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Is There a "Chinese School" of IR?

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Abstract

Research on Chinese International Relations (IR) theory has produced a variety of discourses, including post-positivist analyses, contributions by area specialists and China watchers, and articles by Chinese IR scholars. These strands, however, hardly overlap or communicate with each other. To close the gap between "the self-reflection of the core" ("Western" IR) (Waever/Tickner 2009: 3) and "the periphery's revolt against ["Western"] IR" paradigms (ibid.), it is necessary to view China (and other non-"Western" regions) as more than simply a playground for theory testing. This paper thus goes beyond the meta-theoretical debate about the possibility of non-"Western" IR. It argues that even though the IR debates in China are heavily influenced by the trends of "Western" IR Studies, the claim regarding the establishment of a "Chinese school of IR" is not a hollow slogan. Indigenous frameworks are already under construction.

Keywords: China, international relations (IR) theory, post-positivism, *tianxia*, world order

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Article Outline

1 Introduction

The growing interest in Asian, and especially Chinese, International Relations[1] (IR) has various causes.[2] One of these is the growing influence of non-"Western" actors – especially those in the East Asian region – on international politics. These actors' rise to global power status has enabled them to participate in the restructuring of the post-Cold War world order. To position themselves in international affairs, these emerging powers need a sound knowledge

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[1] Throughout this paper, International Relations, capitalized, refers to IR as an academic discipline, while international relations, lowercased, is used to describe the practice of international politics.

[2] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the WISC Conference in Porto (2011). I would like to thank Miriam Prys, Bert Hoffman and Hartmut Mayer for their helpful comments, as well as Melissa Nelson for excellent language editing.

of IR theories so that they can calculate the potential responses and reactions of other actors and thus develop their foreign strategy. But in addition to using theory as a guide to action, these rising powers will probably also try to generate their own sets of normative IR theories, drawn from their own philosophical-historical traditions, to define and constitute the international order of the future (Alagappa 2011: 222). Therefore, the "rise of China" might also entail a rise of "Chinese IR theory" (Wang, Yiwei 2009: 103). In order to predict the future positioning strategies of actors such as China in international affairs, it is thus necessary to analyze the theoretical and strategic discussions that guide foreign policy decision-making and determine the worldview of the emerging regional powers.

Another motivation driving research on "Chinese" IR has its roots in the parochialism debate of the late 1970s, when Stanley Hoffman identified IR as "an American Social Science" (Hoffman 1977). Even after the end of the Cold War, large-scale decolonization, and the formation of new regional powers in the non-"Western" hemisphere, Euro-Atlantic perspectives continue to shape IR research all over the world (Waever 1998; Smith 2000; Crawford and Jarvis 2001). Guided by the aim of overcoming this parochialism in IR and internationalizing IR theory, post-positivist contributions to IR literature examine the potential intellectual sources of autochthonous IR formulations in the non-"Western" world.[3]

Whereas the post-positivist debate, which looks to China to find new concepts that would allow the broadening of the ontological bases of "Western" IR theory, was launched in the late 1990s, Chinese scholars have been puzzling over the general functions and conceptual sources of a distinctive "Chinese" approach for more than three decades (Noesselt 2010). The controversy among Chinese IR scholars can be roughly classified as an antagonism between internationalization and indigenization; a selection of articles from this debate was published in international IR journals during the 1990s (Liang 1997; Song 1997; Zha 1997) but did not resonate with the post-positivist IR discussions.

This paper argues that research on Chinese IR theory has produced a variety of discourses – including post-positivist analyses (Acharya and Buzan 2010 [2007]; Waever and Tickner 2009), contributions by area specialists and China watchers (e.g. Chan 1997; Chan 1998; Chan 1999a; Chan 1999b; Geeraerts and Men 2001), and articles by Chinese IR scholars (Qin 2009; Wang, Jisi 2003) – which hardly overlap or communicate with each other. To close the gap between "the self-reflection of the core" ("Western" IR) and "the periphery's revolt against

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3   In 2007 a special issue of the journal *International Relations and the Asia-Pacific* (*IRAP*) was dedicated to the critical investigation of the field of International Relations theory in order to explain the continued predominance of "Western" IR theory and the apparent absence of non-"Western" approaches (Acharya and Buzan 2007). The articles in this issue, published as an edited volume in 2010 (Acharya and Buzan 2010), analyzed the institutional foundations and sociohistorical structures of IR studies in the case of China, India, Japan and Southeast Asia. A follow-up project to the IRAP research that included non-"Western" International Relations studies (IRS) beyond the Asian region was published in 2009 (Tickner and Waever 2009).

["Western"] IR" paradigms (Waever and Tickner 2009: 3), it is necessary that we do not take China (or other non-"Western" regions) only as a playground for theory testing (Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003), but rather dive into the intellectual foundations of IR philosophy as it is discussed inside China. This paper thus goes beyond the metatheoretical debate about the possibility of non-"Western" IR. It argues that even though the debates in China are heavily influenced by the trends of "Western" IR studies, the claim regarding the establishment of a "Chinese school of IR" or, alternatively, a theory "with Chinese characteristics" is not a hollow slogan. Indigenous frameworks are already under construction.

The following discussion[4] is divided into three parts: The first section provides a short overview of the research assumptions that shape research on non-"Western" IR theory in the English-language IR community in general. The second section contrasts the post-positivist debate about Chinese IR with the debates inside China. The last section sheds light on selected aspects of "Chinese" IR that could, according to the metadiscussions on Chinese IR edited by Acharya and Buzan (2010 [2007]) and Tickner and Waever (2009), help broaden the ontological base of post-Cold War IR theory.

2   The Post-Positivist Turn in IR

A closer look at IR publications that deal with IR studies and IR theory in China reveals that their main concern is not to dig into the archives of traditional Chinese state philosophy and excavate elements that could expand the explanatory power of the existing IR frameworks. Rather, most analyses of Chinese IR theory engage in a metatheoretical discussion that goes back to the reflectivist turn in IR. Acharya and Buzan (2010 [2007]: 1–3) refer to Cox's critique that there is no abstract theory independent from time and space (Cox 1981), Wight's early insights that IR theory consists of "national international relations theories" (Wight 1966), Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci 1971 [1929–1935]), and studies on the parochialism of European-Atlantic ("Western") IR theory (Waever 1998). Tickner and Waever draft a more complex matrix of "geocultural epistemologies" by combining selected elements of the post-positivist debate, namely, post-colonialism, with sociology and the philosophy of science (Waever and Tickner 2009: 6–16). The central idea of these frameworks is that there is not one unified world that can be analyzed with the help of IR theory, but that IR theory itself contributes to the imagination and construction of this "world," which is only one of many possible imaginations.

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4   The study adopts a phenomenological-hermeneutical approach. It summarizes and discusses two leading debates on Chinese IR: the post-positivist debate and the discussion among Chinese scholars. The latter has been documented and archived by the online database <www.IRChina.org>, established and maintained by Nankai University. Additional resources can be found in the Cross Asia/China Academic Journals database, which is the source of the data used in this paper's quantitative figures.

This geocultural framework is deeply rooted in the post-positivist[5] IR debate: Contrary to the positivist philosophy of science that has constituted the epistemological basis of rational IR theory frameworks (realism, liberalism), post-positivist reflectivist approaches reject the idea that the empiricism applied in natural science possesses the same explanatory power when transferred to the field of social science. Instead of the discovery of general regularities and objective laws that can be empirically tested, post-positivism shifts the focus from explaining to understanding, and to the interpretation of the objects and structures under observation (Smith 1996: 16). This erects a dividing line between explanatory versus constitutive and foundational versus anti-foundational theory. Whereas positivist scholars believe that general laws can be discovered and explained by theories that are clearly differentiated from facts, post-positivism identifies theories as normative-constitutive frameworks that do not explain the world but instead ascribe meaning to it. In post-positivism there are thus no objective and unchangeable foundations against which the validity of a theory can be measured (Smith 1997: 167).

Normative theories, which positivism declassifies as "value-laden and unscientific" (Smith 1997: 173), were reintegrated into IR theory during the early 1990s. Critical theory, rooted in Marxism and heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School, specifies the impact of norms and ideas in IR theory by stating that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" and that "there is no such thing as theory in itself" (Cox 1981). According to Cox, normative theories have not been produced exclusively since the post-positivist turn in IR, but have rather shaped the discipline for ages. The main concern of critical IR is therefore to reflect upon the assumptions and frameworks that have so far been taken as given. Critical approaches thus lay bare the concealed normative foundations of the existing structures and organizational principles, but at the same time also outline their own normative-utopian model of how the world could be transformed (Cox 1981). One could thus expect that theories developed in the non-"Western" context do not solve the parochial bias, but instead simply replace the existing hegemony with a conceptual counter-hegemony.

One approach that should definitely also be included in the post-positivist search for non-"Western" IR is the dimension of language and wording. According to the post-modernist critique of IR, which is guided by a strong "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (Lyotard 1984: xxiv) and based on Foucault's post-structuralist conception of power, (political) power is a derivative of discursive knowledge production. The world is constructed through the meaning attributed to it via the practice of discourse. Discourses not only describe the objects of which they speak, but also define how these should be addressed. In this

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5   Wight basically identifies post-structuralism and post-modernism as subcategories of post-positivism and sees constructivist frameworks as a way to synthesize the manifold and divergent post-positivist hypotheses (Wight 2002: 34). Smith offers a slightly more complex categorization that differentiates between normative, feminist, critical, and post-modernist theories and also includes historical sociology as a subtype of reflectivist IR (Smith 1997: 172).

sense, IR theory, which portrays certain worldviews that provide one among many possible representations as the only way to interpret the objects (structures, processes, practices) of international politics, functions as constitutive to power relations in international politics. Language and labeling play a crucial role in the subjective construction of the world (de Saussure 1966), as they manifest power hierarchies and prescribe orthodox ways of thinking. Competing IR paradigms hence manifest themselves as historical representations of the world and its ordering principles.

Post-colonialism is neither the only nor the most dominant factor in the search for alternative IR traditions. However, it adds a specific dimension to the IR debate: identity and role conceptions. As, according to the post-colonial worldview, the Orient stands for Europe's imagination of the other (Said 1979), the discourse about the non-"Western" world is an instrument of identity formation based on discursive practices of integration and exclusion. Heavily influenced by the Gramscian concept of hegemony, post-colonial studies condemn the predominance of concepts defined from the perspectives of the leading powers in world affairs and demand a more pluralist, integrative IR framework. Post-colonialism proposes the integration of the voices of the so-called Third World into the process of IR theory formulation. To justify this endeavor, post-colonial scholars stress the incompatibility between "Western" theory and non-"Western" political and philosophical foundations.

However, as long as the IR discourses inside China are excluded from the post-positivist IR debate, the post-Cold War IR discussion still runs the risk of strengthening the intellectual colonization of the former periphery of world politics and, in the words of post-colonialism, of perpetuating the construction of "Western" "regimes of truth" (Abrahamsen 2007: 116) that silence those voices from beyond the European-Atlantic hemisphere.

2.1 China as the Center of an Alternative Formulation of IR?

Until very recently, IR research in the West did not include "Chinese approaches" to international relations and world affairs. Instead, most IR studies have referred to China as a playground for theory testing or as a potential source for the ontological expansion of general IR theory – not as a potential theory-generating state actor.

The post-Cold War literature on IR constellations in Latin America documents a "conceptual misfit" of conventional IR assumptions with the so-called Third World (Neuman 1998): according to the perspective of those Latin American states that joined the already established international system after the process of decolonization, international constellations are not anarchic but are rather hierarchically structured. Regarding the nature of the state as the main actor in international politics, the political regimes of Latin American states are comparatively weak and unconsolidated. With respect to the Chinese case, in contrast, most studies conclude that the existing IR theories also cover the political constellations in the Asia-Pacific region. Ikenberry and Mastanduno, who "test" the main assumption of macro-

IR theories in their analyses of international relations in the Asia-Pacific region, assume that general IR theories possess universal explanatory power and that there is no need to pursue alternative theoretical formulations (Ikenberry and Mastanduno 2003: 19). So far, though, no final consensus has been reached: contrary to Ikenberry and Mastanduno, David Kang postulates that realist and liberalist hypotheses are not able to cover the historical and cultural particularities of the region and that Asia "may pose new empirical and theoretical challenges [that] could lead to a fruitful research agenda" (Kang 2003: 83). Kang's statement outlines the linkage between theory testing and the debate on "Chinese" IR traditions. As early as the late 1990s China had been identified as a potential breeding ground for alternative IR configurations:

> For the sake of the growth of knowledge and the promotion of international understanding, there is a need to go beyond this parochial understanding of IR to accommodate non-Western views. In this respect, the development of IR studies in China adds an interesting dimension to the existing body of knowledge.
>
> Chan 1997: 2

> Some surveys claim that not much research [on IR theory] is to be found elsewhere [beyond the "West"] – the next largest community is the Japanese, which produces very little theory in general and much less that is not based on American inspiration. The most obvious candidate for an independent IR theory is China, though very little independent theorizing has taken place.
>
> Waever 1998: 696

China, as one of the world's most ancient civilizations, has attracted the attention of academic elites in the "West" for centuries. Zhang Yongjin, who belongs to the English school of IR, argued that "no credible IR theory (…) can be built only upon the narrow confines of the European historical experience (…) China's rich and deep history is an important avenue for exploring other world orders" (Zhang, Yongjin 2001: 63).

Gerald Chan, who published the first (English-language) overview articles on the state of Chinese IR research and its theoretical underpinnings, explained that Chinese IR Studies in the 1990s did not meet the (international) academic standard and were therefore not taken seriously in scholarly debates about IR theory. However, he predicted that the interest of the policymakers and their advisors around the world in the ideas and calculations underlying China's foreign policy decision-making would rapidly increase over time. The status of Chinese IR would thus be upgraded to that of a "semi-peripheral" school of IR, though, according to Chan, it would not become a major theory school (Chan 1999b: 179–180).

Nonetheless, to date China's contributions to IR ontology, which have been under way since the 1990s, have not made it into the official records of post-Cold War IR theory.

2.2   The Functional Dimensions of Theory-Building

In order to answer the question of whether non-"Western" IR theory exists, the term "theory" itself needs to be clarified somewhat. One has to distinguish between a broad and a narrow conception of theory and to keep in mind that the Chinese debate does not necessarily emulate the "Western" definition of IR theory.

Acharya and Buzan introduce a wider definition of IR theory that integrates "the harder, positivist, rationalist, materialist and quantitative understandings (…) and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern [understandings of the theory spectrum]" (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 291). They also concede that IR might include normative assumptions; even pretheoretical concepts are viewed as elements of an emerging IR theory framework in Asia (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 292). As a working definition, Acharya and Buzan propose labeling any IR concept that is either recognized as a theory by the international academic community or identified as such by its progenitors or, regardless of academic acknowledgement, represents a systematic and abstract approach to IR as a contribution to IR theory (Acharya and Buzan 2007: 292).

In contrast to this all-encompassing definition, Alagappa reduces theory in the Asian context to a normative-constitutive function, which is directly linked to the policy level (Alagappa 2011: 222). According to this understanding, theory does not function as a framework for analysis, but is rather a tool for exerting power in international politics. Alagappa assumes that "theory" in the Asian context "has a predominantly practical orientation with emphasis on understanding and interpreting the world to forge suitable national responses" (Alagappa 2011: 194).

On the Chinese side, a Marxist understanding of theory, which was imported during the early stages of Sino-Soviet cooperation and ideological proximity, is still discernible in IR publications. The "official" Chinese understanding of the meaning and function of (IR) theory is as follows:

> [A theory] is a system of concepts and principles (…) a scientific theory is established on the basis of social practice and has been proved and verified by social practice, and is a correct reflection of the essence and laws of objective things. The significance of a scientific theory lies in its ability to guide human behavior (Cihai entry on "theory," quoted from Wang, Jisi 1994: 482).

This definition has its roots in the Maoist era. In his writings "On Practice" and "On Contradiction," Mao proposed a recursive interrelation between theory and practice:

> Discover the truth through practice, and again through practice verify and develop the truth. Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles, and with each

cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level. Such is the whole of the dialectical-materialist theory of knowledge, and such is the dialectical-materialist theory of the unity of knowing and doing.

Mao 1937

"Theory," as can be seen from Mao's writings, was not something to be produced by the academic community; rather, it should be formulated by the political leaders. The main aim of these political "theories" was not to explain the world, but to realize the socialist world revolution (Chan 1997: 59).

In the reform period, IR theories in the Chinese context have continued to serve the dual function of guiding and legitimating political action. Obviously, this understanding of "theory" is different from the definitions commonly agreed upon in the general IR literature. If theory in China has to guide political practice, its main focus has to lie on foreign policy, not on international or global politics in general. Only frameworks applicable in the bi- and multilateral context of international politics are regarded as being worth studying (Ren 2000: 20). Contrary to this practical, Marxist-inspired definition of "theory," the more liberal school of Chinese IR scholars affiliated with Fudan University in Shanghai argues that "theory should serve to promote the forward-looking awareness or predictive power of international affairs and to serve [sic] to accumulate knowledge" (Chan 1998: 16).

Chinese scholars still disagree over the question of whether the focus of IR research and IR theory formulation in China should be Chinese foreign relations or international relations. In the recent past, most research has dealt with China's foreign relations and China's image in the world (Wang, Fan 2008). As an element of foreign policy, the theory debate has to answer the "core question" of Chinese IR: it has to define the circumstances and conditions under which China's reemergence, the "peaceful rise," can be realized without encountering containment and balancing acts by other states (Qin 2005). If, in accordance with neorealism, states act in an anarchic environment and seek to defend their relative power capacities, there would not be any place for China in the concert of the world's great powers (Mearsheimer 2004). States relying on realist theories would tend to contain states like China from rising to global status. This implies that China's concept of a "peaceful rise" has a dual purpose: It explains and legitimates China's reemergence and justifies the steps undertaken to realize this ambitious project. At the same time, it fulfills the strategic function of defusing the threat perceptions and conflict scenarios that conventional "Western" IR would predict for the coming years between the US, the old hegemon, and China, the reemerging Asian power (Friedberg 1993/1994; Bernstein and Munro 1997).

The Chinese contribution to the IR debate does not lead to the substitution or reformulation of established IR concepts such as global governance and world society; it instead introduces an independent IR terminology and presents alternative explanations of international development. Traditional Chinese philosophy together with elements of dialectical and his-

torical materialism form the basis of Chinese IR theory. The reactivation of traditional Chinese terminology symbolically underlines the PRC's claim of developing a theory framework independent from and opposed to the "West" (Wang, Yiwei 2009).

Moreover, in the Chinese context the validity of a theory is not measured in terms of its explanatory power, but rather according to its ideological soundness and its ability to guide political action (Geeraerts and Men 2001: 252). This implies that a huge gap exists between the general understanding of "theory" in the context of Chinese IR and the functional dimensions of IR theory in the international debate. In the Chinese debate, ideology is an essential element of any theory, whereas in the "Western" discourse, ideological attributes are taken as evidence that non-"Western" IR lacks a scientific foundation and should instead be classified as strategy (Wang, Jisi 1994). In order to avoid being misled by the term "theory," one should consider referring to IR debates in China not as systematic frameworks of analysis, but rather as "worldviews" that "do not reflect the world (…) [but] represent it, not only constraining our vision but also enabling us to develop a language of concepts and terms that in turn make it possible to talk intelligibly about IR" (Griffiths 2007: 1).

But what is the "Chinese" worldview? What are its ontological and epistemological foundations? The following section investigates these questions.

3   Chinese IR Theory

3.1 "Chinese" IR: Historical Background

Although Chinese political science research dates back to the late imperial era, IR research as an independent academic discipline has quite a short history. In the early 1950s the Department of Foreign Affairs was set up at Renmin University in Peking; this was enlarged into the Foreign Affairs College in 1955. In 1963, following the Chinese Central Committee's decision to strengthen research on foreign affairs (not international relations!), departments of international politics were established at Renmin University, Peking University and at Fudan University in Shanghai (Geeraerts and Men 2001: 253; Chan 1997: 47–48).[6] Research was divided among these institutes along "geopolitical-ideological" lines: Renmin University focused on socialist states; Beijing University analyzed developing states in Africa, Latin America and Asia; and Fudan University had the only institute specialized in the politics of the Western capitalist states (Wang, Yiwei 2009: 105).

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6   This relaunching of IR research in the 1950s, after most research institutes had been shut down in the early years of the PRC, was caused by the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Maoist PRC refused to copy the Soviet model and instead sought to follow an independent foreign strategy based on analyses and visionary concepts of world order that reflected the Chinese perspective. For a more detailed study on the emulation of Soviet models in the PRC see: Bernstein and Li 2010.

During this initial phase of IR studies in China, most analyses were rather atheoretical works (Qin 2010 [2007]). Marxism-Leninism provided the overall framework that determined China's interpretation of international politics (Wang, Yiwei 2009: 105). The few IR concepts that were put forward were primarily political concepts – among them Mao's theory of "intermediate zones"(Ye 2001: 128–129; Pu 2004: 20–21) and his "Three World Theory" (Yee 1983).

In the post-Maoist period, IR studies in China underwent an all-encompassing reorganization. Most institutes had been shut down during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). After 1978, they were reopened and Maoist ideas and Marxist-Leninist ideology were replaced with "Western" IR approaches. These approaches were regarded as universally valid analytical frameworks that would allow the PRC to enact pragmatic and efficient foreign policy. Scientific research was seen as a necessary prerequisite for defending Chinese interests in the context of bi- and multilateral bargaining processes in international politics and for realizing China's modernization program.[7] However, as most scholars at the reopened research institutes had been educated in Marxist-Leninist methods, the old paradigms continued to influence political research in the PRC. New perspectives were introduced by the younger generation of Chinese IR scholars, who had studied Western languages and had often spent several years at universities in the US or Europe (Fang 2005). The field of IR in China continues to be shaped by the cleavages that emerged in the early decades of the reform period and that are manifested in the controversy regarding the internationalization/Westernization versus the indigenization/Sinization of IR theory (Geeraerts and Men 2001: 266).

Although Chinese scholars were encouraged by Deng Xiaoping to "make up the missed lessons" and catch up with the West, IR theory did not play a major role in Chinese IR journals until the 1990s. Although key publications from "Western" IR were translated into Chinese and discussed by the academic community, almost none of these frameworks were applied to the analysis of IR in the Chinese context (Qin 2009: 188–189). As Figure One demonstrates, analyses of "China" and "International Relations theory" represent only a negligible share of all IR articles.[8]

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7   This is illustrated by the fact that IR research continued after 1989, when most other subdisciplines in the social sciences were the subject of spiritual rectification and ideological reeducation.

8   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 autochthonous IR framework, the former also includes Marxist-Leninist and "Western" IR.

Figure 1:   Quantitative Survey of Articles on IR Theory in Chinese Academic Journals (1993–2011)
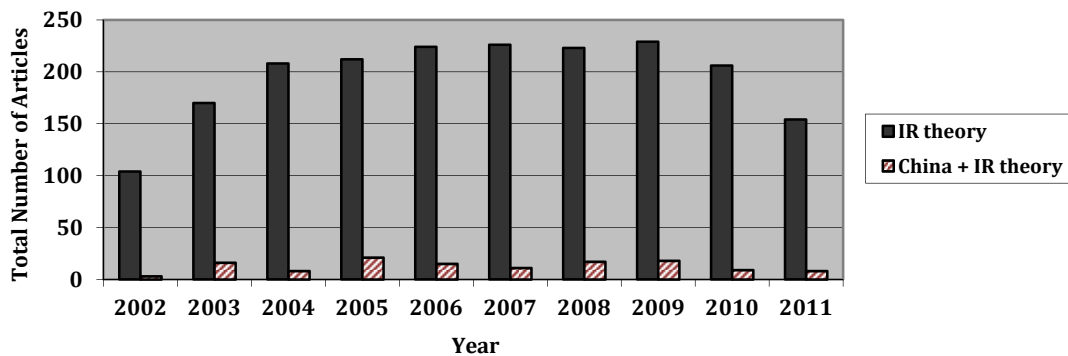
Source: Author's own compilation based on the China Academic Journals database[9].

The overall majority of articles were and still are dedicated to American IR theory (Qin 2009: 192, figure 2). Between 1978 and 2007, only six percent of all articles referred to Marxist IR (Qin 2009: 193, figure 3). Furthermore, the time-dependent coding of the theoretical trends in Chinese IR journals shows that the majority of Marxist analyses date back to the early decades of the post-Maoist PRC, when the old generation of revolutionary scholars dominated the field of research (Qin 2009: 194, figure 4). The institutionalization and modernization of IR research in post-Mao China did not stop with the reception and adoption of "Western" IR. Instead of "theory learning" a new "paradigm" has emerged in Chinese IR journals since the late 1980s, with some Chinese scholars proposing the formulation of a "Chinese" IR approach.

Although Qin Yaqing's survey documents the existence of a "Chinese paradigm" (Qin 2009), no systematic conceptualization of "Chinese" approaches to IR theory has been developed to date. Chinese scholars in support of a "Chinese" IR theory 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). This controversy among Chinese scholars can be roughly divided into two periods of metatheoretical discussion:

1)   "Chinese Characteristics"

In 1987 Huang Xian, the chief cadre of the Research Department for International Affairs under the State Council, proposed the "construction of IR theory with Chinese characteristics" and explained that this theory should "be based on China, face the world and analyze the objective development laws of the shifts in international politics from a Chinese perspective" (Huang 1987, quoted from Ren 2009). This statement was made public at the first Pan-Chinese IR Conference in Shanghai (1987). Since then similar conferences have elaborated on this idea. More than a decade later, in 2004, the Pan-Chinese IR Conference took place under

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9   This and the following figure are based on the China Academic Journals database. Only articles in "core" Chinese IR journals have been counted; the "subject search" (Figure 1) was conducted for articles tagged with "guoji guanxi lilun" (IR theory) and "guoji guanxi lilun" (IR theory) + "Zhongguo" (China).

the general headline "construct a Chinese IR theory, establish a Chinese school (of IR)" (see also Guo 2005).

Although the formulations "IR theory with Chinese characteristics," "Chinese IR theory" and "Chinese school of IR" (see Figure 2) all belong to the "indigenization and Sinization of IR theory" category, they should not be understood as simple synonyms. The formulation "Chinese characteristics" is directly linked to Deng Xiaoping's formula "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Wang, Yiwei 2009: 109). It implies that the PRC not only follows an independent development path in domestic politics, but also hopes to develop an independent and sovereign foreign policy, as the Chinese minister of foreign affairs, Zhou Enlai, stated shortly after the founding of the PRC (Wang, Lian 1994: 45). The idea of "constructing a theory with Chinese characteristics" iterates the principles of Marxism-Leninism while simultaneously reflecting the adaptation of these ideas to the national constellations of the PRC. Liang Shoude, head of the Department of International Politics at Peking University, came up with the following definition of IR with "Chinese characteristics": In addition to being based on China's version of socialism, it has to serve China's national interests – that is, to consolidate China's status in international affairs and to regulate China's relations with other states. It does not directly oppose Marxist-Leninist principles or "Western" IR, but it distances itself from both by drawing its main assumptions from traditional Chinese philosophy (Liang 1994, quoted from Wang, Lian 1994).

Figure 2:   Quantitative Survey of Articles on "Chinese IR"
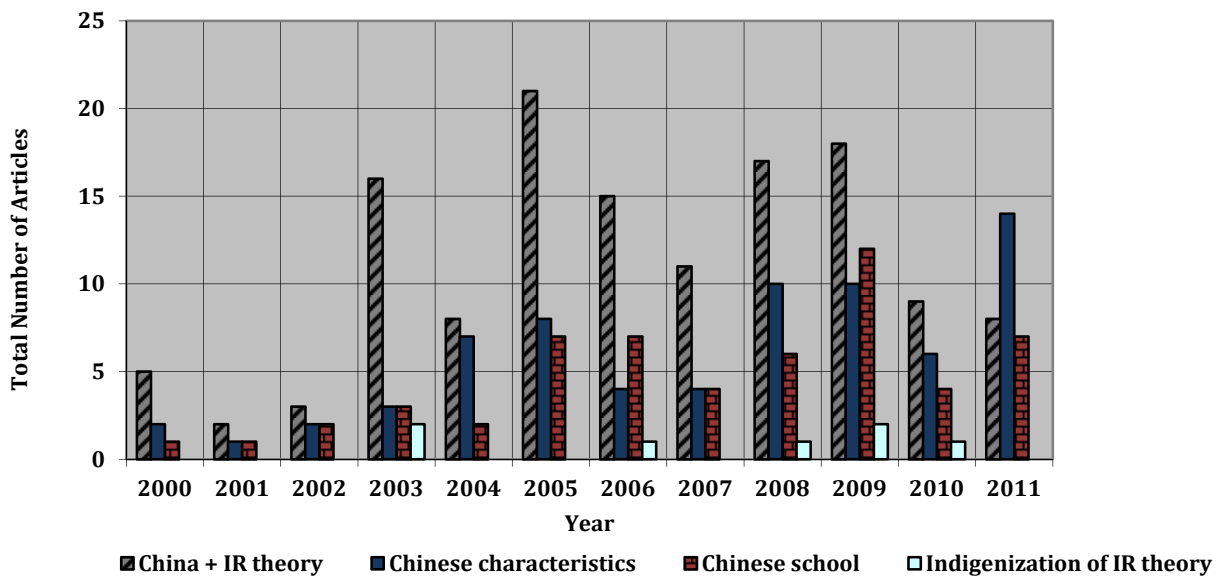
Source: Author's own compilation based on the Chinese Academic Journals database.

2) "Constructing a 'Chinese School'"

Since the late 1990s Chinese publications have started to use the expression "Chinese school" instead of stressing the particularity of China's IR approach. The members of this school of (Chinese) thought do not negate the general ideas of "Western" IR, but, inspired by the "English school," try to enrich the existing frameworks and to add a new perspective to general IR (Ren 2009). The "Chinese school" paradigm has, however, not replaced the search for IR "with Chinese characteristics" (Figure 2).

The "indigenization" of IR has emerged quite recently in Chinese IR literature (see Figure 2). The notion refers to a theory framework that reflects China's national interests and considers its options, as a rising power, for cooperation with the international community of states, as well as the danger of confrontation with these same states. According to the self-image of China's IR community, such an IR theory neither formulates annotations to the political statements of China's leaders nor serves as an instrument for Chinese foreign policy (Ren 2009). As the links between the historical and cultural traditions of a country and its foreign policy are more than obvious, Chinese scholars argue, why shouldn't there be a distinctive approach to international relations?

Most articles quoted in the online database on IR in China, which is managed by Nankai University, refer neither to the "Chinese school" nor to "Chinese characteristics." Instead they use the expression "Zhongguo guoji guanxi lilun" which can be translated both as "Chinese IR theory" and as "IR theory in China."[10]

Overall, the quantitative surveys (Figure 1; Figure 2) document the strong influence of "Western" IR on Chinese political science. The emergence of a "Chinese paradigm" since 1991, as outlined by Qin Yaqing, has marked a turning point in contemporary IR research in China. Articles subscribing to "Chinese paradigms" might contribute to the construction of an indigenous "Chinese" IR tradition with distinctive perspectives and categories. However, as Qin Yaqing does not specify the meaning of the term "Chinese paradigm" it is not clear whether this group of articles is dedicated to a metatheoretical discussion or is already engaged in the ontological construction of a "Chinese" IR approach.[11] Even Chinese scholars engaged in the debate about a "Chinese paradigm" have to admit that no systematic "Chinese" IR theory or "theory with Chinese characteristics" has been formulated so far (Qin 2008; Zhang 2003; Su 2005).

Nonetheless, on the ontological level, Chinese scholars have started to excavate concepts from Chinese philosophy and traditions. These are presented as alternative conceptualizations of international politics. Some of these "traditional" elements of Chinese IR have been

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10 <www.IRChina.org>.

11 Wang Yiwei argues that Chinese scholars have started to "construct the world" and to define a distinctive geo-ocultural view of the world (Wang, Yiwei 2009: 116). So far, however, this worldview has not offered a unified and integrated interpretation of the world, but instead has comprised selected diplomatic statements and fragments of ancient Chinese philosophy.

analyzed by scholars specialized in Chinese history and applied to the analysis of Chinese foreign policy (Fairbank 1942; Fairbank 1968). Others have mainly been elaborated upon in the debate among Chinese IR scholars; although English translations are available, they have not been integrated into the "Western," post-structuralist global theory framework.

4 Back to the Future: The Reactivation of Ancient Chinese State Philosophy

As stated in Chinese scholars' metatheoretical studies on IR, premodern Chinese philosophy is seen as the primary source of inspiration for the construction of "Chinese IR" in the twenty-first century (Ren 2009). Of the articles on "Chinese" IR in academic journals – which make up less than five percent of all IR-related articles (Qin 2009) – only a minor share focuses on its ontological foundations. These articles on "Chinese" IR ontology can be roughly subdivided into the following categories:

1. basic principles of interstate relations;
2. ideas concerning the structure of the international system;
3. visionary concepts of global politics.

4.1 The Archaeology of Chinese IR: Principles of Interaction

Chinese scholars argue that Chinese IR can be traced back to the Zhou dynasty (Chan 1997; Yan 2011a; Ye 2004), during which several small Chinese kingdoms contended for leadership and hegemony. During this period, also referred to as the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 B.C.) and the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.), multiple philosophical schools developed their readings on the state, the ruler and ways of governing. The interactions between the formally independent kingdoms, which later became unified under the emperor of the victorious Qin dynasty in 221 B.C., are referred to as a historic example of premodern international relations in a regional context far from the West. Instead of learning from the "Western" history of international relations and memorizing the outcomes of the Eurocentric theory debates, scholars in favor of the formation of a "Chinese" school propose studying the constellations inside the *tianxia,* the Chinese concept of the "world" as "all under heaven," during the Zhou dynasty (Chan 1999a; Yan 2011a; Zhang 2001).[12]

Yan Xuetong, professor of international politics at Peking University, has presented the most comprehensive study on ancient Chinese state philosophy from the pre-Qin period and its adaptation to the constellations of the twenty-first century. In addition to his comparative overviews of selected Chinese philosophers' political ideas (Yan 2011a), Yan Xuetong's analysis of legitimate rule, the nature of the state, and the (international) order offers a key for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of modern Chinese IR (Yan 2008).

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12 For a more detailed discussion see: Fairbank (1968); Walker (1971).

Yan Xuetong argues that ancient Chinese state philosophy predicts a direct interrelation between the views and convictions of the emperor, the nature of the state and the structure of the international system. Yan develops a threefold typology of political rule: "True kingship" (*wang*) leads to a stable international order. "Hegemony" (*ba*) establishes hierarchies and asymmetries, and the international order oscillates between stability (relations between the hegemon and its allies) and chaos (confrontation between the hegemon and its opponents). "Tyranny" (*qiang*) will inevitably lead to disaster and decline (Yan 2008: 137). "True kingship," also labeled "humane authority," is the only way to maintain a long-lasting and stable order.[13] Overall, pre-Qin "IR theory" is said to differ from "Western" IR in two central ways:

1) Political leadership requires moral authority. The sage and benevolent ruler has to employ enlightened and distinguished officials to guarantee stability and harmony.

2) The international system is hierarchically organized. These hierarchical structures, whose existence can be empirically proven, exert a stabilizing effect on international politics (Yan 2008).

China's proclamation regarding a "harmonious world" and its commitment to a "peaceful rise," which have so far been classified as political slogans, are thus identified as the conceptual pillars of an alternative model of the international system that could serve as a blueprint for other state actors (Yan 2008: 159).

Yan Xuetong's research, which undertakes an eclectic reading of political philosophy and merges it with the political constellations of the twenty-first century, is, however, contested by a wide range of Chinese scholars (Yang 2011; Xu 2011; Wang, Rihua 2011). Qin Yaqing's contribution to the volume on non-"Western" IR edited by Acharya and Buzan (2010 [2007]), for example, indirectly excludes the idea of a premodern "international system" in China from the ongoing poststructuralist IR theory debate and postulates that the absence of "Chinese" IR theory is mainly due to the lack of "international-ness" in China's view of its environment (Qin 2010 [2007]: 36–37).

4.2 The Traditional Order and Visions of the International System

Until the Opium Wars (First Opium War: 1839–1842), the "inter-national" order established by the Chinese empire was based on the idea of "all under heaven" (*tianxia*), the concept of China as the center of the civilized world, with its external exchanges based on the tributary system. This traditional structural element established a hierarchy in the Chinese emperor's relations with other states and tribes. Depending on their geographical proximity to the Chinese empire and the degree to which they had assimilated and internalized "Chinese" norms

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13   In his 2008 article, Yan translated "wang" as "true kingship"; in 2011, he instead used the term "humane authority" (Yan 2011b).

and values, these actors were arranged in concentric circles around the power center personi-fied by the son of heaven (Fairbank 1968).

In "Western" research on China, the tributary system has been equated with a "Chinese world order" (Fairbank and Teng 1941; Fairbank 1942; Fairbank 1968). In political reality, however, the primus position of the Chinese emperor could only be maintained in selected periods, when centralist control was recognized by the vassal states. In times when the em-pire was weak, the rhetorical claim to rulership over the *tianxia* was perpetuated and the myth of the tributary system iterated, but the emperor had already lost control over certain vassal states and territories (Wang, Gungwu 1983: 62).[14]

Recent publications by Chinese IR scholars have reinvented the *tianxia*, not the tributary system, as an alternative to the existing international order (Ren 2010). This model is based on a selective reading and reinterpretation of the *tianxia* and the Westphalian system. It relies on the assumption of a general incompatibility between "Chinese" and "Western" ordering principles. The Westphalian order is linked with negative attributes: the international system is anarchic; nation-states compete against each other in zero-sum games; and wars and con-flicts result from the absence of an ethical code of conduct (Qin 2005; Zhao 2005). In contrast to this dark scenario the *tianxia* is depicted as a hierarchical but stable alternative blueprint for the twenty-first century (Zhao 2005).[15] According to Zhao, the *tianxia* concept might serve as a model for "world governance" as opposed to the failed concepts of international or global governance defined by the Westphalian order. The decline of the nation-state in the age of globalization might, according to Zhao, evoke a resurgence of empires as predicted in the oft-quoted study by Hardt and Negri (2000).

In his theory, Zhao merges elements of China's philosophical traditions with the ongoing global debate about a post-Cold War world order. Based on the Confucian idea of a "good" social and political order, Zhao develops a framework of interaction for a "world society" that surpasses the borders of the former nation-states. According to this interpretation, *tian-xia* represents an ordering structure distinct from military empires, which plan to extend

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14 The Chinese emperor was neither able to defend his territorial claims against the nomadic tribes in the North nor to impede the vassal states from declaring themselves independent and joining in alliances with other states. After 1138 the founder of the Song dynasty was forced to accept being relegated to the status of a vassal state to the Northern Jin dynasty. This contradicts the general assumptions regarding the tributary system as the operational-institutional foundation of the "Chinese world order" (see also Zhang, Feng 2009: 555). And in the last years of the Ming dynasty, the power of the Chinese emperor was repeatedly challenged. It was not until the reign of the Qing emperor Qianlong that a punitive expedition was launched to reestablish central control. Burma's capitulation resulted in an interim stabilization of the tributary system, which, however, did not last very long (see Zhou 2011: 165, table I).

15 Zhao Tingyang dedicates himself to scrutinizing the tianxia as an ontological element of Chinese IR theories. His two books on this topic, The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution (Zhao 2005) and Investigations of the Bad World: Political Philosophy as the Number One Philosophy (Zhao 2009), have become best sellers in China. The general ideas of his model can also be accessed via his English-language articles, which have been published in high-ranking international journals (Zhao 2006; 2009).

their sphere of influence across the whole world (Roman Empire), and imperialist states, which are guided by nationalism and colonialism (British Empire). The American empire is the most recent variation of hegemonic leadership (Zhao, Tingyang 2006).[16]

Contrary to the state-centric approaches in "Western" IR, the central unit of Chinese IR is the "world." The "world" needs a commonly agreed-upon "world institution" as its control center. As is the case with the ancient *tianxia* concept, this power center is not democratically elected but is legitimated through its compliance with moral and ethical values. Although this part of Zhao's theory lacks empirical foundations and logical consistency, it nonetheless reveals a prevalent train of thought within China's epistemic community that has long been ignored in global IR debates.

Zhao's *tianxia* does not find its "Western" equivalent in the United Nations Organization. Although both structures address global issues, the philosophical and strategic foundations of the UN can be traced back to IR frameworks based upon the nation-state. Political reality has proven, at least according to Zhao, that the UN is unable to restore international stability and establish universally valid and commonly accepted principles of interaction (Zhao, Tingyang 2006).

According to Zhao's *tianxia* concept, no one is excluded and there is no such category as "foreign." Participation in the *tianxia* system is not for states, but is instead open to all people. Flexibility and inclusiveness are the model's main foundations. It is characterized by harmony and diversity, and cooperation between different civilizations and sociopolitical systems (Zhao, Tingyang 2006).[17]

Zhao Tingyang's configuration of the *tianxia* in the context of the twenty-first century is not limited to the tributary system, which served as the "operational foundation" over hundreds of years; instead it upgrades the *tianxia* from a regional institutional framework to an abstract global model. Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia* shows parallels to world system theory and theories of world society, yet it officially draws on original "Chinese" philosophy to develop an autochthonous concept. In diplomatic practice, however, the PRC does not employ the *tianxia* concept, but rather refers to the idea of the "harmonious world" introduced by Hu Jintao in 2005 (Hu 2005). In contrast to Zhao Tingyang's global model, the "harmonious world" requires the existence and persistence of independent nation-states that remain the main actors in international and world politics. Rather than transferring sovereignty to a superior, common world government beyond the borders of the old nation-states, the "harmonious world" requires the peaceful coexistence of divergent, multiple civilizations. But like Zhao Tingyang's *tianxia*, the "harmonious world" is a conscious disassociation from the con-

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16 This and the following passages rely on the online edition of Zhao Tingyang's book.

17 Zhao's concept has met with severe criticism from Chinese scholars and was the subject of a critical deconstruction of its internal coherence and intellectual soundness (Callahan 2008). Most arguments against Zhao's tianxia model are related to his quotes from the Chinese classics. Historians and philosophers accuse Zhao of misreading and selectively arranging fragments of Confucian texts to justify his theory (Chang 2011).

cept of global governance and underlines China's aim of integrating its own ordering principles, which are said to be derived from ancient Chinese culture, into the international debate.

5 Conclusion

Post-structuralist and post-colonial ambitions to internationalize IR theory through the integration of voices from the non-"Western" world – which were previously marginalized and silenced – have come to a temporary standstill. The only outcome of the post-structuralist assessment of "Chinese" IR consists of a handful of essays about the state of IR studies in China. These do not go much beyond the earlier overview articles published by area specialists. Nonetheless, the main contribution of these post-structuralist investigations into Asian IR is the fact that the possibility of "alternative" IR formulations has come to be accepted by a wider audience of IR scholars, most of whom refused to accept "Chinese" IR as a theory during the 1990s.

The obvious isolation of the post-positivist search for "Asian" or, to be more general, non-"Western" IR approaches from area studies and intra-area discourses has evoked severe criticism from scholars specialized in the Asian region. Alagappa has commented on the absence of a direct dialogue between Asian IR experts and the group of post-structuralist IR scholars. As a result, he argues, IR theory in the non-"Western" world is analyzed and classified in terms of the structures and basic categories of "Western" IR theory.[18] 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 (Alagappa 2011).

Furthermore, the predetermined dichotomy between "Western" and "Asian" IR that post-colonial studies assume raises more questions than it can solve. There is no unified "Western" IR tradition (Acharya 2011: 620–621), nor can IR in Asia be reduced to one single, homogenous approach (China, India, Japan, Korea, Southeast Asia) (Alagappa 2011). Strictly speaking, the assumed antagonism between regional concepts of world order and world views mirrors the Orientalism versus Occidentalism controversy. "Asia" is portrayed as the "other" against which the "West" defines itself and consolidates its political and national identity. Reciprocally, the intra-Chinese debate contrasts "Western bourgeois" and socialist theories and bases its own national project on the latter. Whereas the "West's" post-structuralist community pursues the goal of decentralizing and pluralizing IR through the inclusion of the history of the global South, the intra-Chinese debate returns to the roots of Chinese philosophy to reactivate indigenous concepts that cannot automatically serve as universal frameworks or be considered "theory."

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18 One of the few exceptions is the article by Acharya (2011). Acharya points out that the whole Asian region has been influenced by Buddhist ideas – the other philosophical-religious ideas are categorized as local traditions – and would thus be based on a distinctive epistemological foundation.

Even though the "internationalization" of IR theory seems more than appropriate in times of globalization and increasing interdependency, one should not forget that, within the Chinese debate, the formulation of an autochthonous Chinese IR perspective still ranks second to the metatheoretical debate on the past and future of IR studies in the PRC. Very few Chinese scholars engage in the concrete formulation of "Chinese" IR contributions.

Finally, one has to conclude that the Chinese debate on the metatheoretical foundations of foreign policy, the area studies discourse on Chinese IR theory, and the post-positivist stream in IR literature remain insulated discourses that differ in terms of their research interests and their methodological and epistemological bases. Moreover, the post-positivist and the area studies discourses are highly incompatible: while the former looks at IR theory in China from the outside and assumes that existing IR traditions can be combined with the historical experiences of the non-"Western" hemisphere to broaden the empirical foundations of IR theory, the latter is mainly interested in exploring the evolution of "Chinese" perspectives on and interpretations of the world order as part of the PRC's national identity formation.

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