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Recent Developments toward a Chinese School of IR Theory

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Yaqing Qin, APR 26 2016

A decade has passed since I published the article 'A Chinese school of IR theory: possibility and inevitability.' If the idea was more hypothetical at that time, and if most discussion then was around whether there should be a Chinese school and how it could be done, it is much closer to a reality now with ten years of sustained efforts to develop substantial IR theory that goes beyond the Western mainstream and is unmistakably imprinted with Chinese birthmarks.

Three developments are particularly noteworthy. The first is Zhao Tingyang's 'all-under-heaven system' argument, of which *A Possible World of All-under-heaven System* (2016) is representative. Zhao argues that the world governed by the state system is a 'non-world,' for inter-state institutions, by nature and by design, cannot solve trans-state and global problems. The Confucian 'all-under-the heaven system' is an inclusive system that eliminates the self-other boundary. Institutions designed and established for such a system are global in its real sense and constitute the prerequisite for establishing a global system and solving global problems. The world order, therefore, needs a philosophical reconstruction and must be based upon genuine world institutions as embodied in the Confucian worldview and informed by the ancient Chinese Western Zhou Dynasty (1100 BC-771 BC).

The second development is 'moral realism'. It takes power as its central concept and accepts the basic assumptions of realism, recognizing that anarchy is the nature of the international system, that national interest is the primary mover of state action, and that struggle for power and for world leadership is an inevitable reality of world politics. At the same time, however, it argues that morality plays an important role in exercising power. Very much drawing on Xunzi, an ancient Chinese philosopher, it holds that humane authority, a combination of power and morality, is more effective than coercive authority in the competition for hegemony. The book by Professor Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (2011), represents this line of thought. It is realism with Chinese characteristics.

I have developed a relational theory of world politics, which can be listed as the third strand. It conceives the international relations world as one composed of ongoing relations rather than mere discrete individual entities. This view assumes international actors as actors-in-relations, and takes processes defined in terms of relations in motion as ontologically significant. It puts forward the logic of relationality, arguing that actors base their action on relations in the first place. It uses as its epistemological schema the Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics, which sees polarities as immanently inclusive and mutually complementary, denying any dualistic structure and 'either-or' way of thinking. It is based on the practice of the Chinese cultural community and provides a different approach for understanding relationships in an increasingly complex world. The effort to develop the relational theory is reflected in my book *Relations and Processes* (2012) and in the article 'A Relational Theory of World Politics' (2016).

Despite the fact that Chinese scholars are developing theories along different paths, there are some commonalities in their intellectual pursuit. Firstly, perhaps most conspicuously, they all explore the traditional philosophies and thoughts embedded in the Chinese culture for intellectual inspiration. Confucianism is heavily drawn on by Zhao and myself, while the more power-oriented ancient Chinese thinker Xunzi provides the ideational basis for Yan. Secondly, they produce more systematically organized theories, making great effort to conceptualize and theorize about

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international relations realities. Recently, articles have been published around each of the three strands, in both Chinese and English, and efforts to continue to theorize are consistent and persistent. Thirdly, they purposefully aim to engage IR communities around the world, especially mainstream Western IR theory, for dialogue, discussion, and debate. They criticize Western IR theories and at the same time integrate them in their discourse. They publish in English so that they can communicate directly with the world of IR theory still dominated by the West. Fourthly, they are more knowledge-oriented. Except, perhaps, for Yan's moral realism, they do not seek to be particularly policy relevant. Rather, they think more about such basic things as social order and human behavior, believing that something from the Chinese civilization may add to the edifice of human knowledge.

The past ten years have seen a transition from a discussion on how to develop a Chinese school of IR theory to the emergence of substantial international theories exploring traditional Chinese cultural resources. This intellectual effort will undoubtedly continue.

About the author:

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