

The Missing Voice: Investigating the Absence of a Distinct Chinese International Relations Theory

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ABSTRACT

Power and political theory have always gone hand in hand, where International Relations has always been tagged as being Eurocentric, the shifting power centres have resulted in the rise of many Non-Western voices, depicting the nature of a multipolar 21st century. Therefore, studies must be made shedding light on different perspectives developing in the non-Western IR. This paper aims to study China's attempts to make an IR theory that is distinctive in its Chinese origin. For that purpose, the study looks at historical efforts made by the Chinese government, starting with the establishment of the first IR program, to the more recent Xi's announcement of the Global Governance Initiative. The study hints that where there is reason to believe that the Chinese IR theory hasn't truly been realised, it would be unfair to conclude that progress hasn't been made. China's clear intent and initiatives like the Global Development Initiative, Global Civilisation Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Governance Initiative are a sign that China, in future, is likely to achieve a distinct IR theory.

Keywords: Chinese IR Theory, Tianxia, Global Development Initiative, Global Governance Initiative, Global Civilisation Initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The reason why International Relations (IR) as a discipline was created in the aftermath of World War I was to answer the questions about war. Why do the states go to war? What are the primary causes behind war? These fundamental questions were the centre of the discipline when the first Chair was established at the University College of Wales in 1919. Aberystwyth (Hay, 2002). Since then, various scholars have tried to answer these questions, starting with Wilsonian Idealism, which reflected in the shape of Woodrow Wilson's idea of "collective security" (Dunne et al., 2020) championed by the League of Nations, and subsequent fall when World War II started, giving more strength to the skepticism of realists like E. H. Carr (Erik Jørgensen, 2010). The discipline, for the longest time, when it came to theory, has been dominated by two dominant theories: liberalism and realism. There have been major highs and lows for both of them, but overall, Realism has been the most dominant theory of the discipline until recently (Guzzini, 2004), when the ontological and epistemological questions have been raised by various theories. It started with Constructivists who drew inspiration from Wandt's "Anarchy is what you make of it" (Gokcekuyu, 2023; Whitham & Heywood, 2023), later, when realism wasn't able to predict the end of the Cold War, it gave rise to the end of History theories like those of Fukuyama (Lemke, 1997) and the Clash of Civilisations like Huntington (Huntington, 2008). Apart from them, there had been a rise of growing feminist, post-colonial, and post-structural critiques (Hay, 2002). It has grown to a point that even the most foundational questions have been challenged by anti-foundational theories.

With these rising theoretical challenges to the mainstream theories coming up, one should never undermine the role of changing power dynamics, as Foucault called "knowledge power nexus", in the current century, where the US has kept his Hegemony, it is foolhardy to think that the US hasn't lost its prime, the world we are living in, is increasingly becoming multipolar. The rise of the Global South, in the shape of BRICS it is becoming increasingly difficult to subdue the voices coming out of the Global South. China, being the leader of the Global South, has long been in pursuit of creating a theory that reflects its own version of truth. It has started to demand its place in the system, where there is a reason to believe that China is projecting his own theory of IR in the shape of Global Development Index (GDI) against the Western SDGs, Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), a vision that is based on mutual respect and dignity against the Western idea of universal values, lastly, the Global Governance Initiative laughed by Xi in 2025 as a direct threat to the accepted norms of Hegemony in the discipline. Even though these steps are in a nascent stage, what they truly represent only the time will tell, the paper aims to focus on the missing voice of the Chinese IR theory, seeking to causes and efforts made to form a theory that is distinctly rooted in Chinese tradition. It argues that even though efforts have been made, there has been a major lack of acceptance of a Chinese Theory in the IR. The discipline remains dominated by the Eurocentric and American Perceptions of international relations.

China's growing political influence and civilizational roots haven't resulted in a distinct Chinese IR theory that is completely independent from the Western ontological, Epistemological and methodological influence. Even though Chinese Acadia has been trying to form a theory that can have its own Chinese identity, there hasn't been a single theory that has been accepted as a theory, like Realism. There have been efforts in the form of Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) and Global Governance Initiative (GGI) that China is trying to give international relations a distinct Chinese character. But the efforts are still in their nascent phase, and how they materialise in the next decade to come, only time will tell. Therefore, the paper aims to analyse how it has started, where it is heading and what the problems are in the way.

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the historical conditions behind the absence.
2. To evaluate the depth of Chinese dependency on the Western frameworks of IR Theory.
3. To Access the potential Chinese philosophical traditions.

Methodology

The methodology adopted for the purpose of this study is of descriptive nature as the topic demands a historical overview of the Chinese IR and the recent emerging trends in the policy and philosophy of Chinese IR. Therefore, secondary sources have been used ranging from journal articles to scholarly books and opinions.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Yaqing's influential analysis traces the absence of a distinct Chinese IR theory to deep-rooted historical, cultural, and institutional factors. She argues that traditional Chinese thought was "unconscious of 'international-ness'", reflecting a Sinocentric worldview that did not conceive of foreign relations in the modern sense. Consequently, modern IR concepts: sovereignty, balance of power, etc, were imports. In Qin's view, three broad factors have blocked indigenous theory-making: the inward focus of China's traditional worldview, which assumed China's centrality in a global "Tianxia" (all-under-heaven) order rather than equality among nation-states; the dominance of Western IR paradigms in China's universities, so that scholars have typically applied imported theories to Chinese cases rather than formulating new ones; and the lack of a consistent theoretical core in Chinese IR research (i.e. no leading home-grown framework)(Yaqing, 2007).

Qin also highlights three historical “milestones” that could supply the intellectual “nutrition” for a future Chinese IR theory. First, China’s two-thousand-year tribute and Tianxia tradition, which envisioned a hierarchical world order centred on Chinese values, could in principle offer alternative concepts of order and hierarchy in world politics. Second, the intellectual revolutions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (the Self-Strengthening Movement, republicanism, socialism, etc.) disrupted old thinking and introduced radically new ideas. Third, post-1978 reform and opening-up unleashed vast social and economic changes and renewed engagement with the world. Qin believes these eras, if critically engaged, provide the raw materials (from Confucian ideas of relational harmony to modern nationalist thought) that might eventually seed an “inevitable” Chinese IR theory. In short, Qin presents both the obstacles (traditional insularity and Western hegemony) and the potential resources (Tianxia worldview, historical upheavals) for indigenizing IR theory in China.(Yaqing, 2007).

Western Hegemony in IR and the Global IR Initiative

Against Qin’s backdrop of Chinese indigenisation, many IR scholars emphasise the overwhelming Western bias in the discipline and call for more global inclusion. Acharya observes that mainstream IR concepts are “heavily biased in favour of Western Europe and the United States”(Acharya & Buzan, 2019). The canonical narrative of IR often starts in early-modern Europe (the Peace of Westphalia) and treats non-Western states as peripheral actors or passive “norm-takers”. This disciplinary parochialism means that experiences from Asia, Africa, Latin America, etc., have traditionally been neglected or poorly explained by IR theory.

Acharya’s remedy is the idea of “Global IR”: a pluralistic project to “bring the Rest in” by integrating diverse voices into IR scholarship. Global IR does not reject existing theories, but pushes them to broaden their horizons. Its goals include: diversifying who writes IR (e.g., more non-Western scholars in top journals), broadening pedagogy (teaching diverse intellectual traditions), and expanding the subject matter to include world histories beyond Europe. Acharya urges IR to study not only “anarchic” European-style state systems but also hierarchical orders and civilizational systems (as existed in imperial Asia or the Islamic world)(Acharya & Buzan, 2019). In practice, global IR involves dialogues between Western and non-Western ideas, recognising that Great-Power status and scholarly resources have shifted since the discipline’s founding.

Acharya (with co-editor Barry Buzan) also diagnoses why non-Western theory has lagged. Western hegemony is bolstered by factors such as the institutional dominance of Western scholarship (leading journals, conferences, funding) and its premise of being “universally valid.” Acharya notes practical barriers: limited academic infrastructure outside the West, language barriers (English as a gatekeeper), and the fact that many Asian IR scholars work closely with their governments and focus on policy rather than pure theory. He also points out a normative deference among some Global South scholars who “uncritically accept” Western paradigms, lacking confidence to challenge them.(Acharya & Buzan, 2019). Together, these factors reproduce a situation where even in China or India, IR is often taught and written in Western frameworks, with indigenous ideas introduced only marginally.(Acharya & Buzan, 2009).

Chinese IR Scholarship: Adaptation and Innovation

Within the Chinese academic community, scholars have long debated whether (and how) to cultivate distinct IR theories. Early Chinese IR studies (mid-20th century) were overwhelmingly ideological or descriptive – often Marxist or policy-driven, with little independent theory-building. In recent decades, with China’s rise, there has been increasing introspection about “Chinese characteristics” in IR. Some senior Chinese scholars have explicitly proposed frameworks claiming Confucian or holistic roots, such as “moral realism,(Zhang, 2023) “relationalism,(Qin, 2016) or “Tianxia”(Tingyang & Harroff, 2021), while others cautiously employ Western theories to analyse China’s rise.

Observers note that most Chinese IR writing still largely operates within Western frameworks. As a recent review observes, many Chinese theorists “aspire to engage intellectually with the Western mainstream,” often importing core assumptions like state-centrism into their work. For example, Chinese scholars may take realist concepts (power, interest) or constructivist ideas (identity formation) and then add Chinese case-studies to them. In this light, Chinese IR appears paradoxically both eager to distinguish itself and tied to existing paradigms. Alastair Iain Johnston and others have remarked that while Chinese scholarship shows creativity, it has not (so far) produced a theory that wholly departs from global IR’s terms of debate.(Johnston, 2019) The emphasis that Chinese theories “while emerging from China, should not be seen as ‘Chinese’ in the essentialist sense”, they arise from a shared social and intellectual milieu and often mirror biases found in mainstream IR.

On the one hand, there are signs of indigenous innovation. Several distinct strands of thought have gained attention within Chinese academia and beyond, drawing on China’s history and values. Zhang, for instance, revived a form of realist theory infused with Confucian notions of moral leadership.(Zhang, 2023). Yaqing and colleagues have articulated the “relational” theory.(Qin, 2016) , stressing interpersonal harmony over Hobbesian self-help. Tingyang has developed Tianxia-ism, envisioning a hierarchical but universalistic order inspired by ancient Chinese cosmology.(Tingyang & Harroff, 2021). These efforts suggest a desire to reframe IR in non-Western terms and address issues like hierarchy, legitimacy, and harmony that classical Western IR marginalises.

Moreover, as Noesselt notes, debates within China itself reveal a dynamic and not a monolith.(Noesselt, 2012). Although Chinese IR debates are heavily influenced by Western trends, the discussion is not just mimicry: “indigenous frameworks are already under construction”(Noesselt, 2012). In other words, talk of a “Chinese school” is not purely rhetorical. Chinese scholars are actively sifting through China’s own statecraft traditions (Confucian, Legalist, Maoist, etc.) to see what insights apply today. Acharya and Buzan’s own findings underline this: they expected Chinese IR to focus mainly on applying Western models, but found instead a lively discussion about China’s unique position and history.

Nevertheless, these emerging frameworks remain contested and internally varied. As the Cambridge review above illustrates, even within supposedly Chinese paradigms, there is no consensus on a singular vision of international order; one Chinese IR theorist’s ideal world may differ sharply from another.(Xiong et al., 2024). Furthermore, many Chinese works explicitly acknowledge their debt to Western theory, applying borrowed concepts pragmatically. In sum, Chinese IR scholarship today sits between two poles: on one side, a pragmatic adaptation of global IR tools (state-centric realism, liberalism, etc.), and on the other, experimental forays into indigenous ideas.(Qin, 2016; Tingyang & Harroff, 2021).

Sino-centrism, Essentialism, and Reflexivity

Alongside advocates of new Chinese theories, several scholars issue stern caveats. William Callahan, a leading critic, warns that some Chinese approaches risk parochialism and ideological essentialism (A. Callahan, 2008). He observes that reviving concepts like Tianxia can be a double-edged sword: while it valorises Chinese culture, it may also reify a “Sinocentric” worldview that implicitly excludes outsiders. In Callahan’s words, Zhao Tingyang’s Tianxia vision – often portrayed as all-inclusive- presents a new hegemony that reproduces China’s hierarchical empire for the twenty-first century”. In other words, what is sold as a cosmopolitan philosophy can reproduce familiar patterns of imperial dominance (China on top, others subordinate). Likewise, Sinan Chu cites critics who note that Tianxia “betrays a longing for a Sinocentric order resembling imperial China”. These criticisms urge caution: in seeking alternatives to Western IR, Chinese theorists must be vigilant not to fall into nationalist or authoritarian tropes(Chu, 2020).

Sinan Chu and others extend this critique more generally. They point to a pattern among non-Western theorists, including Chinese authors, of uncritical subservience to domestic authority and an ethnocentric outlook. For example, Chu argues that an “indigenous subject position” in China’s IR debates has led many scholars to align closely with official policy cues and overlook internal biases. In practice, this can mean prioritising national prestige or unity over analytic rigour. (Chu, 2020). Chu (and earlier critique by Callahan) call on Chinese IR scholars to adopt a reflexive stance: they should expose and question the ideological underpinnings of their own work, rather than assume them blindly.

EMERGING INDIGENOUS STRANDS AND GLOBAL TENSION

Despite these reservations, most reviews acknowledge that Chinese scholarship has indeed begun to feed into broader theoretical debates. The four main Chinese paradigms noted in the literature – moral realism(Zhang, 2023), relationalism(Qin, 2016), Tianxiaism(Tingyang & Harroff, 2021), and symbiosis theories(Ren, 2024). Each brings non-Western concepts into play. Yet authors caution that these should not simply be read as monolithic “Chinese theory”; rather, they represent diverse contributions that can enrich global IR if critically engaged.

Thus, a balanced take emerges: on one hand, the Chinese case exemplifies the structural inertia of Western IR (language barriers, academic incentives, and conceptual inertia). On the other hand, there is a cautious, incremental opening of space for indigenous thought. Scholars such as Nele Noesselt and Amitav Acharya see reason for optimism: with China’s global prominence and continued introspection, Chinese theoretical voices can become more confident and distinctive over time.(Acharya & Buzan, 2009; Noesselt, 2012). The literature speaks of an ongoing tension: between overreliance on Western paradigms (leading to potential blind spots about China’s uniqueness) and the necessity of grounding IR in China’s own context (which, unchecked, can risk parochialism).

In practice, this tension translates into concrete dynamics. For example, Chinese IR journals and graduate programs still emphasise the “big three” (realism, liberalism, constructivism) in teaching, but also encourage students to study Chinese thinkers. Many junior scholars today feel they must become bilingual in IR – fluent in English theory and literate in Chinese philosophical traditions. Conferences increasingly feature panels on Chinese IR theory, signalling institutional support. Yet publication in top global journals often still requires engaging with Western literatures, reinforcing a hybrid model of theory-building.

Balancing Continuity and Innovation

The scholarly literature paints a complex, evolving picture. No single view dominates: some stress the absence of any coherent Chinese theory.(Yaqing, 2007). Others highlight nascent efforts to craft one. (Roland, 2021). Critical commentators underscore that the path to “de-Westernising” IR is fraught with pitfalls.(Chu, 2020). Together, these perspectives underscore a cautious equilibrium. At present, Chinese IR theory remains a work in progress: it draws heavily on Western IR and often reproduces its assumptions, yet it also increasingly interrogates them and experiments with alternatives rooted in China’s past and present.

This literature review has traced the limitations (western bias, institutional constraints, ideological echo-chambers) and the potential (rich intellectual traditions, rising scholar community, global IR momentum) of Chinese IR scholarship. It highlights that these are not mutually exclusive. For example, Zhao Tingyang’s Tianxia both embodies the hope of an inclusive worldview and the worry of a new Chinese exceptionalism. Similarly, Qin’s own relational theory is innovative but still debates how much it truly breaks from Western ontology. What unifies the discussion is an acknowledgement of tension: Chinese

scholars must navigate between uncritically applying imported theories and uncritically affirming indigenous myths.

In the coming years, this tension is likely to sharpen. As China's role in world politics becomes ever more central, questions about its intellectual leadership in IR will loom larger. The review suggests a gradual trend toward pluralisation: Chinese ideas will continue to enter the global conversation, but those ideas will themselves be filtered through academic rigour and contestation. Overall, the literature calls for a reflexive stance, from both Western and Chinese scholars, that recognises Western IR's limitations while carefully discerning which elements of Chinese thought can genuinely advance the discipline.

THE FUTURE OF CHINESE IR THEORY

Earlier, it has been discussed that traditionally, non-Western IR, particularly Chinese IR, has been more focused on practice than on theory. A famous quote from Deng Xiaoping, "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches the mice"(Buckle, 2018), reflects the historical trend of the Chinese IR. They have been historically very pragmatic in their approach. It is only in recent years that, due to the rising political influence of China, it has started to reflect on its philosophical foundations. Xi Jingling has been the central figure in this pursuit.

Xi's ambitions are aptly outlined by Dian and Menegazzi opined that the Global Development Initiative (GDI) is a shift from infrastructure-based development to a development model based on the well-being of the people and improving their living standards of the people (Dian & Menegazzi, 2025b). Similarly, Global Security Initiative (GSI), if GDI was China's vision in development for international order, GSI is the Chinese vision of security that deals with security in line with interests and values. It challenges the US-led security framework and alliances in dispute management and resolution. It also aims to legitimise Chinese policies in the field of security (Dian & Menegazzi, 2025c). Lastly, they argued that the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) aims to promote a vision of international society where the Global South isn't excluded (Dian & Menegazzi, 2025a). For instance, a worldview where the voices and concerns of the South are not seen through the Western lens. It aims to de-westernise the international norms and values. If these initiatives are successful and find appreciation, it will raise major issues for the US and the West. For instance, imagine a world where China's treatment of Uyghurs is considered legitimate. Or the inhumane treatment of individuals who dissent against the "one China policy" (Mattingly, 2020). These are the issues that are believed to be the core interests of China. If they remain to be viewed strictly from the lens of national interests, would the new system that China aims to develop be any different from the current international system, where the US, being the dominant, does what fits its national interests, whether it is supporting Genocide in Gaza or supporting a political figure that is against the socialist democracy of Venezuela? (Anderson, 2025)

Chinese IR finds itself in a paradox where it isn't willing to shun the punitive practices against dissenting citizens, and at the same time equates development to the well-being of the people. This idea of political stability has been a lesson learned from Chinese history, but at the same time, it is necessary to find a balance where China can claim its altruistic message based on civilizational respect and norms. China shouldn't follow the footsteps of the previous hegemon, where national interest took priority over Normative functions of the international system. Otherwise, even if China develops an IR theory of distinct characteristics, the underlying principles of protection of national interest as made by Realism will remain the same. It will only be then change of the hegemon, not a meaningful change in the system.

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