven key philosophers in the pre-Qin China: Kongzi (Confucius), Menzi (Mencius), Laozi, Mozi, Guanzi, Hanfeizi and Xunzi have been closely examined. Their ideas and conceptualizations of power, authority,
hegemony, war, and justice have been scrutinized. Their deliberations of how morality informs interest and is related to order, and why hierarchy is conducive to stability, and in which way moral leadership fosters humane authority as supreme power have been interrogated. One crucial finding of this excavation of knowledge is that the conceptualization of power by ancient Chinese philosophers differs conspicuously from that of classical and contemporary Western thinkers. While not denying the importance of material power, ancient Chinese philosophical discourse sees power as derived mostly, if not exclusively, from non-material sources with a firm moral claim. Morality therefore is the core of any claim to political power, as it gives legitimacy to the claim of power. There is, in other word, an ethical dimension in any claim to power, if the legitimacy of power is not based on coercion. There is at the same time an emphasis on ‘the context sensitivity of Confucian ethics (Yan 2011).’

It follows that there are three distinctive ways of exercising power in constructing a hierarchical international order: humane authority (Wangquan 王权), hegemony (Baquan 霸权), and tyranny (Qiangquan 强权). Yan and his associates argue. Humane authority, based on the power of persuasion rather than coercion, is the highest form of rulership with strong moral claims, for example from the Mandate of Heaven, for its legitimacy and leadership. The exercise and acceptance of humane authority does not, therefore, rest on claims to material power. International order based on the exercise of humane authority is the most stable and long lasting, as ‘a humane authority under heaven relies upon its ultrapowerful moral force to maintain its comprehensive state power in first place in the system (Bell 2011: 13).’ Tyranny (Qiangquan 强权) on the other hand is ‘the lowest form of rule, relying exclusively on military force and stratagems.’ For such understanding and interpretation of the centrality of power in ancient inter-state relations, Yan has been labelled a ‘moral realist’ (Zhang 2012).

The Tsinghua approach clearly seeks to make a distinctive contribution to IR theorization through exploring valuable indigenous sources related specifically to ancient Chinese history and philosophy. Such modest goal is explicitly stated in the preface of one of Yan’s edited book, when he remarked...
The core goal of editing this book is the hope that through uncovering anew pre-Qin inter-state political thought I would provide new resources for Chinese scholars to enrich existing international relations theory (Quoted in Paltiel, 2011: 11).

Yan does envision a more ambitious goal for the study of ancient Chinese political thought in the long run. That is ‘to create a new international relations theory on the basis of both pre-Qin thought and contemporary international relations theory’, for ‘it is only by creating a new theory that we can fully prove the value of studying pre-Qin thought (Yan 2011: 221).’ Yan is unenthusiastic about the idea of constructing a Chinese School of IR. In his words, ‘if we envision IR as a scientific inquiry, then IR theory should be universally applied. If we do not need a Chinese school of physics or chemistry, why do we need a Chinese school of IR theory? (Yan 2011: 259)

Qin Yaqing: Reinventing Confucian Relationalism

As a leading Chinese IR theorist and self-identified constructivist, Qin Yaqing (2012: 78) shares with Yan Xuetong the aspiration of theoretical innovation by ‘taking its inspiration from Western theories and engaging them with Chinese culture, practices and worldviews’ and through ‘an inter-cultural dialogue with more critical reflections’. His research project aims at developing a theoretical model of processual constructivism ‘informed by social constructivism and Chinese philosophical traditions’ and ‘by incorporating and conceptualizing two key Chinese ideas— processes and relations’ with a view to developing ‘a theory on relationality to understand the dynamic international relations (Qin 2009: 5).’ Relationality, Qin (2012: 85) argues, is ‘the pivotal concept in Chinese society, developed over millennia, and practiced by generations’. It is deeply ‘rooted in traditional Chinese practices and thought’, which can be traced back to Yi Jing (Book of Change), where the fundamental concept for governance was deliberated and understood by ancient Chinese philosophers. In contrast to the trans-Atlantic IR theorization that takes rationality as its hard core, Qin takes the Chinese idea of ‘relationality’ as the hard core of his theoretical construct by giving ‘relations’ some ontological status, and theorizes it ‘following social science principles (Qin 2012: 79-81).’
Qin identifies three components of his theory of relationality: process in terms of relations, the meta-relationship, and relational governance. On the Chinese dialectics of meta-relations (i.e. the ‘relation of relations’), Qin contends that ‘Like Hegelian dialectics, it sees things in opposite and interactive poles; but unlike Hegelian dialectics, it assumes that the relations between the two poles (yin and yang) are non-conflictual and can co-evolve into a harmonious synthesis, a new form of life containing elements of both poles and which cannot be reduced to either.’ Chinese dialectics thus ‘allows room for a “process approach”, making harmony possible ‘by combining opposites and thwarting conflict.’ In international relations, ‘Chinese dialectics does not assume the non-existence of conflict. Rather it takes conflict as representing progressive steps toward harmony, which is the highest form of life (Qin 2012: 80-82).’

Relational governance, Qin (2012: 82-83) argues, is ‘a more culturally oriented behaviour’ rather than merely based on cost-benefit calculation. It is ‘a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust that evolves through a shared understanding of social norms and human morality’. Relations should therefore be taken as the basic unit of analysis. Taking global governance as a social environment, governance is more of a process of balancing, maintaining and managing relations rather than just that of controlling and regulating behaviour of rational actors through networks of institutions to realize rule-based governance. In this understanding, ‘negotiations’ become an important process of managing relations. Qin emphasizes, however, that relational governance is complementary to rule-based governance in international relations (Qin 2011).

Like Yan, Qin is emphatic that his theorization combines rediscovering China’s traditional thought and practice with inspirations from the trans-Atlantic IR theories. His theory provides a complimentary account of the dynamics in international relations and enriches the existing theories rather than displace any of them. Unlike Yan, Qin is unequivocal that theory of social sciences has its own geocultural birthmarks based on the living experience and practice of people (Qin
Only when a specific theoretical innovation eventually transcends local traditions and experiences can it become universally valid. Qin is a strong advocate for constructing a Chinese School of International Relations.

**Zhao Tingyang: Reinterpreting Tianxia**

Unlike Yan and Qin, Zhao is not an International Relations scholar. A philosopher by training, Zhao has pursued his career as a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His intervention in the construction of Chinese international theory from a cognate discipline is largely unanticipated with the publication in 2005 of his *Tianxia Tixi* (The System of All-under Heaven). It has been nevertheless most productive in generating debates among Chinese scholars about how ancient Chinese history and philosophy as a critical resource could and should be drawn upon for innovative theorization of IR. Zhao’s works since 2005 has sought to advance a philosophical critique of the worldview prevailing in Western philosophy and IR theory. It is his sustained attack on the ontology and epistemology of Western political thought that inserts him in the meta-theoretical debate in the trans-Atlantic IR.

The key claim that Zhao has made is that today’s world is a non-world, i.e. philosophically and institutionally it is not a world in its true sense. The only world that prevails today is geographical one that is institutionally failed and politically abandoned. The ontological world understood and interpreted by Western philosophy is a problematic one because it is a world constituted by rational state actors, who pursue their narrow national interests. The world-ness of the world is sadly missing because Western political theory and international theory justify national interest in governing world politics, thus denying the world its world-ness. The existing institutions created by powerful states and for powerful states do not promote universal wellbeing (Zhao 2005). ‘The failure of world politics is essentially the failure of [Western] philosophy (Zhao 2009: 7).’ Zhao is scathingly critical of Kant at a time when Kant, in the words of David Armitage (2004-107-08), ‘has become variously the theorist of democratic peace, the avatar of institutional internationalism and the grandfather of globalisation.’ The Kantian vision of perpetual peace and its modern incarnation (i.e. democratic peace), he argues, fail to transcend, least of all
overcome, the cultural and spiritual divides among civilizations. The idea of ‘a federation of free states’ constructs insiders and outsiders in the world and it does more to divide than to unite the world. So does Western philosophy.

Zhao calls for ‘a philosophical renewal of all-under-heaven (Zhao 2009: 9)’ and argues for an imaginative and creative use of ancient Chinese political thought, particularly the idea of Tianxia (all-under-heaven) to foster an all-inclusive worldview and to imagine a world that is of all and for all, where nothing is ‘foreign’ or ‘pagan’. ‘Viewing the world as a whole is an epistemological principle first used by Laozi’. As Chinese philosophy always considers the world more as a political body than a scientific object, it is a political epistemology not a scientific one that informs ancient Chinese philosophy. ‘Chinese philosophy deals more with the problems of relations and the heart, whereas Western philosophy concentrates more on the truth and the mind (Zhao 2009: 10).’ A global political philosophy constructed around the idea of Tianxia is to cultivate a worldview equivalent to, in his words, ‘a mind at peace, free from the trap of thinking in terms of war, enemy, winner and loser. It is different as political mentality from those of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, Freud, Schmitt, Morgenthau, and Huntington, and different in a practical sense from the hegemonic order of Pax Romana, Christian cosmopolitanism and democratic peace under US leadership (Zhao 2005: 7; translation is from Qin: 2012: 74).’ For Zhao, ‘a philosophical renewal of all-under-heaven’ is indispensable in search of such a global political philosophy. It entails ‘rethinking China’; and ‘the historical significance of “rethinking China” lies in recovering China’s own ability to think (Zhao 2005: 7).’

The ‘International Turn’ in Chinese IR as Political and Intellectual Projects

Clearly, ancient Chinese history and political thought have been taken very seriously in all three research programmes discussed above in search of international thought in China’s deep history and Chinese classical philosophical works. These attempts have been variously described as the ‘indigenization through a synthesis of traditional Chinese thought and modern IR theory (Zhang, F. 2012: 80)’; the ‘hybridization of unique experiences and universal assumptions (Krisetensen 2016)’; and ‘constructing a dialogue between Western international theories and Chinese
cultural thinking (Qin 2012: 78).’ Indeed, as Qin Yaqing (2012: 69-70) himself remarked in comparing the three research programmes, ‘All of them attempt to go back to the Chinese tradition, culture, philosophy, and practice for their theoretical nutrition, or in other words, they all recognise the importance of culture and seek to reconstruct in some way cultural and philosophical ideas into contemporary international theory’. Taken together, the international turn represented by these three research programmes has played a very important role in shaping IR theoretical debates in China in general and the construction of a Chinese School of IR in particular. It has produced considerable theoretical ferment around the questions of local knowledge production about IR in China.

What are then the political and intellectual projects embedded in and promoted by this international turn? International Relations, like any social phenomenon, to borrow Martti Koskenniemi (2004: 2), is a complex set of practices and ideas, as well as interpretations of those practices and ideas, and the way we engage in them or interpret them cannot be dissociated from the larger professional, academic or political projects we have.

No adequate understanding of the international turn as a set of social practices is possible, therefore, without a real appreciation of the challenging circumstances confronting the Chinese IR scholars in their attempts at new knowledge production. To the extent that IR constitutes part of ‘colonial expenses’ of social sciences (Grovgogui, 2013: 248), asserting and establishing the epistemological legitimacy of alternative knowledge claims is to fundamentally undermine the prevailing assumptions about what is theoretically knowable. It is to contest the existing relationship between the subject and the object in IR. It is to contend that ‘not only our knowledge and evidence changes or grows throughout history, but our understanding of what can count as knowledge can be historicized as well (Sturm 2014).’ It is to assert the subjectivity of Chinese IR. Such epistemological ferment is a particular historical context and constitutes one indispensable condition that makes possible and gives meaning to the tentative moves to rediscovering international thought in ancient China for theoretical innovation.
This is conditioned at the same time by an acute intellectual dilemma mentioned earlier. For better or worse, the trans-Atlantic IR is integral to, and has become indispensable in any account of, IR disciplinary growth in China and Chinese knowledge repertoire of IR. Chinese IR scholars as late-comers to the IR theorization enterprise cannot, therefore, escape from existing vocabulary, concepts, categories, theoretical tools and can hardly dispense with the existing ‘universals’. In the Chinese IR epistemic community, as in many others on the margins of global IR epistemic community, there have long been articulations of complaints about and resistance to the much criticized intellectual hegemony of American IR (or trans-Atlantic IR). Yet, it is only recently that the trans-Atlantic IR theories have been increasingly seen in China as inadequate in explaining the systemic transformation of the unipolar world, in understanding foreign policy challenges a rising China has to confront, and more broadly, in meeting the needs distinctive to the Chinese IR. Still, both Yan and Qin, while disagreeing on the universal claims of theory, are emphatic that the purpose of their attempts at (re)discovering international thought in ancient China is to enrich not to substitute the existing IR theories developed in the trans-Atlantic IR (Yan 2011, Qin 2012). As one critic puts it, for them, ‘Chinese experiences and philosophies function as sources of unique local data on which to test and enrich universal theories’. Worlding IR in this fashion, therefore, may open up ‘different ways of being and experiencing the world, but not different ways of knowing the world (Kristensen 2016).

Intellectually, all three research programmes assert, and attempt to establish, the epistemological legitimacy of resurrecting ancient Chinese philosophy and history as critical resources to draw upon to construct new knowledge, to contest exclusive epistemological claims of the trans-Atlantic IR, and to enrich the existing scholarship. Tentative as they are, in rediscovering ancient Chinese international thought and wisdom in this fashion, all three offer an implicit critique of an acute form of historicism—‘Europe first, then elsewhere’ in Chakrabarty’s formulation—the subalternity of non-Western, third world histories and the notion that only Europe is theoretically knowable (Chakrabarty 2001: 28-30) in the development of IR theory. In no small measure, all three try to reverse the subject-object relationship in the studies of International Relations. To assert the identity as the knower is also to
overcome what Tu Weiming (1998) calls the Enlightenment mentality—that came to dominate Chinese intellectual thinking about the world and the world history and by the same token the interpretation of Chinese history after the mid-19th century (Brook and Blue 1999). This is what Zhao Tingyang (2005) calls ‘recovering China’s ability to think’. For all three, it is through consciously and purposively engaging in intercultural dialogue that they seek new knowledge formations. It is in such a dialogue, however, that one senses a historical motion and political, even personal, struggle with the presence of the indispensable yet inadequate West. Little wonder it is to see how much the West is embedded in these distinctively non-Western and Chinese approaches to theorizing IR!

There is no doubt that these three scholars share some intellectual assumptions and emotional dispositions about ancient Chinese history and philosophy. Their respective and selective engagement with ancient Chinese history and philosophy from a variety of analytical, historical and normative perspectives, however, reflect professional trainings, political preferences, and personal idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved. Further, if the purpose of reinterpreting and reconstructing the past is to serve the present, it is inevitably a matter of political and moral choice how and, indeed whether, each individual scholar embraces the so-called ‘motivational presentism’, i.e. ‘reasons for why we study what we study in the here and now (Armitage 2015: 119).’ To the extent that each research programme undertaken has a particular ‘presentist’ political project to advance, the common drivers for them are historical circumstances (China’s search for wealth and power after the Opium War), political exigencies (exercise of sovereign rights and national security and regime survival) and policy concerns (social and economic development in the context of China’s rise). For them, these combined considerations dictate that China should have its own distinctive master research narratives in IR, which informs foreign policy and international relations agenda of a rising China in the context of rapid systemic transformation of international relations. In the words of Qin Yaqing (2012: 85),

It is clear that when they go back to the Chinese tradition, their purpose is to find ways and means for today’s world. No matter whether we are talking
about hegemonic power, the all-under-heaven system or relationality, they are all closely related to the problems we face today. Furthermore, China’s rise and the state’s relations with the international community constitute a major theme that frequently appears in their discussion.

Zhao Tingyang puts it in a different way. ‘The historical significance of “rethinking China”, in his words, ‘lies in recovering China’s own ability to think, reconstructing its world views, values and methodologies, and thinking about China’s future, Chinese concepts about the future and China’s role and responsibilities in the world (Zhang 2010).’ Yan Xuetong is more explicit. One of the purposes of studying the pre-Qin political philosophy is to ‘draw lessons for policy today’ and to inform China’s grand strategy for its peaceful rise (Yan 2011: 200-221). One might also argue that the shared political purposes and objectives of these intellectual projects are informed by a particular Chinese intellectual tradition, i.e. ‘the intersection of moral philosophy and the statecraft (Paltiel 2011: 400)’. For good reasons, the political projects these research programmes seek to advance have attracted criticisms. It is nevertheless highly debatable whether such indigenous attempts at (re)discovering Chinese international thought are aimed at fulfilling the function of legitimizing the one-Party rule in China today as Noesselt (2015) claims. It is more of a misrepresentation to suggest that Zhao’s exploration of the idea of Tianxia as a political and philosophical concept for worlding IR aims at reviving the old hierarchical and Sino-centric order in East Asia, emblematic of China’ hegemonic ambitions in the 21st century (Callahan 2008).

Two ‘International Turns’ and the Prospect of a Global History of International Thought

This international turn in Chinese IR is undoubtedly tentative and highly contested. It is arguably fragile, as it is subject to criticisms of methodological nationalism; and some arguments advanced by its protagonists may be regarded as suspect of Chinese exceptionalism. Questions have also been raised about what international thought, if any, can be excavated from China’s imperial epoch, which lasted over more than two thousand years; and how different it might be from that emanating from the anarchical period of the pre-Qin China; and why the Chinese scholars have not made
any attempts at (re)discovering it (Paltiel 2011, Wang and Buzan 2014). Nevertheless, what is particularly intriguing and significant in a broader global and comparative perspective is the fact that this international turn in the studies of ancient Chinese history and philosophy should have coincided with the international turn in intellectual history in the trans-Atlantic IR discussed recently by David Armitage, among others. There is no evidence to suggest that either is remotely aware of the other. Chinese scholars pioneering the international turn as discussed above are blissfully unaware of the renaissance in the history of international thought in the trans-Atlantic IR. Intellectual historians in the trans-Atlantic IR have not taken any notice of the international turn in China. Both have, however, brought back the humanist tradition in political thought in exploring the international in the longue durée as a critique of and a correction to increasingly positivistic IR theorization. Their respective attempts at (re)discovering and resurrecting the forgotten system of morals and politics in historical Europe and ancient China show shared intellectual commitment to historicizing ideas and concepts fundamental to IR theory construction, and indeed to what is counted as our knowledge of IR in general.

Compared with the international turn in intellectual history in the trans-Atlantic IR, the international turn in China has several limitations. In the first instance, there was no rift between intellectual history and International Relations in China. There has been no intellectual drive or momentum, therefore, for mending that rift. Disciplinary anxieties for a rapprochement between IR and intellectual history are conspicuously absent, since IR as a disciplinary pursuit in China, as is well known, is relatively young. One might add that rather curiously, Chinese political theorists have kept a distance from IR. Further, if there are self-identified intellectual historians working on ancient China, the number of those who are interested in the history of international thought is perhaps negligible. The influence of the contextualist approach to the studies of the history of ideas is insignificant, and the impact of the linguistic turns on the theorization of IR is little felt in China. As a result, intellectual history is still very much marginalized in the studies of the political. There have been very limited exchanges, if at all, between Chinese IR scholars and intellectual historians. If Chinese IR scholars have explored the international thought in ancient Chinese history and philosophy, intellectual
historians in China have rarely engaged IR. Consequently, the international turn in China has not stimulated and cannot inspire new conversations between philosophers, political theorists, International Relations specialists and international and intellectual historians, which are decisively constitutive of the renaissance in the history of international thought in the trans-Atlantic IR. Zhao Tingyang is one of few exceptions of Chinese political philosophers, who have purposively engaged IR scholars in a conversation concerning the history of international thought.

As discussed above, both Yan Xuetong and Qin Yaqing are self-identified IR theorists with some interest in international thought in ancient China. However, neither Yan nor Qin are intellectual historians. The attempts made by both to (re)discover and (re)construct international thought in ancient Chinese political philosophy are intuitive and instrumental. For better or worse, the debates they have stimulated have captivated only a small group of Chinese scholars working on the making of Chinese international theory and on the construction of a Chinese school of IR, and of course their critics. There is not yet a systematic inquiry into the intellectual history of the international in Chinese political thought.

To the extent that this international turn in the exploration of ancient Chinese political thought adds a global dimension to and complements the renaissance in the history of international thought in trans-Atlantic IR, however, it also helps highlight the limits and problems of the international turn in intellectual history in the trans-Atlantic IR evaluated David Armitage and exemplified by his own works. Three questions can be raised in this regard that are worth teasing out.

First, what is ‘international thought’? David Armitage (2013: 7) defines international thought as ‘theoretical reflection on that peculiar political arena populated variously by individuals, peoples, nations and states and, in the early modern period, by other corporate bodies such as churches and trading companies’. Is this definition too limiting and too bound up with the European historical experience? Is such understanding of international thought parochially embedded in culturally specific and historically situated experience and philosophical edifice? What has been excluded from such a definition? If historical writings on war and peace, diplomacy and law, sovereignty and the state are indeed what come to define
the study of international relations since Thucydides (Armitage 2004: 99), what about those historical writings before the early modern period and beyond Europe? Putting it differently, is there international thought before early modernity in Europe? Can international thought as ‘an historical corpus of reflection on the international’ (Armitage 2015: 129) be found in the non-European world?

This leads to the second question, the question of longue durée in the historiography of the international. Armitage (2012) argues strongly for the importance of longue durée intellectual history, exemplified by his personal endeavour to explore the intellectual history of civil war as a ‘big idea’ from ancient Rome to the present. Yet, he is convinced that it is correct ‘to see the full emergence of the international as post-dating the Renaissance, not least when historiographical analysis converged with natural jurisprudence in the works of Pufendorf and Vattel (Armitage 2015: 125).’ He anchors foundations, if not the origins, of modern international thought firmly in the age of European empires and states and traces them back genealogically to the Enlightenment thinkers in the long eighteenth century (Armitage 2013). This view of longue durée intellectual history of the international has serious historiographical implications, not in the least because it may lead to the production of what one critic of Armitage calls ‘a new master narrative in which the revolution of 1776 comes to occupy a similar status to the 1648 Peace of Westphalia in the historiography of International Relations (Hutchings, 2014: 392).’ It may also come to legitimate the exclusion of longue durée intellectual history, European as well as non-European, that have enabled as well as conditioned the full emergence of the international in its modern manifestations in the long eighteenth century.

Finally, it is the question where to look for international thought? Armitage’s own exploration of the intellectual history of the international has heavily relied on British historiographical sources. His excavation of international thought has been mostly performed by looking into the canonical works of principally British political thinkers from Hobbs to Locke. In responding to his critics, Armitage (2015: 125) acknowledges that international thought in its various manifestations needs to be reconstructed ‘high, middle and low’, i.e. such resources as ‘manuals for diplomats;
collections of treaties (and the texts of the treaties themselves); the works of journalists and publicists’, among others, must be included. Although he has warned against ‘dangers in relying on predominantly Western historiography for conceptions of the international’ (Armitage 2015: 126), his works have rarely moved beyond Western historiography. The pivotal historical moments when ideas concerning the international changed or were made are all found in European history.

Final Words

This is where and how the international turn in the exploration of ancient Chinese political thought complements the renaissance in the history of international thought in the trans-Atlantic IR. Terry Nardin (2015: 101) is hopeful that ‘the enterprise of international intellectual history is likely to become more inclusive as the study of ideas, thinkers, and texts in languages other than European ones, and by scholars in other parts of the world, increases’. This suggests that a lot beyond the European historiography needs to be interrogated and scrutinized for international thought. If Armitage (2015: 120) is right in claiming that theology remains ‘one of international thought’s foundations that is yet to be fully excavated’, one could legitimately ask what non-Western historiography, for example of the Axial Age (Bellah and Joas 2012), remains to be fully excavated in constructing a truly global intellectual history of the international in the longue durée? Can a Confucian tradition of international thought be meaningfully constructed not necessarily as a coherent intellectual edifice but as the grinding of the intellectual optics through which the world is seen and understood in the past and at present, perilous as such an enterprise may be? How can the excavation of the international in ancient Chinese political thought contribute to a comparative historical research project through a conversation with the international turn in intellectual history in the trans-Atlantic IR? Efforts to search for answers to these questions are indispensable to making the renaissance in the history of international thought a truly global enterprise.
References:


