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Summary

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the rise of China has been one of the most frequently discussed topics in international relations (IR) circles. Because of this rise, Anglophone IR scholars have developed an increasing interest in Chinese perspectives on international relations. At the same time, IR scholars in China are dissatisfied with being consumers of knowledge rather than knowledge producers; many Chinese scholars have suggested there should be a Chinese school (CS) of IR, and attempts have been made over the past few decades to establish it. The call for a CS can be understood as an effort by Chinese scholars to establish their own subjectivity in international studies, a pursuit of an indigenous Chinese site of agency with regards to developing IR and IR theory. To demonstrate this, the historical development of international studies in China after the founding of the People's Republic and how it led to Chinese IR scholars calling for the establishment of a CS in the 21st century is first introduced. Subsequently, the main branches and viewpoints of the CS will be illustrated—including Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's conception of the Tianxia system, the Shanghai school's symbiosis theory, and Qin Yaqing's relational theory of world politics—before elucidating the main criticisms they have received from the Anglophone world of IR. Critics argue that the overall development of international studies in China is very much one of Chinese scholars replicating mainstream IR and its problems. This claim suggests that the CS movement is an imitation of modern Western discourse for political service rather than a genuine development of an indigenous discourse from Chinese tradition. This article, however, refutes these critics by suggesting that the development of international studies in China does have the potential to make an important contribution to non-Western, post-Western, and global quests in IR; attempts at creating CS contain an indigenous Chinese site of agency with regards to developing IR.

Keywords: Chinese IR, Chinese school, moral realism, Tianxia, symbiosis theory, relational theory

Subjects: International Relations Theory

Introduction

The discipline of International Relations (IR) in the 20th century was largely dominated by the West, especially the United States. The discussion of Western/American centrism in international studies by critical IR scholars has gone in two directions (see Hoffmann, 1977; Smith, 2002; Tickner, 2013; Wæver, 1998). One explores the relationship between American IR scholarship and other Western regions (especially Britain), and the other analyzes the relationship between Western-led research on international relations and the non-Western world. The former is mainly focused on the materialist ontology and positivist epistemology that has dominated American social science. As for the latter, the Anglo-American IR discipline is counted as "Western" IR. The concept of "West" here is no longer a specific concept of geography and

territory but rather is inseparable from colonial modernity. The presumed superiority of the West over its Others suggests that only one single (Western) path leads to the end form of human civilization or history (Fukuyama, 1992), that is, the one represented by Western civilization. Western centrism in this sense is prescriptively built on the assumption that the totality of Western culture is universal.

Entering the 21st century, as the non-West in general is growing in material prominence, which gives it an increased discursive potential, these existing theories and methods find it increasingly difficult to provide adequate explanations for international politics. Especially for China, it is not only the rise of material power in the traditional sense but also the imagination of an alternative modernity. Accordingly, IR scholars have begun to discuss the theoretical possibilities of a non-Western, post-Western, or global IR. Non-Western and global IR is expected to develop a variety of IR theories based on non-Western historical experiences, concepts, and viewpoints, so as to complement current limitations and deficiencies in research on international relations. It also makes IR a more diverse and inclusive subject (see Acharya & Buzan, 2007, 2019; Shilliam, 2010). Although Acharya discussed issues such as differentiation, inclusiveness, and diversification when proposing global IR, he focused more on epistemological issues. Therefore, as Blaney and Tickner (2017, p. 297) noted, global IR still presents a tendency of "single-world thinking" in terms of ontology. It is still a continuation of Western liberalism (Gelardi, 2020). Post-Western IR, instead, puts forward the viewpoint of "worlding," emphasizing the transition from the global gaze of the world to the world politics as the scene of *multiple worlds*. Accordingly, they advocate for the existence of multiple realities on the ontological level. Although attention still needs to be paid to the center–periphery structure of knowledge, the research on the periphery is not to make the core international relations more universal and global. On the contrary, it needs to realize worlding from the existence of the periphery itself (Kristensen, 2020, p. 3).

Regardless of non-Western, global, or post-Western IR, they all hope that non-Western peoples can be transformed from the *silent* Other of the discipline of IR to subjects of knowledge, releasing their agency, initiative, intellectual potential, experiences, viewpoints, and research resources (Nayak & Selbin, 2010; Tickner & Blaney, 2012; Vasilaki, 2012). As a part of the non-Western world, the rising China has particularly stimulated interest from Western observers; increasingly, scholars are showing a desire to study international relations from a Chinese perspective. Simultaneously, IR scholars in China are dissatisfied with being "consumers of knowledge" rather than "knowledge producers"; many Chinese scholars believe that the development of Chinese IR theory can also be an important part of the development of global IR and make positive contributions to the IR knowledge community (see Hwang, 2021a). For this reason, several Chinese scholars have suggested there should be a Chinese school (CS) of IR, and attempts have been made over the past few decades to establish it. Although different branches of the CS have different views on methods, concepts, and problematics, they all try to understand, explain, and interpret world politics from a Chinese perspective by incorporating China's own past historical experiences, worldviews, and thoughts. Thus, as this article demonstrates, the call for a CS is an effort by Chinese scholars to establish their own subjectivity in international studies, and it is a pursuit of an indigenous Chinese site of agency with regards to developing IR and IR theory.

It is worth mentioning that the search for China's agency in international studies predates the current attempts of trying to establish a CS in IR. As a social science discipline, China's international studies have been gradually introduced from the West since the 19th century. However, in the process of its introduction, the knowledge, theories, and methods of international studies have been constantly and selectively modified according to China's local needs in different periods, to solve the various problems that China faces in different periods of the modernization process (Chan, 1997; Hwang, 2021b). This phenomenon continued after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The political elite of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attached great importance to the field of international studies from the very beginning (Qin, 2007; Shambaugh, 2011; Shambaugh & Wang, 1984). In their view, international studies are closely related to the survival of the regime. Due to this perception, it is clear that "Chinese IR has always served the Chinese nation, state, and its regimes" (Hwang, 2021b, p. 582). International studies as a discipline aims to understand international relations theoretically and empirically from the perspective of China.

Although the CS, as a case of non-Western subjectivity construction, has the potential to empower other non-Western regions, it must be pointed out that the CS has also received a great deal of criticism in the IR discipline, especially in the Anglophone world (see Hwang, 2021a, pp. 318–322). Scholars are skeptical of the CS movement's subjectivity construction and its contribution to the field. First, critics argue that attempts to reinvigorate Chinese traditional concepts and historical experience may misunderstand, misinterpret, or romanticize Chinese political thought and history and thus infer "an imperious form of Chinese exceptionalism" (Hwang, 2021a, p. 318). Critics also critique attempts at establishing a CS for essentializing and fixating the existence of "Chinese culture," which can be deemed as fluid, multiple, and heterogeneous in nature. Second, critics point to a danger that a CS's intellectual resources may only serve the interests of the Chinese government, which tries to legitimize China's hegemonic status in international relations. Thus, they conclude, the overall development of international studies in China is very much one of Chinese scholars absorbing mainstream IR and replicating its problems (Hwang, 2021a). This makes the CS an imitation of modern Western discourse for political service rather than a genuine development of a truly indigenous discourse from Chinese traditions. According to Dreyer (2014), it is "at best disingenuous and at worst dangerous."

This article refutes critics of the CS by suggesting that the development of international studies in China does have the potential to make an important contribution to non-Western, post-Western, and global quests in IR. While it is true that the CS may reverse concepts and themes that the West currently uses against the non-Western world back onto the West itself, this does not mean that there is no indigenous site of agency. This claim is based on four grounds (see Hwang, 2021a). First, Chinese scholars imbibe Western IR knowledge for China's own causes and necessities. The process of imbibing Western knowledge is also a process of constructing Chinese subjectivity. Second, imitation by the CS is not simply a process of duplicating Western discourse; there have evidently been innovative alterations of Western IR. CS imitation of Western IR alters Western concepts and practices to bring them more into line with Chinese local conditions and aspirations. Third, Chinese imitation of Western discourse is an obscured and detrimental form of

resistance in the anticolonial strategy. This is a way for Chinese IR scholars to save themselves from further alienation and domination by Western hegemonic culture. Finally, the CS can become an effective local group, linking various struggles to form a "counterhegemonic bloc" of post-Western or global IR in the discipline.

In the following sections, this article first discusses the historical development of international studies in China after the founding of the PRC and how it led to Chinese IR scholars calling for the establishment of a CS in the 21st century. Subsequently, this article illustrates the main branches and viewpoints of the CS—including Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's conception of the Tianxia system, the Shanghai school's symbiosis theory, and Qin Yaqing's relational theory of world politics—and then elucidates the main criticisms they have received from the Anglophone world of IR. By way of conclusion, it is argued why the CS is still an indigenous site of agency in Chinese IR.

The Origins and Development of China's International Studies

According to Qin (2007), three phases of IR institutional building in China can be identified since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The first was from 1953 to 1963, the period in which the PRC set up its first of several IR-related institutions in order to "satisfy the immediate need for talents in the field of national security and public security. Disciplinary development was not the priority of their work" (Qin, 2007, p. 315). The second phase was from 1964 to 1979, wherein three major universities in China established their respective international politics departments in order to teach and study Communist Party doctrine as its own thought and Western thinking as the enemy's thought as well as a target of criticism (Song, 2001, p. 63). The third stage is from 1980 to the present, in which IR institutions have mushroomed in China to the point "where only the United States matches China in terms of the size of IR research and education" (Qin, 2007, p. 316).

Indeed, shortly after the founding of the PRC in 1949, various institutes of international studies were established to train its foreign language and foreign affairs officials so as to provide timely analysis, opinions, and suggestions on international affairs for the government as a reference for its decision-making. The Institute of International Relations (*Guójì guānxì xuéyuàn*) was established in 1949. In addition, Renmin University of China set up the Department of Diplomacy immediately after its establishment in 1950, offering courses in international relations, international law, Chinese diplomatic history, and foreign policy of the PRC. The department was expanded to become an independent university in 1955 and was named "The China Foreign Affairs University" (*Wàijiāo xuéyuàn*). For the major architects of international studies, China's diplomatic work needed the support of the entire discipline of IR and other related fields, given that international studies were concerned with the survival of the regime (Hwang, 2021b). However, most of the IR research and teaching institutes established after 1949 were closely related to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and national security agencies. Therefore, strictly speaking, the real appearance of academic research and teaching of IR in China started with the establishment of the International Politics departments of Peking, Renmin, and Fudan universities in the 1960s (Qin, 2007).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a dispute between the CCP and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union over ideological dominance. On the one hand, the Chinese government believed that they needed to strengthen their Marxism–Leninism research to seek the right to speak in the socialist camp. On the other hand, they also wanted to establish their own research positions, viewpoints, and methods on international issues under the guidance of Marxism to resist Western discourses. Therefore, at the end of 1963, under the initiative of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, the Central Committee of the CCP issued the "Decision on Strengthening the Study of Foreign Issues" and chose Peking University, Renmin University, and Fudan University to establish the Department of International Politics. The decision makers made a clear division of labor among these three universities: Peking University mainly studied the Third World's international independent movements, Renmin University specialized in the international communist movement (especially in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries), and Fudan University mainly studied Western international relations (mainly Sino–U.S. relations) (Geeraerts & Jing, 2001; Hwang, 2021b; Qin, 2007).

In other words, in the early development of China's international studies, the government's diplomatic, security, and ideological needs played a leading role. Chinese IR scholars needed to provide theoretical support for the CCP government's anti-Western imperialism, anti-Soviet revisionism; promotion of the international communist movement; support for the national liberation movement of the Third World; and China's independent diplomacy during that period. Appropriately, the direction of China's international studies during this period was mainly influenced by three international trends of thought (Qin, 2007). One was the Soviet Union's theories of international relations, especially the theory of the international communist movement. The other was anti-imperialist theories and national liberation movements developed in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The third strand included the IR theories of the United States and Europe, including the Cold War theory, nuclear deterrence theory, and so on. In short, China's persistence in taking the path of independent diplomacy and trying to have its own views on international issues has contributed to the need and necessity of the Sinicization of international studies.

The 10-year Cultural Revolution caused serious harm to China's international studies. Facing China's academic stagnation, after Deng Xiaoping took power, he proposed to resume and strengthen research on world politics (Deng, 1994). Subsequently, the Chinese government has been engaged in efforts to (re)institutionalize international studies. During this period, the following two main phenomena can be observed. The first is the promotion of international studies programs. After 1980, in addition to the restoration of Peking, Renmin, and Fudan Universities, which were closed during the Cultural Revolution, Nanjing University, Nankai University, and other universities also started to offer related courses. A large number of students were engaged in international studies, forming a group of professional IR scholars and research communities. After decades of development, international studies in China are already on par with the United States in terms of research and educational scale (Qin, 2007, p. 316).

Second, many research results of international studies in the West—especially mainstream American academic works—are translated and introduced to China. Hans J. Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1954); Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War* (1977); and Robert Keohane and

Joseph Nye's *Power and Interdependence* (1989) and other works were translated into Chinese in the 1980s and 1990s. Especially since the end of the 1990s, the introduction of American IR by the Chinese IR scholarship has become more comprehensive, timely, in-depth, and systematic. For example, when constructivism arose in the United States in the 1990s, the translation and introduction of the main works of constructivism in Chinese academia were carried out roughly simultaneously.[1] This has enabled China's international studies to absorb a large amount of Western philosophy, theories, viewpoints, and scientific research methodology, with the goal of strengthening their own theoretical foundation. At the same time, Chinese scholars have also started to examine Western (primarily American) theories through Chinese case studies and have tried to incorporate more Chinese perspectives and ideas. They are also aware of the problem of Western centrism and thus have a certain vigilance about it. They believe that if they blindly chase Western knowledge, they will always be followers. Therefore, Chinese scholars inevitably raise the issue of how to establish China's own views, styles, and "language," especially the question of the subjectivity of China's international studies (Ren, 2009).

Moreover, the increasing awareness of subjectivity construction in China's IR academia is also related to the introduction of the English school into China and the prevalence of reflectivism in the Anglophone IR circles. On the one hand, in the 1990s, Chinese scholars were exposed to the works and ideas of the English school more than they had been before and gained a lot of inspiration from it. The writings of Hedley Bull, Martin Wight, Barry Buzan, and others have successfully attracted attention in China. The historical, humanistic perspective of the English school has been greatly appreciated by a considerable number of Chinese scholars (Zhang, 2000). Since there can be an English school, they wondered, why cannot there be a Chinese school? On the other hand, during this period, Chinese scholars have also absorbed the research results of reflectivism (including constructivism, poststructuralism, critical theory, feminism, etc.). Some Chinese scholars accordingly questioned the ontology and epistemology of mainstream IR research and advocated for the incorporation of Chinese (political) cultural resources. They also advocated for the inclusion of some ancient Chinese concepts, principles, and experiences of dealing with international relations—including China's diplomacy with its neighbors throughout history—and combining these ideas into their theoretical discussions (Ren, 2009). At the turn of the 21st century, some Chinese scholars formally proposed the concept of the "Chinese School of IR" (Ren, 2009). Since then, more and more Chinese scholars have embraced this proposition. Among them, the most representative advocate is Qin Yaqing of the China Foreign Affairs University.

In 2002, Qin proposed the establishment of a CS of IR in his preface to the "Frontier Translations of International Relations Theory" series, published by Peking University Press. This series had translated many important IR theoretical works by American scholars. In the general preface, Qin notes that the formation of a CS is not only possible but also inevitable.[2] His reason is threefold. First, all social theories have an innate and inevitable locality. Second, the CS has three sources of thought from which it can draw nourishment—namely, the Tianxia concept and the practice of the tributary system, the modern communist revolutionary thought and practice, and the experience of reform and opening up.[3] Third, with the rapid development of China's political and economic power, China's accelerated integration into the international system has made Chinese

scholars pay more attention to the relationship between China and the world. Qin also believes that the CS needs two characteristics (Qin, 2005). First, it must originate in the context of China's geocultural and historical context. Second, it can gain universal significance in its development. For advocates of the CS such as Qin, in the development process of Chinese IR theory, the CS should also actively seek to transcend the local space of knowledge production through discussions and exchanges with other schools of IR theory to gain wider universality. Qin therefore defines China's IR theory as "using the resources in Chinese cultural thought to conceptualize, abstract, and generalize the substantive content of international relations, thereby forming a logically self-consistent system of thought" (Qin, 2020, p. 33).

It should be noted, however, that Chinese IR scholars have tried to construct their own theoretical system since before the notion of a CS was explicitly proposed. As early as 1987, at the Shanghai Seminar on the Theory of International Relations, Chinese diplomat Huan Xiang had already proposed establishing "a theory of IR with Chinese characteristics" (Ren, 2009, p. 17). However, Chinese scholars' understanding of theories with Chinese characteristics at that time was different from the CS in the 21st century. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, Chinese scholars mainly wanted to use "Marxism/Socialism with Chinese characteristics" as the guidance for the construction of IR theory. What they emphasized was the ideology and political orientation of the research. As Cheng Duowen (2021) pointed out, major advocates of IR theory with Chinese characteristics at that time emphasized the importance of China's identity as a developing country of the Third World. The distinction between "the South" and "the North" still occupied an important position in China's diplomatic discourse at that time. Therefore, they seldom used traditional Chinese history and culture as available theoretical resources. However, in the wave of calls for a CS after the 21st century, the Western centrism of mainstream IR has become the focus of criticism. Meanwhile, with the rise of China's status as a major great power, Chinese scholars are less concerned with the identity of China as a developing country. Instead, they pay more attention to the political and cultural differences between "the East" and "the West." Therefore, Chinese history, culture, philosophy, and traditional political thought have become the most important resources for the theoretical construction of the CS.

The Nascent Popularity of the Chinese School of International Relations

As early as the 1990s, Yu (1996) from Fudan University put forward a proposal to integrate Chinese traditional culture and ways of thinking about the new international political order in the post–Cold War era. He made three main points at the time. First, the humanistic spirit and ideals of traditional Chinese culture are to value and pursue social harmony and stability, which is consistent with the ultimate goal of long-term peace and stability, which the international political order should strive for. Second, the "doctrine of the mean" (or *Zhōngyōng zhī dào*) in Chinese thought can prevent the intensification of international conflicts, promote the transformation and resolution of contradictions, and achieve coordination and equilibrium among states. Third, the benevolence (*ren*), justice (*yi*), courtesy (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*), and trust (*xin*) in traditional Chinese culture can be used as guidelines for state behavior. Therefore, traditional Chinese culture can provide important intellectual resources for the international community to seek a fairer, more peaceful, and well-disposed operating mechanism (Yu, 1996). This study can

be said to be one of the pioneers of the Chinese IR community to explore how Chinese culture can benefit international relations.[4] Entering the 21st century, more attempts have been made to focus on the application of Chinese history, culture, and traditional philosophical thoughts. Among them, the four theoretical approaches that have caused the most discussion are Yan Xuetong's moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia system, the Shanghai school's theory of symbiosis system, and Qin Yaqing's theory of relationality.[5] In this section, the background and tenets of the theories put forward by these Chinese scholars are introduced.

Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism

In 2005, a research team led by Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University initiated a project that aimed to develop a new IR theory on the basis of Chinese thought in the pre-Qin dynasty to "enrich contemporary international relations theory and present findings relevant to China's foreign policy" (Yan et al., 2011, p. 21). In Yan's view, pre-Qin China was the greatest period for Chinese thought as it saw several philosophical schools compete for ideological supremacy and political influence. Yan and his team initially focused on the study of Xunzi's thoughts (c. 310–c. 238 BCE), trying to clarify key elements of Xunzi's conception of political power. According to Yan (Yan et al., 2011), governmental power can be exercised in three different ways—tyranny (*qiang*), hegemony (*ba*), and humane authority (*wang*).[6] Tyranny and hegemony are equivalent to the Western notion of hard power. Humane authority is about a (world) leader who gains acceptance and recognition of his or her leadership by *practicing* virtues and morals, such as benevolence, justice, and ritual. As Yan noted, in Xunzi's thought, the leadership style of humane authority is regarded as the highest and most precious form of government. Therefore, his theory draws heavily on the notion of humane authority to provide a different understanding of the operation of power and leadership in world politics.

Yan is mainly concerned about the transfer of power in international politics, trying to combine the central tenets of realism with traditional Chinese culture. Specifically, he tried to use the realist analysis framework as the basis to join the ancient Chinese thinkers on morality and governance (i.e., humane authority), in order to explain the process of power distribution, acquisition, and transfer in the international system. His theory is therefore known as moral realism (Zhang, 2012). It is worth noting that while the theoretical framework of moral realism recognizes China's unique historical and cultural tradition, it does not give it an ontological uniqueness in the analysis of international relations. As an international actor, China is essentially the same as other states. It also pursues the maximization of its own interests and regards the survival and security of the states as the primary concern. In addition, neither the process nor the result of this power transfer will have a fundamental impact on the ordering principles of the international system itself. The above two assumptions are consistent with the basic premises of (neo)realism regarding the logic of actions of states under international anarchy (Yan, 2019).

In other words, moral realism is an attempt to combine some concepts in ancient Chinese diplomatic thought with the ontological viewpoints of Western realism, thereby generating "political leadership" as an independent variable to analyze states' behavior and the change in the international system. Yan applied moral realism to the analysis of international relations and

concluded that in the state of international anarchy, a zero-sum game of power struggle between rising and hegemonic powers is inevitable. This finding is consistent with the conclusion of structural realism. However, the struggle for power does not necessarily have to be carried out in the form of fierce confrontation or even war. It can also be accomplished by fighting for political leadership on a moral basis (Yan, 2011, 2019). Applying this line of thinking to analyze China's rise, Yan argues that China does not necessarily need to initiate a war to defeat the United States in order to seize hegemony. On the contrary, it can realize the transfer of power in the international system by enhancing its own political leadership based on humane authority.

Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia System

While Yan and his team have utilized the term *humane authority* to reconceptualize the notion of power from a Chinese perspective, other works published by Chinese scholars have attempted to acquire and appropriate theories and practices of Tianxia in answering the call for the CS of IR. The most systematic and prominent discussion of this concept can be found in the book *Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institutions*, published by Zhao Tingyang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in 2005 (see also Zhao, 2006, 2009; Zhao & Tao, 2019). What Zhao tried to do, in a nutshell, was to sublimate the notion of Tianxia from a particularistic Chinese concept to a universal one applicable to the whole world (Zhao, 2015b, p. 5).

Zhao's theory is based on the premise of a Chinese/Western dualism. He first regarded the existing international (or Westphalian) system as a product of Western civilization (Zhao, 2005, pp. 11–12). Next, he put forward a thesis, stating that "[there] is no political unit of the world in Western political philosophy. The state (and/or nation-state) is regarded as the largest political unit. . . . The lack of a place for the world unit in the framework of Western political philosophy is a fatal flaw" (Zhao, 2005, pp. 11–12). Since the West regards the state as the basis for thinking about the world order, it must consider and deal with the various issues that arise in world politics in the unit of the state, including those that cross national boundaries such as climate change. The West only has international theory, but there is no real-world theory. In Zhao's understanding, as long as the world order is understood and handled from the perspective of individual states, rather than from the perspective of the world as a whole, the current world order will always be in anarchy. Although temporary peace may be achieved through alliances between states, such peace cannot last (Zhao, 2005, pp. 12–13).

In contrast, according to Zhao, traditional Chinese thought takes the entire world (i.e., Tianxia) as the largest (political) unit. It is not only an all-encompassing geographical, psychological, and institutional term but also the ultimate ordering principle. It defines the complete sphere of politics. All issues are understood, explained, and interpreted in the worldview of Tianxia (Zhao, 2015b, p. 10). Accordingly, the concept of Tianxia, as the antithesis of the Westphalian system, is endowed with the following two characteristics. The first is "no outside" (*wuwai*). Zhao believes that through the internalization of the world, the world becomes a system with only internalities and no longer insurmountable externalities. We no longer look for incompatible enemies who cannot coexist; different values no longer pose as an insurmountable obstacle. Therefore, "no outside" is an absolute condition for achieving world peace, universal security, and universal cooperation (Zhao, 2015b, p. 14). Second, in this "no outside" world system, Zhao believes that it

is possible to turn conceivable political entities into the world government, thereby transforming international politics into "internal affairs of the world." From this, we can roughly imagine what Zhao called the "Tianxia system" as a set of worldwide norms, mechanisms, and institutions. Only in this way can we go beyond the principle of "internationality" and think about the world from a truly global perspective. The theory of the Tianxia system is therefore understood as a kind of cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics.

The Symbiosis System of the Shanghai School

Compared with Zhao's focus on the abstract conception of Tianxia, the symbiosis theory of the Shanghai school focuses on the historical practice of the premodern East Asian tributary system, hoping to absorb unique Chinese elements from it, and on this basis to explore its relevance to international relations in the 21st century. The concept of symbiosis originates from biology, which refers to a state of balance between two or more organisms that are physiologically interdependent. This concept was introduced to the study of international relations in the early 21st century by a group of Shanghai-based scholars such as Hu Shoujun and Ren Xiao (Ren, 2015, pp. 1–11). They developed the theoretical concept of an "international symbiosis system" to demonstrate its cultural connotation and historical practice in East Asia.[7]

Similarly, the theory of international symbiosis originated from Chinese scholars' criticism of Western IR theories, particularly realism. They argue that realism only recognizes the existence of Hobbes's "state of nature" but ignores the existence of "harmonious symbiosis" in international relations. Accordingly, they divided the international system into three types—the "antagonistic system, "parasitic system," and "symbiotic system"—based on the different relationships between main actors in the international system (Su, 2013). The transition from an antagonistic or parasitic system to a symbiotic system is a matter of optimization or progress in the international community. To establish a symbiotic relationship, actors must have shareable (material or nonmaterial) resources. By establishing a symbiotic relationship based on the relative balance of interests, the relationship between actors can evolve from anarchy to order. In addition, scholars of the Shanghai school also pay attention to the issue of cultural diversity (Su, 2013). They believe that the process of globalization can further help humankind to form a stronger sense of symbiosis among different civilizations and cultures. People can learn to respect each other's cultural characteristics and at the same time respect the harmonious coexistence of human and nature, so as to protect the living environment and overall interests of humankind. From the above point of view, the basic insights of symbiosis theory are similar to those of the English school, which is also concerned about the evolution of the international society (i.e., pluralism and solidarism) and the role of culture in the evolution of international society (Bain, 2013; Y. J. Zhang, 2013).

Although there is a great overlap between the symbiosis theory and the English school, scholars who follow the path of the Shanghai school believe without exception that this symbiosis system grew up historically among East Asian countries, so it is called the "East Asian endogenous order." They also emphasize China's unique and active role in the formation of the system (Su, 2013). According to Ren (2013), this system is polycentric, rather than a single-centric hierarchical order.[8] There are various forms of interaction among East Asian countries, including

tributary trade, marriage, and war, among which the tributary trade is the most important part of the symbiosis system. For the tributary state, it can be economically profitable. For China, it can guarantee peace and order along China's long frontier. Therefore, if all parties are willing to establish and maintain this relationship, then they can find their own unique position and suitable (social) role. In this web of relations, all members act according to their position and role. This forms a series of principles, norms, codes of conduct, and so on that deal with multiple relationships with each other, thus forming a certain order, which is essentially an extension of China's domestic social and political principles. Therefore, for Ren (2013), this symbiosis system is highly peaceful.

Qin Yaqing's Theory of Relationality

The abovementioned Shanghai school's description of the "relationship" in the premodern East Asian order is the focus of Qin Yaqing's theory of relationality. Qin is committed to combining Chinese culture with constructivism. He proposes a relational theory with "relationality"—or *guanxi*—as a core concept. He put forward several assumptions (Qin, 2010, 2016, 2018). First, relationality is the basic unit of analyzing social life. The world is composed of a series of intertwined relations, and actors are connected with each other and with the environment. Second, the relationality defines rationality. There is no detached "absolutely rational actor." If the actor does not understand the relational circle he or she is in, the actor will not be able to determine whether his or her behavior is rational or not. Therefore, the "relational circles" in which the actors are located are the basis of action. Third, the identity and social role of actors are determined by social relations, and there is no identity that is separated from social relations. Fourth, social existence is not static but a "process." Relationships develop, occur, and manifest in the process, and the identity and social roles of actors are also constantly changing. Finally, actors in the relationship circle will also make use of this system to achieve their goals—usually expressed as short-term material benefits or long-term strategic considerations.

In order to highlight the Chinese characteristics, the relational theory seeks unique Chinese elements from Chinese culture, involving the ancient Chinese social structure, the Chinese people's way of thinking, and the Chinese worldview (Qin, 2016, 2018). In Chinese tradition, individuals make decisions based on intimacy and hierarchical status (superior or inferior) based on the totality of the relational context as its background. This is different from the modern Western worldview, which is guided by the atomistic understanding of the individual and emphasizes individual freedom and autonomy. Chinese people are more inclined to see and understand the world in a relational context. Just as the mainstream Western theory relies on the individual rationalism, Qin's theory relies on the relational ontology, with *yin* and *yang* as the core in traditional Chinese philosophy, and the Chinese way of understanding the world under the guidance of the dialectics of the golden mean. According to Qin (2016), Western thoughts since Hegel have focused on the "contradiction" between the dualities of things, while the Eastern *yin* and *yang* culture emphasizes the transformation of contradictory things. The connotations of tolerance, complementarity, and harmony in the ideology of the golden mean all focus on the relationship between things.

Hence, according to Qin, the relational theory built on traditional Chinese culture naturally possesses a worldview different from that of the West. For example, traditional Western IR theories often divide the understanding of power into "hard power" and "soft power," while relationship theory puts forward "relational power," which refers to the strength that an actor can use to control his or her "relational circle," including having a wider relationship circle, more close partners, and even higher prestige. In addition, Qin's theory, centered on the concept of relationality, has important implications for Chinese approaches to global governance. As elucidated by Qin (2011, 2016), global governance of the international society is an evolving process to manage ongoing relations. Since process consists of relations and relations form the process, to keep the process going means to act in a way to allow relationships to flow. While the West respects "rule-based governance" based on personal reason and selfishness, relational theory promotes relational governance that is based on community trust and interaction.

Critics of the Chinese School of International Relations

In the past few decades, Anglophone academic circles of IR have undergone tremendous changes in their attitudes toward the enterprise of the CS. When Chinese scholars proposed constructing theories with Chinese characteristics in the 1990s, scholars in the Anglosphere seldom discussed this phenomenon that occurred in the field of Chinese IR. Although there were a few articles on the construction of China's IR theory in Western academic circles during this period (Callahan, 2001; Geeraerts & Jing, 2001; Song, 2001), the focus of these studies was not the academic potential of Chinese IR but the ideological and political considerations behind it. They generally hold a negative attitude toward such attempts by Chinese scholars. In the 21st century, the Anglophone IR community has changed their views and paid more attention to these efforts of Chinese scholars. The main reason for this change is, of course, the rise of China's political and economic power, which has led to an increase in demand for understanding the Chinese perspective in Western academic circles (Wang, 2013). Moreover, it also comes from the reflections of Anglophone scholars on the Western centrism in the study of IR theory at the beginning of the 21st century. As an important part of the non-Western world, the construction of the CS has received great attention and acceptance from the Anglophone IR circles. This provides a good environment and opportunities for the construction of IR theory with Chinese characteristics and, in particular, helps Chinese theoretical views to be seen in first-class English academic journals and publishing houses. However, while the achievements in the construction of the CS have been affirmed, a series of skeptical voices have also appeared in the Anglophone IR circles. We can summarize the main skepticisms of the Western academic circles into the following points.

First, the CS's use of traditional Chinese thought and historical experience constitutes a problem of anachronism. Texts can be used anachronistically in two ways. The first form is to analyze past texts based on modern theories or concepts. This is a form of anachronism called prochronism. The second form of anachronism is called parachronism, which is the analysis of current events based on past texts. The idea is that it is wrong to apply past ideas to current events because these texts must be outdated and obsolete. This line of criticism focused on "the CS's alleged

misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or romanticization of Chinese political thought and history" (Hwang, 2021a, p. 318). Critics who hold this view believe that the CS's references to historical documents and classics are either mistaken or unduly romanticized (Chang, 2011; Ge, 2015). The CS therefore infers a form of Chinese exceptionalism—a wishful thinking that "China will be different from any other great power in its behavior or disposition" (Kim, 2016, p. 73; see also F. Zhang, 2013). This criticism is particularly prominent when discussing Yan's moral realism. As some critics have pointed out (Cunningham-Cross, 2011; Horesh, 2013; Zhang, 2012), Yan and his colleagues' analysis not only risked anachronism but also relied too much on their romanticized interpretation of ancient Chinese thought. Therefore, critics believe that Yan's theory is not rooted in the historical connotation and practice of ancient Chinese thought; they claim that Yan's work is centered on *his* Confucian ideals, not those found in *factual* Chinese history. His theory is to "build a castle in the sand" (Hui, 2012).

Second, critics argue that CS scholars always juxtapose China with the Western world and believe that there is a unique and homogeneous Chinese culture, thus creating another problematic dichotomy. Accordingly, the CS has the risk of essentializing "Chinese culture." In this binary opposition cycle, the epistemological violence of the self against the Other is often justified in practice. "When Orientalist IR meets Occidental IR, hatred and conflict are inevitable and will become perpetual practices in world politics" (Cho & Hwang, 2019, p. 193). Therefore, critics believe that the CS cannot rule out the problems of "nativism," "particularism," and "exceptionalism." The problem of this dichotomy between Chinese and Western cultures is presented in, for example, Qin's relational theory. One of the main criticisms of Qin's relational theory is that he mistakes the concept of "relationality" as *exclusively* Chinese (Nordin & Smith, 2019; Nordin et al., 2019). Yet, the Western philosophical tradition has been shown to have engaged with this topic as well (e.g., Jackson & Nexon, 1999, 2019; Ling & Nordin, 2019). Qin simplified Western culture and Chinese culture into the product of "rational thinking" and "relational thinking." This dichotomy is too crude. This not only ignores the social construction process of social consciousness but also denies the possibility of mutual infiltration and transformation of social consciousness in the process of social interaction. As Nordin and Smith (2019) point out, we need to move "away from facile East–West dichotomization and from the claim that relationality is simply Chinese and rationality is simply Western" (p. 648). To those critics, it is difficult to talk about the essential differences between Chinese and Western cultures in this respect.

The third main line of criticism points to a danger of the CS—that is, the knowledge resources of the CS may only serve the interests of the Chinese government, legitimizing the so-called China model and China's (peaceful) rise. As Noesselt (2015) notes, "The search for a 'Chinese' paradigm of international relations theory is part of China's quest for national identity and global status." It aims "to safeguard China's national interests and to legitimize the one-party system" (p. 430). Similarly, Acharya (2015, p. 15) also questioned the relationship between CS and the Chinese government, observing that some ideas and concepts advocated by CS often overlap with the political slogans of the Chinese government. For example, the term *symbiosis*, employed by the Shanghai school, sometimes overlaps with the vocabulary used by the Chinese government in diplomacy. The term has long appeared in Chinese government documents such as its *China's*

Peaceful Development white paper (State Council, PRC, 2011). In a speech entitled "Joining Hands to Build a China-ASEAN Community of Shared Destiny," delivered at the Indonesian National Assembly in 2013, Xi Jinping also clearly proposed to build a closer China-ASEAN community with a shared future to achieve "multiple coexistence and inclusive progress" (Xi, 2013). In this way, the international symbiosis system of the Shanghai school can be linked to China's diplomatic rhetoric. This may risk the CS losing its academic independence. These skepticisms are reasonable to some extent.

To be fair, the above criticisms are valid but not exclusive to China, and by this standard, much other work in IR would also have to be discarded. The problem of duality in the Western IR academia—the Self–Other binary structures—is even the main topic of criticism by scholars of the CS. Mainstream IR thinking is frequently tied to logocentrism (Cho & Hwang, 2019), "which at once differentiates one term from another, prefers one to the other, and arranges them hierarchically, displacing the subordinate term beyond the boundary of what is significant and desirable in context" (Gregory, 1989, p. xvi). As critics of realism have noticed, American IR scholarship also uses source material anachronistically, and its agenda largely reflects the interests and considerations of the United States. The mainstream IR theory has always been to ensure an international system designed for the safety and interests of the hegemonic power (i.e., the United States) (Tickner & Wæver, 2009). Just as the Shanghai school's concept of "symbiosis" is linked to the Chinese government's diplomatic rhetoric, we can also find that, for instance, liberalism's "democratic peace theory" is also closely connected to the U.S. government's diplomatic rhetoric. As E. H. Carr noted in his letter to Hoffman in 1977, "What is this thing called international relations in the 'English speaking countries' other than the 'study' about how to 'run the world from positions of strength'" (cited in Cox's Introduction to Carr's *The Twenty Years' Crisis* 1919-1939, 2016, p. xxix).

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that China, as a rising power in world politics, has cultivated Chinese scholars' new interest in their own traditional thinking and used them to enhance China's own worldview and interests, in order to justify or rationalize China as a great power status. Many scholars in the Anglophone IR circles are worried about this development and question the agenda and purpose behind the CS. For example, many Western scholars worry that the fate of Zhao's Tianxia system is just another familiar hegemonic design. Callahan, one of Zhao's most ardent critics, believes that Tianxia embraces a unique practice of Chinese hegemony. According to Callahan (2008), Zhao's theory may seem unrealistic, but it outlines the image of China that Beijing is striving for. Callahan's criticism of Zhao's paper has received a very wide response from other scholars in the Anglophone world of IR (e.g., Carlson, 2011; Chu, 2022; Dreyer, 2015; Schneider, 2014). These critics all believe that although the Tianxia system exhibits a kind of universalism, this universalism is still owned by China. To make matters worse, the past historical practice of the Tianxia system is a hierarchical order. The use of the concept of Tianxia is therefore understood as a desire for China to expand its power to support its (re)establishment of a hierarchical world order in East Asia. Therefore, Zhao's Tianxia system only marked a different type of imperialism and did not add any new ideas in advancing the theory of IR. These skepticisms all point to the tendency of Sinocentrism in the CS (Lu, 2019).

As a result, even if the above criticisms are not unique to China and can be applied to mainstream IR theories and other major powers (i.e., the United States), for these critics, the overall development of Chinese IR is still largely a matter of Chinese scholars continuing to imitate mainstream IR and repeat its problems. The CS uses mainstream IR's concepts and themes against the non-Western world to fight the West. Western centrism is simply replaced by Sinocentrism (Callahan, 2008), but the nature of the discourse is not that different or even worse. The CS—just like mainstream IR—ultimately serves hegemony (i.e., China), providing them with some concepts to help them understand the world and legitimize their domination of the world. From this perspective, the CS simply duplicates modern Western IR discourse, instead of developing a truly indigenous discourse from Chinese tradition. Regardless of whether this accusation is fair or not, it does raise an important question: How desirable is the enterprise of the CS? Is the CS (and, by extension, the rest of Chinese IR) just a redistribution of disciplinary hegemony in a geopolitical sense, rather than being a critical discourse? Is the construction of subjectivity in the CS ultimately just another form of domination? To what extent can the CS movement contribute to the goal of decentralization in IR research that is advocated by non-Western, post-Western, and global IR scholars? These issues are elaborated on in the conclusion.

Conclusion: The Potential of Chinese IR in the Discipline

Chinese international studies, as a discipline, has been gradually introduced from the West since the 19th century to solve various problems faced by China in different periods of the process of entering the Westphalian system. In this process, the knowledge, theories, and methods introduced from the West are often continuously and selectively accepted and modified according to China's local needs in different periods. Therefore, Chinese IR aims to understand international relations theoretically and empirically from a Chinese perspective (Hwang, 2021b). As shown in this article, this phenomenon eventually led to the proposition of establishing a CS of IR by Chinese scholars in the 21st century. For these advocates, Chinese IR needs to develop its own epistemological system. The call for the establishment of a CS, along with the historical development of Chinese IR since the founding of the PRC, can be understood as the efforts of Chinese scholars to establish their own subjectivity in international studies. It is China's pursuit of agency.

Although the nascent popularity of the CS may have made important contributions to recent academic efforts to include more non-Western historical experiences, ideas, and perspectives, it has received a lot of criticism from within the IR discipline. First, critics argue that the CS's references to historical documents and classics are either inaccurate or overly romanticized (Chang, 2011; Ge, 2015; Kim, 2016). Not only does it risk inferring an arbitrary form of Chinese exceptionalism, but it also problematically essentializes "Chinese culture," juxtaposing Chinese culture and Western culture as opposites, forming a dualism (Nordin & Smith, 2019; Nordin et al., 2019). The second criticism is that the knowledge developed by the CS is only used to legitimize China's rise and hegemony, and its main purpose is to safeguard China's national interests or the interests of the Chinese communist regime. Critics have therefore concluded that the overall development of Chinese IR is an imitation of the mainstream Western discourse on international

relations and therefore inherits its problems (Carlson, 2011; Chu, 2022; Dreyer, 2015). Ultimately, it serves politics rather than developing a genuine local discourse from Chinese traditions; the construction of subjectivity is just another form of domination and lacks an indigenous site of Chinese agency.

Although the above criticisms are reasonable and contain some elements of truth, we should not diminish and underestimate the important achievements made by Chinese scholars in their pursuit of subjectivity of knowledge since 1949. First, although Chinese scholars have absorbed Western IR to a large extent, they did so for China's own reasons and needs that differ from the original Western intentions and purposes. From this perspective, China must have its own special worldview, historical experiences, and practical needs, which in turn affect their absorption of "Western knowledge." Therefore, as far as the development of Chinese IR is concerned, the process of assimilating Western knowledge is also the process of constructing Chinese subjectivity (Hwang, 2021a, 2021b).

Second, those various attempts to establish the CS can be interpreted as a continuation of a constant process of restructuring knowledge in IR, characterized using Chinese history, culture, and philosophy in developing theories that fit China's traditional worldview and contemporary needs. We can see this process of imitation in the works of Yan, Zhao, the Shanghai school, and Qin (Hwang, 2021a). CS scholars use concepts from Western IR theory such as "power," "cosmopolitanism," "international society," and "relationality." However, the connotation of these concepts is *not* entirely consistent with the original meaning of Western theories. There are various "misreadings" in the process of imitation. As Turton and Freire (2016) noted, non-Western peripheral scholars can still make innovative contributions to IR literature through "hybridization," "imitation," and "modification" of original concepts. Thus, the insights of peripheral scholarship are "similar to but not quite" the mainstream IR scholarship. Chinese IR is an obvious example of what they refer to as hybridity and mimicry, "a feature that, once noticed, helps us identify diversity on the periphery, and, more importantly, agency in marginal theory-making and theory-testing" (see also Hwang, 2021a; Turton & Freire, 2016, p. 552).

Third, this hybridity and mimicry are "a concealed and destructive form of resistance in the anti-colonial strategy" (Hwang, 2021a, p. 323). For Chinese scholars, Western hegemony instills its own ideology, including knowledge, language, and other fields, into the non-Western world. If China does not take action to resist the hegemony of Western culture, it will lead to a complete inferiority. Facing Western authority, CS scholars can prove that they are not inferior to the West by imitating and modifying Western discourse through their traditional cultural values (even if they anachronistic or romanticized). At the same time, "the CS also verifies that the European experience is a local experience. Mainstream IR's concepts, ideas, and tenets are always produced in certain historical, political, and cultural contexts, and most importantly, they are produced in power structures" (Hwang, 2021a, p. 324). This becomes particularly clear when its concepts are used in different (cultural, historical, or geographic) contexts. Whether it supports or opposes it, mainstream IR academics are forced to respond to the various ideas, concepts, and methods put forward by CS scholars. The relationship between the "enunciator" and the one who is articulated can potentially be reversed (Hwang, 2021a).

Finally, the CS may become an effective local group to link various struggles and form a unified "counterhegemonic bloc" of post-Western or global IR in the discipline that fights against Western domination in a wider and decentralized field (Hwang, 2021a). Non-Western, post-Western, or global IR has made considerable progress in fighting for equal rights for the non-Western world. However, they still have a long way to go. By using strategic essentialism judiciously, the critical IR academic circle can form a collective that preserves differences and strives for a common goal. On the one hand, they need to pay attention to the power relationship between the West and the non-Western world. On the other hand, they must also show solicitude for the inequality between different cultures and regions in the non-Western world—including their internal differences—and remain vigilant not to harm other local vulnerable groups (Hwang, 2021a).

To conclude, by tracing the historical development of international studies in China and the proposition of the CS, the article wishes to rediscover the agency at the Chinese site through techniques such as adaptation, feedback, and reconstruction of Western influence. Attempts at creating a CS contain an indigenous Chinese site of agency with regards to developing IR. The pursuit of subjectivity in Chinese international studies and the attempts of the CS have indeed provided an opportunity for scholars to transcend Western centralism in the study of international relations. Even though there are certain problems and dangers, such an attempt still has influence and inspiration for international studies in other non-Western worlds in their pursuit of their own subjectivity and local perspectives. In this sense, Chinese IR studies can serve as a driver of the post-Western global imaginary.

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Notes

1. For instance, after Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* was published in the United States in 1999, its Chinese translation was published the following year.

2. See the general preface of books in the "Frontier Translations of International Relations Theory" series.

3. The concept of Tianxia means "under the heaven" in Chinese. At first glance, it seems to have a geographical meaning, but in Chinese philosophy, it is also a cosmology because the word has a universal sense of kingship endowed by heaven (see Chu, 2022).

4. In addition, Ye Zicheng (2003) of Peking University also studied Chinese diplomatic thought during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. His aim was to understand the principles and thoughts of diplomatic practice at that time from an international politics perspective.

5. Please note that my coverage of CS works is not exhaustive due to the scope of this article. There are many other scholars in the PRC who are making important contributions to the CS. In addition, the construction and development of China's IR theory are not limited to PRC scholars. The most important scholars outside the PRC who also use Chinese cultural knowledge to develop IR theory are Taipei-based scholars Shih Chih-yu and Huang Chiung-Chiu (e.g., Shih et al., 2019) and Chinese American scholar L. H. M. Ling (e.g., Ling, 2014).

6. Yan in his 2019 book identifies four types of leadership in international relations: "humane authority" (i.e., trustworthy), "hegemony" (i.e., trustworthy but follows a double standard), "tyranny" (i.e., untrustworthy but consistent), and "anemocracy" (i.e., untrustworthy and follows a double standard). See Yan (2019, pp. 25–53).

7. The main representative studies are included in the book *Symbiosis: The Rise of the Shanghai School*, edited by Ren Xiao (Ren, 2015).

8. For example, Vietnam and Japan also have their own tributary circles.

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