Assessing Possible Chinese IRT Contributions to Contemporary IRT: Shapes, Identities and Emancipation.

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It can be argued that the relatively young field of International Relations as a separate discipline has arisen somewhat organically in the wake of World War 1 out of a need to explain, and a wish to be able to predict, international conflict (Dunne and Schmidt 2008: 92). Subsequently, over the last decades a multiplicity of different ways or theories which attempt to explain the way in which states interact has appeared. The most famous among these International Relations Theories (IRTs) are Realism and Liberalism, with schools such as Constructivism and International Society School (The English School) gradually increasing in influence. Each of these theories originated with the goal to address different issues. Liberalism could be seen as reflecting the ideal of American foreign policy makers around 1919, and Realism as the more grim answer and critique to it. (Social) Constructivism, in turn, was a sociologist’s answer to a discussion lacking the consideration of actors’ motives and identities within the field of International Relations. Marxism and Critical Theory (Frankfurt School) were brought from other disciplines into the field of International Relations in order to add deterministic and emancipatory elements to the discussion. Lastly, Feminism originated out of a lack of gender theory in a “male-dominated” IR (Burchill et. al. 2005), and there are many other IRTs still adding to the IR discourse today.

A regional, Non-Western alternative?

Following these different theoretical perspectives - and in light of the much-touted “Rise of China” - debates regarding the absence and necessity of a national IRT have recently been brought up. In 2007, an essay series edited by Acharya and Buzan
named “Why is there no Non-Western IRT?” appeared, which highlighted the aspect of national origin of IRTs (Acharya and Buzan 2010). Though several different Non-Western academics contributed, one article by Qin Yaqing especially stands out. Where most authors discuss what a non-Western IRT entails, or what contributions from their countries would mean for the discipline, Qin calls for not a contribution, but an alternative “Chinese School” of IR. He notes that with a historical lack of a notion of sovereignty, nationalism or internationalism, or the absence of a dichotomy of the self and other, China and its Tianxia (天下, [sic] “all-under-heaven”) system are inherently incompatible with the current international society. He goes on to state that each national theory needs a “big idea”: America has democratic peace, the United Kingdom has international society, and China should have Datong (大同, Great Harmony), or Tianxia as its big idea. He concludes that China’s failed modernization is the cause of its move away from a distinct Confucian holistic approach. (Qin 2010).

Qin’s article points out some interesting issues. First, he rightly points out that not enough attention has been paid to the possibility of Confucian terms being applicable in IR discourse. Secondly, he is a good example of (and vanguard in) the discourse of an emergence of a Chinese school of IR (Acharya and Buzan 2010: 234). While other countries may be as active within the discipline of IR, it is China that is the most concerned with creating its own alternative. By creating a China School of IRT it is emancipating itself, it is also creating an IRT that is not universally applicable. Through this, the Chinese School becomes vulnerable to the same criticism that constituted the reason for its inception. Both of these two points are equally interesting, but also
inexorably connected with each other. Therefore this article will focus both on some of the Confucian thought that has been considered potentially useful by IR scholars. It will then focus on the larger issue of universality of Chinese IRT by taking the unusual approach of comparing it to Liberalism.

**Tianxia**

Undoubtedly, the most discussed, and potentially useful term used by Chinese IRT advocates, is the aforementioned *Tianxia* ideology. Though not discussed explicitly by prominent Confucian scholars such as Tu Wei Ming or Wm. Theodore de Bary, in whose works only the traditional, national components of Confucian thought are dealt with, it seems to be a popular theme with current rising Chinese IR scholars. However, it is the transition from the national to the international in which one of the biggest problems of blending Confucianist thought within contemporary IR becomes apparent. Starting around 1840, with the drive for modernity because of Western encroachment, China has given scarce attention to Confucianism, viewing it as an anachronistic obstruction to a restructuring China (Tu 1993: 166). As mentioned earlier, the separate discipline of IR did not take root until the first half of the twentieth century, so the literature discussing Confucianism within IR necessarily has to turn to a time in which there was no fully compatible society of states to speak of. Several scholars, however, explored the rich history of China to find an international situation close to the current one. For this, they turn to for example the old Chinese Qin dynasty (221-206 BC) or even before that, in which states were “independent in their economies, military powers and
cultures, but politically and ethically dependent on the empire’s institutional center”. (Zhou 2006: 34-35)\(^1\). This era was considered the Confucian ideal, in which all states fit into one big family hierarchy. Indeed the “Great Learning”, a part of Confucian canon on ethics in governing\(^2\), states: “The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom (here, Tianxia is translated as “kingdom”, but could also be read as “realm”), first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families.”\(^3\) (古之欲明明德於天下者。先治其國。欲治其國者。欲齊其家。 (Kenji 1994: 62)). In short, not only should the international system be considered one great family, it should also managed the way one would manage a family.

This family aspect of Tianxia has two implications for International Relations. First, like in a normal family, there is one nuclear family at the center (the emperor), and its relations with the rest of the family are based on proximity. Consequently, from direct control, to vassal states, to barbarians, there is a concentric pattern of influence that the center has over others. Thus, according to Chinese IR proponents, while influence may decrease with distance, there is nothing outside of this framework of relations, nothing “opposite” or “intolerant” (Qin 2010: 42). However, while the uniqueness of Tianxia and the tributary system is recognized, the argument that there was never a notion of any “other” to the Chinese “self” seems easily debunked. After all, China has always been an empire - in fact, in terms of civilizing others Tianxia also means “empire” (Callahan

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\(^1\) Interestingly, the example of the Qin state as the ideal example of the family hierarchy is contradicted by Fukuyama, who notes that the Qin state was the first actual modern state based on meritocracy and strong state institutions. The Qin state was short-lived however, and had to make way for the much more family (and nepotism) oriented Han dynasty (Fukuyama 2011: 77)

\(^2\) “The Great Learning”, as explained in the Daijisen Dictionary. 大辞泉：「大学」

\(^3\) Translation by Legge, James. [http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748g/](http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748g/)
2004: 34) - and with each dynasty China conquered new lands, or was conquered by others. With the fluidity of its borders and its inherent diversity, China was perhaps never physically detached from any other peoples, but exactly because of this cultural diversity it has always been battling over how “culturally exclusive” it must be to remain Chinese (Waldron 1990: 190). Consequently, on one level there is a center that encompasses the whole realm in a holistic manner, but on another level there is also the Chinese civilization which has to define itself against others. Remarkably, in calling for a Chinese alternative to contemporary IRT, Qin and other Chinese School proponents are exactly doing the latter. While they argue that China historically has never known the concept of an “other”, Chinese IRT does attempt to create a theoretical Chinese IRT “self” as opposed to the Western IRT “other”.

A hierarchy among states: realism and Chinese IRT

The second aspect of Tianxia is that of an accepted hierarchy between states involved in its framework, as in a family. In a realist worldview, all states have to create a balance of power, either by grouping together to counter a hegemon, or with a hegemon to counter another one. However, this balancing occurs out of a will to survive within a system that presupposes equality between all states (Dunne and Schmidt 2008: 92-93). Conversely, in a Tianxia system, polarized by Kang (2003: 167) against an “informal empire”, states are aware of explicit inequalities, and can act accordingly, resulting in more harmonious relations among “lesser states” under the “central state’s” umbrella. Under this system, states that bandwagon with the central power choose to do so because
the benefits will outweigh the price of sacrificing part of the state’s sovereignty. It should be noted here that, save for the hierarchical aspect, liberal institutionalism makes a similar argument that states want to work together to maximize absolute gains (Dunne 2008: 110-112). Furthermore, the argument that the implicit inequality between states in an “informal empire” moves them to behave differently than they would in a hierarchical system raises doubt. The EU, for instance, never contained any hierarchical system geared towards giving one central state more power. To be sure, some larger states have veto power, and states with larger populations get priority in some decision making processes. However, it does not refer to any states as “lesser states”, and indeed all states seem to have taken their positions in a quite organic, or informal, way. Perhaps the EU can be better examined through the ancient scholar Xun Zi, who presupposes a dual system of “Wang” (王 “True King”) and “Ba” (霸 “Hegemon”). While “Ba” is basically the concept of hegemony we know nowadays (for suppressing barbarians), “Wang” rather assumes that the primacy of the superpower is the result of benign government, and is used for dealing with states within its own sphere of influence. (Yan 2008: 136). This explanation of course also fits well for the US, which arguably adopts a “Wang” system when dealing with the EU, where military force is unnecessary to maintain a proper relationship. Outside of the EU, it uses the “Ba” system to get what it wants by applying force or double standards (Leonard 2008: 112). Though this framework is a useful one, it is covered by both Liberal Institutionalism (cooperation) and Constructivism (shared identities), both theories that Chinese IRT advocates scarcely deal with⁴. This is a pity because it leads to a willful disconnection of Chinese IRT from

⁴ Acharya (2014) also suggests the idea of a “Consociational Security Order” in which “unequal and culturally diverse groups” have a “relationship of mutual accommodation” and “prevent hegemony of any
mainstream IRT. As we see here, juxtaposing these theories could lead to finding common ground. While this issue will be discussed at greater length at the end of this paper, another vital and useful aspect of Confucianism which has been conspicuously absent from the international relations discussion should be considered first.

**Closer than we think? Liberalism and Chinese IRT**

The question on compatibility with existing IRT’s raises another pertinent point to consider: How do they add to the existing debate? To what extent are they incompatible? Liberalism in this case points to an interesting example for both an argument for and against a *raison d’être* of a Chinese School of IRT. On one hand, one reason for its existence is that it brings to our attention the national origin and the resulting lack of universality of some IRTs. Simply put: the proposition of Chinese IRT serves as a reminder that Liberalism could basically be seen as an American (Western) School of IRT (Dunne 2008: 110) and the English School as being decidedly Eurocentric (Little 2009: 60). In this sense its value cannot be overestimated, as the universality problem of IRTs constitutes a major issue within the discipline of International Relations. However, the fact that a proposed Chinese School lays bare the weaknesses of the study of International Relations does not mean that it should add to them. Indeed - somewhat ironically - if there is one school the proposed Chinese School of IRT has aspects in common with, it is Liberalism, which has also received little consideration by Chinese School proponents, perhaps exactly because it seems an exact opposite.

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particular group(s)” . This theory could be seen as a kind of similar alternative to the hierarchy/community models.
Though Liberalism on an ideological level suggests that the liberty of the individual is the central concern and that the state only acts as the servant of society, removing obstacles to freedom (Hoffmann 1987: 395), it displays different characteristics on a pragmatic, international level. Surely, terms that are also central to the Liberalist agenda such as compromise and peace (Hoffmann: 396) fit in with Confucian values, and the belief that the anarchical international system can be challenged or contained (Hoffmann: 402) fits well into Tianxia’s denial of anarchy. Furthermore, one could argue that the basic Mencian Confucian concept of human moral equality and natural dignity are “consistent with and morally supportive” of the ongoing debates on human rights and democracy (Bloom 1998). Also, even though the two have different types of morals, they do agree that certain morals are (or should be) universally acknowledged. Within Liberalism, this can be seen when looking at the debates on human rights and democracy (Burchill 2005: 68), while Confucianism focuses more on family values and virtuous leaders, as shown above. Much in the same way, both theories have ways of dealing with countries close to them, but they have different ways of explaining it. For instance, within Liberalism, the democratic peace thesis holds that democratic countries will not go to war with each other because, according to Kant, if the people have a say in it, they will have “great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise” (Kant 1991: 99-102). Until now, this theory might have held up between democratic states, but this could also be explained by the fact that historically speaking these countries have been allies with each other anyway (Dunne 2008: 112). In the Confucian case, as shown above, one could either look at the Wa and Ba theory, or at David Kang’s harmonious hierarchy theory to find an explanation for close cooperation of neighboring states. In short, while there may
be some differences in the details, these are generally theories that serve to legitimize the hegemonic position of both China and the U.S.

**Conclusion: Chinese IRT for whom and for what purpose?**

In this essay I have attempted to synthesize information from the two disciplines of International Relations and Confucianism, and from the very small debate that has attempted to discuss the relation between these two. However, exactly because of their ties to the Chinese culture, none of the sources have succeeded in looking at Confucianism as a school of thought that could contribute to mainstream IRT. This is because of several factors. First, the discussion is too crowded with either nationalist/emancipatory motives, or it is being held against an Orientalist background. The former goes especially for the Chinese School proponents that are mentioned in this article. Most sources apply Confucianism as an answer to the invasion of Western ideas. They all tend to follow the same pattern of intermittently using both “Confucianism” and “Chinese” to point out the same thing (notably Zheng 1999: 81-82 and Zhao 2006: 35), and refer at some point to the Western encroachment upon the Chinese civilization, which prior to the arrival of the West, was a peaceful civilization based on millennia of holistic, spiritual thought (Zheng 1999: 82, Qin 2008: 36). While avoiding discussions on the veracity of these claims, it should be pointed out that these do not help their credibility or the content of their proposed theories. Also, as has been pointed out in this paper, since the current international system is quite different from anything that existed in a time where Confucianism was actively used, Confucian literature itself has very little
to say on international relations. This leaves much open to interpretation by scholars themselves, and distances theory from practice. Indeed, the current foreign policy that has been employed by the Chinese government has been identified as being decidedly realist (Berger 2003: 396), so one would wonder about the use of a Chinese School if even the Chinese state has little or nothing to do with it. Perhaps Chinese IRT is not supposed to be used as a theory to predict (like Realism or Liberalism), but rather to explain China (the way Constructivism can). It is basic questions like these about the nature of Chinese IRT that need to be studied further. For this, it needs to develop more. The discourse should focus on looking at similarities between Chinese IRT and mainstream IRT, not on its differences. It should look at what it can contribute to mainstream IRT in order to obtain a legitimate spot in the current pantheon of theories, just like the English School did before it. In short, it should start working towards universalism (Acharya 2008: 75). For this, the mainstream IRT community will have to keep an open mind towards Chinese IRT, while Chinese IRT scholars should work to find common ground with the mainstream IRT. If Robert Cox is right by stating that “theory is always for someone, and for some purpose” (Cox 1981: 128), we should first look at who and what this theory serves, and have a renewed look at what exactly the purpose of this proposed theory should be.
Bibliography:


