
International Relations (IR) as an academic discipline has always been perceived of as an “American” discipline. The theorization of IR that led to the creation of major schools of thought, from realism and liberalism to constructivism, have largely been efforts undertaken by American scholars, despite the existence of the British school of “international society” and also recognition of the Soviet or Marxist approach to IR during the Cold War years. Such American dominance of the discipline no doubt reflects the pre-eminent status of the United States in the post-World War II global political economy.

However, with China’s rise now supposedly challenging the pre-eminent status of the United States, the voices and discourses of Chinese IR scholars are receiving increasing attention outside of China. Foreigners want to know how Chinese IR scholars perceive the international system and China’s role in it, what theoretical conclusions they can draw from observing international developments, what kind of foreign policy they will prescribe as China is likely to accumulate more material capabilities, and whether they prefer China to adopt a conservative or a radical approach to international affairs that will significantly reshape the international system and the world order. Hung-Jen Wang’s book thus aims to inform readers about the views of Chinese IR scholars.

Wang’s core argument is that the production of IR knowledge in China is the result of a dynamic interaction between Chinese scholars and their subject, China. Chinese scholars are much less focused on theoretical consistency, general applicability, and universal laws than are their Western counterparts in their theorization of IR. Three operative concepts are at work here. First is identity, in which Wang makes the argument that Chinese IR scholarship has to be understood in view of the Chinese historical, cultural, and political contexts. Therefore, most Chinese IR scholars do not claim to be disinterested value-free social scientists working on abstract theorization. Rather, these scholars are accustomed to the tradition in which their works “should have practical applications to their country’s needs.” Second is appropriation. Chinese scholars freely make use of Western theories and concepts when these theories and concepts serve the policy recommendations they are making. Theoretical consistency is not a major consideration. Third is adaptation, in which Chinese scholars, by borrowing Western theories, also make important efforts to tailor and modify these theories to fit China’s needs and conditions. In the process, these Western theories and concepts, which aspire to universal application, are relativized in the Chinese context.

Wang’s work is based on a model in which how to interpret China’s rise by Chinese scholars is treated as an independent variable. In general, among Westerners China’s rise can be seen as either a threat or an opportunity. How Chinese IR scholars counter these perceptions in their writings is then used to analyze the ways dominant Western IR theories are appropriated in China. For instance, Chinese scholars who counter the “China threat” theory with an uncompromising stand are taking a “realist” approach to IR, whereas those who urge for a more compromising stand are said to be taking the “liberalist” path. Chinese scholars who suggest that they should welcome and work with those foreigners who regard China as an opportunity are said to be influenced by the “constructivist” school, since these Chinese scholars believe in the power of ideas to forge peaceful and harmonious relations. Those who are skeptical about the “China opportunity” theory are nationalists who fear that foreign praise of China is a kind of “excessive praise” that is ultimately aimed to weaken China. Wang then uses this model to analyze the writings by Chinese IR scholars in four case studies or four sets of external relations: China-U.S., China-Japan, China-Southeast Asia, and China-Taiwan. Overwhelmingly, Wang finds that Chinese IR scholars are more prone to appropriating liberalism and constructivism rather than realism.

This book has the merit of being the first book to review, discuss, and categorize a large number of Chinese IR writings. The data collected by the author are impressive. However, those readers who are looking for a unique theoretical contribution from China will be disappointed in the sense that most of the book is devoted to analyzing how Chinese IR scholars appropriate Western theories and relativize them in the Chinese context. There is one chapter in the book in which Wang traces the origins and evolution of the IR discipline in China, discusses the pros and cons of constructing a uniquely “Chinese” theory of IR, and suggests what constitutes the core problematics of IR theorization in China. However, Wang does not develop this most interesting chapter further, and in fact this chapter actually does not quite fit with the case
studies. At the end, while the empirical case studies demonstrate the wide range of issues and positions taken and discussed by Chinese IR scholars, the book seems to show that there is not much IR theoretical originality coming from China today. Does this actually reflect the true state of IR scholarship today? Ten or fifteen years ago this might have been the case. The lack of a Chinese IR theory, and the necessity to build one, has been echoed numerous times at the national IR theory conferences held in Shanghai in 1987, 1998, and 2004. However, in recent years Chinese IR theorization has indeed taken a significant step forward. For example, Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University is at the forefront today in developing a new theory combining China’s pre-Qin ancient political thought and contemporary international relations theory. Others, mainly based in Shanghai, have innovatively used Confucian concepts such as ren (benevolence) and tianxia weigong (universal political community) to construct a Chinese paradigm of IR or to explain the security discourses emerging in China. Furthermore, these theorizations are more sophisticated in a sense that, although they are derived from China’s historical experiences or worldviews, they seek to have a universal application (much like the mainstream IR theory derived from the Western world). In a sense, they do not want to confine the theory only to “Chinese characteristics” and they hope that such theory will represent new theoretical progress in IR. However, this part of the IR scene that is developing in China is not discussed in detail in this book. Although Yan Xuetong is mentioned regularly throughout the volume, his theorization of IR and that of other scholars are not dealt with in an in-depth way.

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In his book, The China Fallacy, Donald Gross appeals for dramatic improvements in Sino-American relations with respect to major security, economic, and political issues. Based on his previous experience as a Department of States official and at the White House, Donald Gross provides insights into the genesis of American policies critical of China, unduly influenced by the hardliners. The combined pressures from military hawks, economic protectionists, and human rights watchdogs have prompted leaders in Washington to adopt ever more confrontational policies to address the “China threat.”

The author calls for a complete resetting of Sino-American relations in order to avert military conflict and to usher in a new era of cooperation and prosperity, i.e., a twenty-first century détente. He urges that both governments negotiate a new diplomatic architecture, referred to throughout the book as a “Framework Agreement,” which clearly establishes common principles and goals. The proposed arrangement would consist of concessions from both sides on sensitive issues, such as Taiwan, trade policy, and human rights.

The book is organized as follows: The introductory chapter describes the forces that have shaped U.S. policy toward China, characterized most recently by “hedging” under George W. Bush and the Asia “pivot” under President Obama. The tragedy is the immense security, economic, and political benefits forfeited by the United States due to its determination to characterize China as an enemy rather than as a key partner in the Pacific.

The next several chapters provide an overview of U.S. policy toward China with respect to military, economic, and human rights issues. Recommended policy changes are provided within each chapter and are presented together in the seventh chapter. One proposal for the “Framework Agreement” is a commitment from China to remove short-range ballistic missiles from the vicinity of Taiwan in exchange for U.S. suspension of arms sales to the Taiwan military. Chapters considering Japan and South Korea explain how American allies might expect to benefit from a U.S.-China rapprochement.

A close reading of this book renders two general impressions. The first is a narrative put forward by the author which maligns current