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Non-Western International Relations Theorisation: Reflexive Stocktaking

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YONG-SOO EUN, APR 12 2020

Building on and expanding my previous studies (Eun 2018; 2019a; 2019b), I map the terrain of the ongoing debate over various forms of non-Western IR theory-building enterprise and identify what is missing in the overall debate. In this article and the second article which will follow this piece, I follow the convention of using 'IR' to denote the academic discipline of International Relations and 'international relations' to refer to its substantive domain of study (i.e. the practice of global politics). More specifically, in this first short article, I examine whether the reasons given for the need to theorise a "non-Western" IR are well grounded and how we could further galvanise the project. In the second (follow-up) article, I will attempt to show why the ongoing enterprises must refocus their attention, broadening the range of their own questions and undertakings. Here I call our attention to reflexive solidarity. The discussion in the two articles is by no means exhaustive in scope. Nor do I imply that the discussion represents the total view of the non-Western IR communities. Nonetheless, I hope that, despite its necessary brevity, my engagement will be useful for understanding and advancing our debate on non-Western IR theorisation and theoretical diversity in the field.

"West-centrism" in IR

It is by now a well-run argument that International Relations (IR), as a discipline, is a Western-dominated enterprise. IR scholarship has long focused on and attached importance to great power politics based on "the Eurocentric Westphalian system" (Tickner, 2016: 158); much of mainstream IR theory is "simply an abstraction of Western history" (Buzan, 2016: 156). Furthermore, non-Western scholars have been excluded from "the mainstream of the profession" of IR (Lake 2016: 1113). Additionally, IR continues to seek "to parochially celebrate or defend or promote the West as the proactive subject of, and as the highest or ideal normative referent in, world politics" (Hobson, 2012: 1; see also Lake, 2016; Ling, 2013; Tickner, 2013). Let us take our pedagogical practice as a case in point. Based on an analysis of what is taught to graduate students at 23 American and European universities, Hagmann and Biersteker (2014: 303) have found that "the none of the 23 schools surveyed here draws on non-Western scholarship to explain international politics. World politics as it is explained to students is exclusively a kind of world politics that has been conceptualized and analysed by Western scholars." Publishing provides another case in point. A recent empirical study shows that "hypothesis-testing" works by American and other Global North scholars are published "approximately in proportion to submissions" in flagship political science and IR journals, while Global South scholars 'fare less well' in the review process (Breuning et al., 2018: 789). In short, IR is too Western centric.

Call for "Non-Western" IR Theory

It should therefore come as no surprise that many critical IR scholars have called for "broadening" the theoretical horizon of IR beyond "the current West-centrism" (Buzan 2016: 155). One of the early responses to this call was to draw renewed attention to non-Western societies' histories, cultures, and philosophies and incorporate them in the theorisation of international relations; in this context, whether there are any substantial merits to developing a non-Western IR theory and what such a theory would (or should) look like have now become topics of heated debate. Of course, as will be discussed in detail in the following section, contemporary events such as the rise of China have contributed to the development of non-Western (or indigenous) theories and concepts (Qin, 2011, 2016a; Yan, 2011; Zhang, 2012; Zhao, 2009). Advocates of Chinese IR and (by extension) non-Western IR theory building often point

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out that Asia has histories, cultures, norms, and worldviews that are inherently different from those derived from or advanced in Europe.

This idea has also resonance with discontent with the epistemic value of mainstream IR theories, namely realism, liberalism, and constructivism, all of which have Western—or, more specifically, “Eurocentric” (Patomäki, 2007)—analytical or normative underpinnings (Acharya and Buzan, 2017; Johnston, 2012). Western theories, the criticism goes, misrepresent and therefore misunderstand much of “the rest of the world” (Acharya, 2014: 647). For example, in his well-known piece, “Gettings Asia Wrong,” David Kang (2003: 57–58) notes that “most international relations theories derived from the European experience of the past four centuries ... do a poor job as they are applied to Asia.” Indeed, critiques of this kind have long served as a starting premise in theoretical studies on the international politics of Asia. Almost two decades ago, Peter Katzenstein (1997: 1) wrote as follows: “Theories based on Western, and especially West European, experience have been of little use in making sense of Asian regionalism.” Similarly, Jeffrey Herbst (2000: 23) commented that “[i]nternational relations theory, derived from an extended series of case studies of Europe, has become notorious for falling short of accounting for the richness and particularity of Asia’s regional politics.”

It is in this respect that Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan have put together a special issue and a follow-up edited volume (Acharya and Buzan, 2007; 2010), asking “Why is there no non-Western international theory?” *despite* the fact that “the sources of international relations theory conspicuously fail to correspond to the global distribution of its subjects” (Acharya and Buzan, 2010: 1-2). With the help of a group of scholars examining the status of IR theory or theoretical studies in various countries and sub-regions in Asia, Acharya and Buzan’s contributions show the reasons for the marginalisation of non-Western voices and histories in the global debates on IR theory and what needs to be done to mitigate the issue. Since Acharya and Buzan’s seminal forum was published, there has been a great deal of studies by non-Western IR communities that aim to develop new theories and concepts from their own perspectives

Here, China’s rise has added momentum to attempts to build new or indigenous theories—especially within the Chinese IR community. Yaqing Qin at the China Foreign Affairs University states that Chinese IR theory “is likely and inevitabl[y] to emerge along with the great economic and social transformation that China has been experiencing” (Qin, 2007: 313). The scholarly practices of building an IR theory “with Chinese characteristics” are a case in point. Although consensus on what “Chinese characteristics” actually are has yet to be determined, many Chinese (and non-Chinese) scholars hold that the establishment of a Chinese IR theory or a “Chinese School” of IR is desirable or “natural” (Kristensen and Nielsen, 2013: 19; Qin, 2016b); in this light, Confucianism, Marxism, “Tianxia” (all-under-heaven), and the Chinese tributary system are all cited as theoretical resources for Chinese IR (see, e.g. Kang, 2010; Qin, 2016a; Xinning, 2001; Wan, 2012; Wang, 2011; Xuotong, 2011; Zhang, 2012; Zhao, 2009).

An Example: Chinese IR

Although there have been multiple voices and different narratives about “Chinese IR,” let us look at three established Chinese scholars and their approaches to IR theory as representative of indigenous Chinese thinking on international relations: Qin Yaqing’s relational theory, Yan Xuotong’s moral realism, and Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* theory.

Qin Yaqing’s relational theory begins with his belief that existing mainstream IR theories fall short of answering how the world works. He holds that these theories, founded on the European Enlightenment’s belief in reason and ontological individualism, privilege individual actors’ rationality over social and processual relationality. By contrast, indigenous Chinese traditions, including Confucianism, foreground social contexts and relations, and the relationality that emerges from them. Qin (2016: 36) writes: it is “relationality” that determines human actors’ existence and meaning; we can exist only as “actors-in-relations.” From this perspective, interactions between and among states are defined by various types of relationships: equality, hierarchy, and relationships that fall between the two. Thus, the analysis of international relations “should start from a study of relations rather than taking nation-states as independent entities.... It is the social relationships that define what is rational and appropriate” (Qin 2016: 38). Also, Qin argues that relational theory is an evolutionary theory whose epistemology is based on the traditional Chinese understanding of dialectics, namely *Zhongyong*. Unlike the Hegelian understanding of dialectics, based on thesis, antithesis, synthesis, the two ends in *Zhongyong* dialectics are non-conflictual: they interact not as thesis and

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antithesis, but as co-theses, giving rise to a complimentary and co-evolutionary process (Qin 2018: 153-174).

Like Qin's work, Yan Xuetong's work on moral realism also draws on Chinese traditional thought and history, specifically those of pre-Qin dynasty thinkers and rulers. Although Yan is cautious about the possibility of establishing a distinctive "Chinese School" of IR, he believes that Chinese scholars should have "an interest in rediscovering traditional Chinese IR concepts" and enrich IR theories "with traditional Chinese thought" (Yan 2011: 255-259). The central questions posed by Yan's moral realism are why only some rising states can achieve their goals and why a hegemon cannot remain a hegemon forever. A related and more contemporary question is how and why China can narrow its power gap with the US. To answer these questions, he focuses on the history of the hegemony-aspiring state of Qi and the strategies taken by its prime minister, Xunzi. He then draws out key elements of moral realism, such as *Wang Dao* ("kingly way"). This traditional Chinese notion stresses the moral values of righteousness and benevolence over the legalistic Western values of equality and democracy. Yan's moral realism calls for a policy of leading by example that claims to avoid the "double standards" it finds in Western practices of world politics. It also suggests what sort of Chinese foreign policy would be conducive to forming an alternative international order and ensuring China's global leadership. While conceding that Chinese traditional values do not necessarily compete with Western liberal norms, such as justice and equality, Yan emphasises that they "can by all means transcend the hegemonic values of the United States" (Yan 2013:17).

Zhao Tingyang is probably the best-known scholar who has applied the Chinese concept of *Tianxia* to the study of international relations. In Chinese history and philosophy, *Tianxia* literally means "the earth or all lands under the sky" (Zhao 2005). The historical backdrop of Zhao's work is the events of the displacement of the Shang dynasty by the Zhou dynasty and the resulting challenge facing Zhou nationals. As a small tribe, the Zhou had to be able to control a large number of more powerful tribes, including the collapsed Shang. In coping with this challenge, the Zhou devised the system of *Tianxia* so as to maintain their legitimacy and manage the stability of the newly established political order. The *Tianxia* system aspires to "'harmony' through a universal agreement in the 'hearts' of all people" (Zhao 2005: 21-34). From the analysis of these historical experiences, Zhao develops the notions of world sovereignty and world order based on the *Tianxia* system. The highest unit of international relations is, he argues, the "world" and not the state; as such, the challenge of statecraft is world-building, not nation-building (Zhao 2005, 2009). He rejects the Westphalian nation-state model and criticises it for causing international conflicts and failed states. Relatedly, Zhao associates *Tianxia* with fairness and impartiality to all: *Tianxia* "envision[s] a world system characterized by harmony and cooperation without hegemony" (Zhao 2005: 35-43). He argues that *Tianxia* offers a "far better model of a future world order that takes into account the interests of the entire world," whatever its constituent elements (Zhao 2018: 123).

Criticisms

As is clear from the above, there has been a great deal of interest in non-Western IR theorisation; this trend includes a strong and increasing commitment to the development of indigenous IR theories among Chinese IR scholars. At the same time, however, a number of empirical, epistemological, and normative criticisms have been raised against attempts to develop a Chinese IR theory and (by extension) non-Western IR.

Empirically, the international relations of the Asian region are not fundamentally different from those of Europe, in the sense that anarchy, survival, and the balance of power have been the key operating principles of state-to-state interactions since the pre-modern period. For example, based on a detailed archive analysis of China's foreign relations under the Song and Ming dynasties, Yuan-kang Wang concludes that in the "anarchical" international environment at that time "Confucian culture did not constrain ... [Chinese] leaders' decisions to use force; in making such decisions, leaders have been mainly motivated by their assessment of the balance of power between China and its adversary" (Wang, 2011: 181). This finding leads Wang to defend the theoretical utility of structural realism based on the Westphalian system.

Epistemologically, too, critics point out that it is "unscientific" to emphasise and/or incorporate a particular culture or the worldview of a particular nation or region into IR theory, for a legitimately "scientific" theory should seek "universality, generality" (Choi, 2008; Xinning, 2001). Mainstream (positivist) IR theorists and methodologists argue

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that IR studies ought to seek observable general patterns of states' external behaviour, develop empirically verifiable "covering law" explanations, and test their hypotheses through cross-case comparisons. For example, Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba make it clear that generality is the single most important measure of progress in IR, stressing that "the question is less whether ... a theory is false or not ... than *how much of the world the theory can help us explain*" (King et al., 1994: 101, emphasis in original). From this perspective, any attempt to develop an indigenous IR theory, be it non-Western or Western, is suspect because it delimits the general applicability of theory. In the case of a Chinese IR theory, criticism of this kind can increasingly be found in studies by younger Chinese IR scholars. According to Xinning Song (2001: 68), Chinese scholars, especially younger ones who have studied in the West, think that it is "unscientific or unnecessary to emphasize the so-called Chinese characteristics." A similar criticism can be found among Korean IR scholars in regard to attempts to build a "Korean-style" IR theory (Cho, 2015). Critics of the "Korean School" of IR frequently ask how can we make a distinctively Korean IR theory while trying to be as generalisable as possible? Any theory or theorisation based on Korea's unique historical experiences, the criticism goes, "must be tested under the principle of generality" (Choi 2008: 215).

Normative criticisms of attempts to build a non-Western IR theory highlight the relationship between power and knowledge. Critics point out that although theory-building enterprises in the non-West contexts commonly begin by problematising Western-dominated IR, the ongoing scholarly practices and discourses associated with non-Western IR can also entail (or reproduce) the same hierarchic and exclusionary structure of knowledge production, which can fall prey to particular national or regional interests. For example, in his discussion of Chinese visions of world order, William Callahan doubts the applicability of *Tianxia*. He claims that what the notion of *Tianxia* does is "blur" the conceptual and practical "boundaries between empire and globalism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism". Rather than help us move towards a "post-hegemonic" world, *Tianxia* serves to be a philosophical foundation upon which "China's hierarchical governance is updated for the twenty-first century" (Callahan, 2008: 749). Echoing this view, Ching-Chang Chen (2011: 16) notes that although it is our "responsibility" to make IR more pluralistic and democratic, "most intellectual endeavors to construct non-Western IR theory in Asia run the risk of inviting nativism." Relatedly, Andrew Hurrell (2016: 149–150) has added that although developing culturally specific ways of understanding the world "undoubtedly encourages greater pluralism," attempts to do so can also lead to a national and regional "inwardness" that works to reproduce the very "ethnocentricities" that are being challenged.

Evolution: "Global IR"

These concerns, particularly that about the potential nativist undercurrent of the non-Western IR theory-building enterprise, are indeed shared by many non-Western IR scholars (see, e.g., Behera 2010; Chen 2012; Kosuke 2015; Shahi and Ascione 2016); for this reason, they often use the term "post-Western" IR, as opposed to "non-Western" IR. But their priority—as is the case in non-Western IR theorisation—is to address "the current West-centrism of IR" (Buzan, 2016: 156); to this end, they, too, draw attention to their cultural or philosophical traditions. Of course, this interest in traditions is intended not to establish a national or indigenous "school" of IR, but to embrace a wider range of histories, knowledge claims, and philosophies.

Going a step further, more recent studies, in the name of "Global IR" have begun to pay greater attention to how to overcome the West/non-West (self-other) binary when it comes to opening up the present parochial landscape of IR. Global IR sets out to safeguard against a tug of war between Western and non-Western IR and subsumption of one of them in favour of the other. Being wary of *both* problems, namely the current West-centrism in IR and the potential danger of nativism of non-Western IR theorisation, Global IR attempts to render international relations studies more inclusive and pluralistic in terms of theory and knowledge claims.

The idea of Global IR was first introduced by Amitav Acharya. In his presidential address at the annual convention of the International Studies Association in 2014, Acharya explained what Global IR is or should be. His background assumption is this: IR does "not reflect the voices, experiences ... and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the world" (Acharya 2014: 647). Yet, instead of arguing for a counter (i.e. 'anti-Western') approach, he presented the possibility of a global discipline that transcends the divide between "the West and the Rest." In his views, IR should be a "truly inclusive" discipline that recognises its multiple and diverse foundations and histories. In this light, Global IR disagrees with the view that existing IR theories and methodologies need to be

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discarded and displaced. This is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, Global IR argues that these theories and methodologies need to be challenged and broadened with insights from the ideas and practices of non-Western societies. Acharya and Barry Buzan have recently noted as follows: “our key concern about any national school is whether it can “deprovincialize”—i.e. travel beyond the national or regional context from which it is derived in the first place...” (Acharya and Buzan 2017: 361). In short, what Global IR seeks is not to discard or disavow mainstream theories and concepts sourced from the West, but to render our discipline more inclusive and broader, so that it reflects voices and experiences outside the West more fully.

Epistemologically, Global IR is grounded in “pluralistic universalism” and “theoretical pluralism” (Acharya 2016: 4-5)—which reject any form of monistic universalism that puts forth a singular idea of truth or modernity. Instead, it calls upon scholars to respect the geo-epistemic diversity of truth claims and the empiric-historical existence of multiple modernities. It is thus interested in developing alternative but equally valid theories of knowledge through bringing in indigenous ideas and experiences of societies and cultures other than those of the West; but, more importantly, Global IR reminds us that scholarly enterprises of this kind should not lead to a nativist or self-centred binary thinking. As such, one of the key issues central interest to Global IR is to build bridges among divergent intellectual concerns and claims across the West/non-West divide. “Encouraging debate and dialogue across perspectives ... is a core purpose of the Global IR project,” Acharya writes, because a conversation “among the likeminded”—for example, among those interested in non-Western IR theory building—not only “carries a greater risk of the fragmentation of the discipline,” but also fails to achieve mutual learning and a “truly” global and inclusive field (Acharya 2016: 14; Acharya and Buzan 2017: 362). In this respect, there has recently been the emerging literature on “dialogue” beyond the West/non-West distinction in the Global IR debate (see, e.g., Hutchings, 2011; Bilgin 2016; Eun 2018).

To summarise, the currents of debate over “broadening” the theoretical or discursive horizons of IR beyond the Western disciplinary dominance have evolved over the past decade or so, embracing a wide range of epistemic concerns; their contributions to grappling with the problem of the Western-dominated IR are dense. However, despite such a meaningful effort, be it “non-Western IR,” “post-Western IR,” or “Global IR,” and its recent contributions, several critical questions and issues still remain unclear or under-explored. In the next article, I will discuss what is missing in the debate and how we could further galvanise the project of the “broadening” of IR.

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