

Mainstream IR Theoretical Perspectives and Rising China Vis-À-Vis the West: The Logic of Conquest, Conversion and Socialisation

Young Chul Cho¹ · Yih-Jye Hwang²



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Abstract

The aim of this article is to critically examine how the mainstream International Relations (IR) theoretical perspectives — realist, liberalist, and constructivist — make sense of the relationships between Self and Others in explaining the rise of China in IR. Our argument is two-fold. First, although mainstream IR perspectives are believed to produce objective, neutral, scientific, and universal knowledge about reality and how the world works, they are not value-free explanations but normative approaches that serve the US/West hegemony, and Orientalism appears to constitute the hidden normative underpinning of those perspectives. Second, considering mainstream IR perspectives as problem-solving approaches for the hegemonic US/West reveals that the hegemonic Self uses the logic of conquest, conversion, and socialisation to deal with the Other, rising China.

Keywords IR theoretical perspectives · Rising China · Self/Other · East Asia · International relations

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the study of the rise of China has boomed in international relations (IR) studies. IR scholars, along with practitioners and journalists, have tried to understand how China might follow, influence, and revise the current

✉ Young Chul Cho
youngchul.cho@gmail.com

Yih-Jye Hwang
y.c.huang@luc.leidenuniv.nl

¹ The School of International Studies, Chonbuk National University, Rm. 214, Global Leaders Hall, 54896 Jeonju, South Korea

² Leiden University College, Leiden University, Rm. 4.13, Anna van Buerenplein 301, The Hague 2595, The Netherlands

liberal international order and what the consequences of any path they might take would be [34]. The story often begins with the assumption that the United States (US) has been enjoying undisputed, hegemonic status in the world since the end of the Cold War, but an emerging contender for that hegemonic position is on the rise in the East — China. The story continues: even though China at the moment is not in a political, military, or even cultural position to overthrow the US hegemony, China will be ready to do so in the not-so-distant future [24, 85]. Indeed, the rise of China has drawn massive interest in both academic and security policy circles [14, 24, 29, 43, 47, 49, 53, 61, 85, 89, 94, 96, 105, 113]. All of the above rich scholarly literature on the rise of China has used similar language to treat China as a nebulous, worrying Other. In other words, although detailed descriptions of particular IR events relating to the rise of China sometimes differ, much of the mainstream IR literature relies on a few similar theoretical perspectives: realist, liberalist, and constructivist ([103]: 52–62). Those perspectives maintain that they deal with how the world ‘really’ is and works.

One important critique of those perspectives has been their Western-centrism and their inability to come to terms with the problem of the Self/Other dialectic in IR [69]. Tickner [107] notes that the reasons for ‘IR’s resilience as a (neo)imperial field have yet to be examined systematically and empirically’. One way to do so, as suggested by Jones [52], would be to explore the political, ontological, and historical underpinnings of IR, interrogating how the field came to be configured as it is and what kinds of power relations were at work in its evolution. Those authors in one way or another offer their argument about the Self/Other binary structures contained in mainstream IR theories (e.g. [20, 46, 78, 97]). Despite this growing call for decolonization of IR, still little research on possible Western-centric knowledge production of the rise of China has been done in IR studies. Moreover, although IR scholars often see the rise of China as one of the most important issues of this century, a decolonial gaze toward its knowledge industry on the rising China topic is still lacking, save for Chengxin Pan’s rare work – *Knowledge, Desire, and Power in Global Politics* [82]. It would appear that IR studies is still conservative and lags behind other disciplines in a reflexive sense; indeed, in the fields of China studies as well as area studies, there has been much critical research on Orientalist knowledge production on China since the end of the 1980s (See [15, 37, 40, 48, 71, 80, 110, 112, 121, 122]). Bearing in mind the reflexive gap between IR studies and China studies, the research scope of this paper’s critical investigation is limited to mainstream IR scholarship.

Informed by a poststructuralist and postcolonial stance, this article is intended to offer a critical epistemological reflection on the field of China’s international relations, adding to a growing body of literature of decolonial IR studies [4, 57, 68, 77, 95, 98, 99, 108]. In other words, this article is an empirical analysis of recent mainstream IR literature of rising China while (meta-)theoretically adding to the existing critical IR scholarship. By critically examining the ways in which mainstream IR perspectives understand China’s rise vis-à-vis the US/West, we wish to decolonise and democratise IR studies. In particular, we aim to explore in what ways and with what strategies the hegemonic Self (i.e. the West) deals with a rising China. How has the Self/Other nexus in mainstream IR structured academic and political understanding of contemporary China’s IR? What are the policy-relevant implications of mainstream IR’s depiction of the Self/Other nexus, designed to limit China’s growth and power? Studying narratives informed by mainstream IR theories can illustrate the problematic epistemological and ethical assumptions that underlie IR

scholarship, as well as suggest ways to genuinely ‘re-world’ both IR studies and the reflexive research attitudes in the social sciences in general.

With the above questions in mind, we critically examine how the mainstream IR theoretical perspectives — realist, liberalist, and constructivist — make sense of the relationships between Self and Others in explaining the rise of China. Mainstream IR does not simply explain how a rising China thinks and behaves in international politics, but produces certain international images of a rising China that rationalise Western understandings and justify its policies. Our coverage of mainstream IR writings is not exhaustive; however, we have endeavoured to capture the overall tendency of mainstream IR’s discussion of Self/Other engagement. Plus, note that this article does not suggest that the mainstream IR perspectives examined in later sections are theoretically homogenous, nor do they present clear-cut, discrete IR theories per se. Rather, they are three different broadly-defined cognitive frameworks. This article thus uses the term, (theoretical) perspective, rather than theory. Moreover, the scholars discussed below are not held exclusively by any particular theory; instead most of them are shared by a diversity of theoretical persuasions that often transcends the theory divides. It is indeed difficult, if not problematic, to classify any IR scholar into a pre-existing theoretical camp.

In what follows, Section 2 provides a brief sketch of each mainstream IR perspective and a critical discussion of Self/Other engagement in mainstream IR. In that analysis, we reveal mainstream IR’s logic of conquest, conversion, and socialisation toward the Other and consider Orientalism as the hidden normative foundation of mainstream IR perspectives. Section 3 examines how mainstream IR literature depicts a rising China — the threatening Other or a would-be West — and applies its particular logical frameworks to suggest ways of handling China. The final section highlights a possible danger of mainstream IR’s (re)production of the US/West-China insecurity by Chinese IR scholarship while recapping our main arguments.

Self-Other Dialectic and Orientalism in the Mainstream IR Perspectives

Self-Other Relations in Realist Perspective

The most dominant theoretical perspective in IR is realist. Almost all realists share principles such as statism, survival, self-interest and power, though different strands of IR realism have existed. Statism means that the sovereign state is the principle actor in international relations and the legitimate representative of the people’s will. Moreover, the core interest of every state is to pursue its survival, which only can be achieved by following its own interest and by not relying on other states or non-state actors (e.g. the United Nations). Hence, self-interest and constant struggle for power are the main motivations in international politics. Classical realists such as Morgenthau explain this behavior by forces inherent in human nature to act in self-interest. As Morgenthau notes (1978: 4), ‘Politics, like society in general, is governed by objective laws that have their root in human nature’. State behaviour is thus a reflection of human behavior.

Structural realists instead explain state behaviour by the anarchic structure of the international system. We live in an anarchic world where there is no overarching authority above states. This anarchical system creates the need for self-help. States need to protect themselves against the unknown actions of the other states in the

system. Within structural realism there is a further distinction between offensive realism and defensive realism. Offensive realists like Mearsheimer see states as ‘power maximizer’. As Mearsheimer notes, ‘[g]iven the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power’ ([73]: 1). Defensive realists like Waltz see states as ‘security maximizer’. They acknowledge that imprudent state expansion puts state survival at risk by antagonising other powers, creating security dilemmas and provoking others to engage in counterbalancing strategies. States should therefore seek for an appropriate amount of power to guarantee their security and not threaten other states. Power is merely a means to the end of security.

What, then, is the realist understanding of Self-Other relations in IR? First, the binary of Self and Others does not manifest itself explicitly in the realist tradition. Realists seek to be essentially transcultural by assuming that both human and state nature is always greedy, regardless of cultural, social, and linguistic background. All actors are assumed to be selfish. As Morgenthau [76] notes, ‘the drives to live, to propagate and to dominate are common to all men’. Structural realism has a similar view. For Waltz [111], all states are ‘like units’ under an anarchic system of international politics. It does not matter whether states are democratic or Western; all states are understood to perform similar functions and act in a similar way: ensuring their security above all or falling behind. Everyone is understood to be selfish, and *my* survival and interests could be compromised against *my* will at any time. Here, the realist logic from the self’s point of view is that *I* (the Self) know that *you* (the Other) have an evil nature without needing to observe or know who *you* are.

Against that backdrop, a realist perspective insinuates a hierarchical dichotomy between the superior West as the Self and an inferior ‘non-West’ as the Other, both morally and analytically. This assertion is mainly derived from the realist conception of the ‘state of nature’. IR realists frequently draw an analogy between anarchy and the Hobbesian idea of the state of nature [41], i.e., life before civil society. In that state, Hobbes [41] argued, every person has a natural right or liberty to do anything necessary to preserve their own life, and life is ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. Hobbes [41] noted that he developed his understanding of that state of nature using his interpretation of non-European communities, mainly, ‘the savage people in many places of America’ who ‘have no government at all and live at this day in that brutish manner’. Hobbes thus presupposed that the European world (the West) was civilised and the non-European world (the Rest) was barbaric. As rightly pointed out by Chacko [8], ‘[by] describing the international system as anarchical IR theorists cannot help but activate images of the state of nature and primitive society, concepts that contain culturally specific understandings of human nature and history which are hidden from view through the language of universalism’.

Moreover, realism distinguishes the anarchy of international politics from the order of the domestic realm. The domestic is a realm of order and justice, and the international is a realm of disorder and injustice: the idea of the former is derived from European experience and that of the latter is based on European ideas about non-European worlds. Consequently, the domestic/inside (the Self) and the international/outside (the Other) are clearly divided as antithetical entities in the ontological sense, and between them is not an interface but a wide moral distance. As the anarchical world

(i.e., the Other) poses an existential threat to the Self, the Self (we) should conquer, or at least tame, the Others (them) before they conquer us (the Self).

Self-Other Relations in Liberalist Perspective

For liberalists, we people are rational beings, we can cooperate with one another for better lives and moral principles, even though tension and conflict will arise at times. Conflict can be managed via the harmony of interests, and states do not need to fear one another all the time, despite the anarchy of international politics. States remain significant actors in liberalist IR, but many other actors are also recognised, such as international organisations, NGOs, and even individuals. Particularly, international cooperation and peace can be realised through the Kantian triangle of democratic institutions and norms at home, complex economic interdependence abroad, and solid international law and institutions abroad ([11]: 245–261; [23]: 108–122; [92]: 94–113). Different strands of liberalism accordingly underline different angles of the Kantian triangle. While the democratic peace theorists stress the idea of democracy and the need to expand the liberal zone in international relations, the neo-liberalists/liberal institutionalists focus more on economic interdependence.

Many liberals claim that democratic states tend to not engage in interstate wars with other democracies. Therefore, it could be argued that the global spread of democracy and democratic values would lead to a steady decline in the frequency of interstate wars and can thus be a beneficial actor in the development of a more peaceful international society. As Kant notes ([54] 138), ‘[if] the consent of the citizens is required in order to decide that war should be declared...nothing is more natural than that they would be very cautious in commencing such a poor game, decreeing for themselves all the calamities of war’. Moreover, population satisfaction in democratic states is likely to be relatively high, compared to non-democratic states. This is the result of the freedom, protection of several human and constitutional rights and again, the presence of a democratically elected government. Therefore, the introduction of a functioning democracy would benefit the development towards a more peaceful international society.

Whereas classical liberals focus on the role of the people’s power in relation to the peace brought by democracy, neoliberals argue that the democratic peace would be the result of the existence of high levels of interdependence between democratic states. The emergence of a more globalised society and economic treaties and ties between states would have led to more peaceful international cooperation and understanding. Moreover, given that free trade and cooperation are intrinsically immanent in democratic states, the existence of these shared values has in fact contributed to a more interlinked and interdependent global economy. Therefore, the emergence of a more democratic international society would be likely to cause a decline in interstate wars breaking out [59]. Yet, it should be remembered that in most liberal viewpoints peace is still not a normal state of international affairs; it can only be achieved when actively pursued. Thus, the mere promotion of democracy would not lead to peace, unless the newly established international institutions and/or regimes actively seek to achieve it.

What, then, is the liberalist understanding of Self-Other relations in IR? First, like realism, it initially defines the Other in relation to the Self in a negative sense. Despite its strong belief in rationality and progress for peace, liberalists, like realists, pose similar questions about how to address the untrustworthy, threatening Other in a

Hobbesian world; they simply present different solutions to the same perceived problem of securing the Self. In other words, liberalists depart from Hobbes' extreme depiction of state of nature as war of all against all, and try to go beyond the world of Hobbes and transform its antagonistic Self-Other relationship through the Kantian triangle into a conciliatory relationship instead, allowing for pacific and cooperative relationships between liberal democracies.

At first glance, the liberalist perspective can seem reasonable. However, with regard to the question of Self-Other relations, it overlooks the power imbalance between the West and the Rest. Liberalism as political thought is founded on the values of self-determination and the idea that individuals are free, rational and autonomous, existing independently on an equal footing and being able to critically evaluate their ends. But that obscures inequality and injustice, in the Marxist sense, between the Self (the West) and the Other (the Rest) in the current Western-led international system. More importantly, the Self's system – as to either political (i.e. democracy) or economic system (i.e. market economy) – is presented as self-evidently legitimate; it tells the Other that the system is equally good for them, and thus the Other must follow the Self's system. A liberalist perspective – especially democratic peace theory – thus accepts a clear hierarchy between the developed-modern-civilised 'good' world (i.e., the Western Self) and the underdeveloped-pre-modern-barbaric 'evil' world (i.e., the non-Western Other), making the Self morally superior to the Other.

The Self is thus a universal reference that should 'educate' the Other — the White Man's Burden. Any Other who resists the Self's teaching should be 'civilised'. The manifestation of this 'standard of civilisation' can be observed in the European Union's self-identification as a normative power (e.g. [72]), who regards itself as the 'protector' or 'ethical teacher' of developing countries (in particular the African states). This constitutes a paternalistic relationship, which is arguably, rooted in Europe's colonial history. The implicit normative rationale is that the Other should be converted into the Self for its own good because the Self is assumed to be a righteous, democratic, and universal model. Based on that moral hierarchy, '[i]nstitutions [norms] may become the anchor for such a hegemonic strategy since they lend themselves both to the representations of diverse interests and to the universalization of policy' ([18]: 219). All things considered, liberalists are interested in the ways in which the Self regulates the untrustworthy Other who might otherwise threaten the Self: the Self should convert the Other into the Self before being conquered.

Self-Other Relations in the (Wendtian) Constructivist Perspective

Since the late 1990s, the constructivist perspective has joined liberalist and realist perspectives as a mainstream IR theoretical perspective [44]. For constructivists, 'security interests are defined by actors who respond to cultural factors' ([56]: 2), such as culture, norms, and identity. State identity is critical because the state cannot make sense of its interests without knowing who it is. State identity is, to a great extent, shaped through norms that display appropriate actions and thereby constitute a state's particular interests. Norms thus either define or regulate states, or they do both, providing states with the necessary knowledge of their interests and identities ([56]: 1–32). However, norms are also produced by social interactions among states, and the culture within each state-system determines the extent to which it feels secure or

insecure in international politics: ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ [116]. In other words, for neorealism anarchy is essentially conflictual, whereas Wendtian constructivism argues that the nature of anarchy is not fixed. It can be Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian, depending on states’ social interactions. To achieve international peace, therefore, friendly cultures among states should be established through positive social interactions because such cultures contribute to increasingly peaceful international politics. In that context, socialisation (i.e., the adoption of rules and modes of behaviour by actors) matters in the constructivist perspective ([11]: 245–261; [12]: 299–316).

What, then, is the constructivist understanding of Self-Other relations in IR? Constructivists limit the ethical and analytical horizons of these relations by presuming that the international system can best be researched as if it were an equal give-and-take interaction among like-minded sovereign states. Here, the critical question is where the underlying norms come from ([63]: 451–97). The theoretical answer might be that they arise through social interactions among free, rational, and private state actors. However, due to their structuralist interest in uncovering top-down/deductive, causal mechanisms from norms to actors in practice, constructivists paradoxically tend to take their own concept — norms — for granted, even as they criticise realists for treating a state’s identity and interests as exogenous givens. In line with ‘the liberal claim that international institutions can transform state identities and interests’ ([115]: 394), constructivists tend to make little of the power imbalance between states in the formation of norms. Who can produce the norms, and whose voices are most reflected within the norms of international politics? To put it simply, who are the rule-makers?

In practice, it appears obvious that the rule-makers are often hegemons in the Gramscian sense ([17]: 162–75). They are the great powers (mostly Western), and they use norms to perpetuate their particular order. As elaborated by Ikenberry and Kupchan ([45]: 283–315), norms, in addition to the manipulation of material incentives such as threats of punishment or promises of reward, are a means by which hegemons assert control over weaker powers within the international system and achieve and maintain compliance. Thus, the constructivist perspective does not operate from a drive to convert Others (e.g., the Rest) into the Self (e.g., the West); instead, the powerful Self seeks to socialise weaker Others into a global system that serves the Self’s interests. Here, the simple distinction is that the hegemon is the rule-maker and others are the rule-takers, and the hegemon prefers ruling by consent (under the name of global governance) rather than by force because the former is less costly and more effective than the latter. Moreover, whereas liberalists are normatively inclined to the West, the constructivist perspective is more focused on how a hegemon (or few great powers) socialises subordinate states via norms that maintain its upper-hand status and vested interests. Nonetheless, the liberalist logic of conversion and the constructivist logic of socialisation overlap in practices of IR.

Embedded Orientalism in Mainstream IR

Mainstream IR scholarship, under the cloak of objective scientific knowledge production, thus reflects the identity and interests of the West, specifically the Anglo-American world, by encouraging its scholars to exclude non-Western systems of thought and using its theoretical perspectives to justify and perpetuate Western hegemony ([42, 95]: 167–83). Our analysis of the Self/Other relations in each mainstream IR perspective suggests that realist, liberalist, and constructivist perspectives are

‘problem-solving’ approaches, as opposed to critical approaches ([18]: 204–54). To paraphrase Cox’s [18] renowned statement — ‘Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose’ — mainstream IR theoretical perspectives are always *for* great, hegemonic powers and *for* the purpose of securing an international system designed for the security and interests of those great hegemonic powers. In international affairs, the Self is the hegemon (often the West), and the Other is the subordinate (often the Rest). The Self is the proactive subject, and the Other is a mere object to be controlled by the Self for the Other’s own good. The Other’s subjectivity is often missing or ignored.

Normatively and meta-theoretically, this way of thinking is tied to logocentrism, ‘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’ ([36]: xvi). From Plato through to the present time, logocentrism has been the dominant mode of producing meaning in Western culture. In the context of Jacques Derrida, Delanty [21] says that logocentrism is ethnocentric because it privileges Western thought over all other forms of thought and makes Western reason the sole criterion for ‘correct and universal’ knowledge. It is easily discernible that logocentrism is theoretically akin to Said’s [93] notion of Orientalism, which notices the Orient as the most recurring image of the Other, the West’s ‘contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience’ that helps to define what the ‘West’ is. In critical IR literature on China, Chengxin Pan’s study on Western representations of China’s rise is particularly illuminating. In *Knowledge, Desire, and Power in Global Politics* [82], Pan first provocatively asserts that ‘China watching rarely watches itself’. He argues that although it is commonly held as ‘objective truth’, Western knowledge of China’s rise is in fact less about ‘China’; rather, it is a reflection of ‘a certain Western self-imagination and its quest for certainty and identity’ ([82]: viii). Pan then persuasively demonstrates the ways in which two prominent Western ‘paradigms’ – namely: China the ‘threat’ and China the ‘opportunity’ – have steered and shaped Western understandings of China, determining ‘certain acceptable ways of making sense of China and facilitate the production of knowledge along those lines’ ([82]: 22). To him, these two paradigms are produced by a longstanding ‘colonial desire’ of the West towards China. Whereas ‘the ‘China threat’ paradigm bears the stamp of fears, the ‘China opportunity’ paradigm can be best seen as manifestations of modern fantasies’ ([82]: 16).

In addition, the presumed superiority of the West over its Others suggests that only one single (Western) path leads to the end form of human civilisation or history [31], that is, the one represented by Western civilisation. Western civilisation is thus understood to be not only different from its Eastern counterpart, but far superior to it. Western-centrism in this sense is prescriptively built upon the assumption that the totality of Western culture is universal. External geographical or cultural differences thus come to be represented as Others that could constitute a threat to Western universality. In such a Manichean world of morality, the Self and the Other are essentially different, and the temptation is strong to translate Self/Other into a logocentric good/evil binary framework that provides a moral basis for conquest, conversion, and socialisation. IR examples of this are US President Ronald Regan’s use of ‘evil empire’ to describe the Soviet Union in 1983 and US President George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address describing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as the ‘axis of evil.’

Thus, the logic of conquest, conversion, and socialisation when dealing with Others is often justified by stealth in mainstream IR perspectives. Realism, liberalism, and

constructivism never provide value-free IR knowledge; rather, they are normative theories for the hegemon. Logocentrism and Orientalism have here been shown to constitute the hidden normative underpinning of those mainstream IR theoretical perspectives. As Pan [81] rightly noted, the US perception of the Other (i.e., China) as a threat is closely linked to how US policymakers see themselves ‘as representatives of the indispensable, security-conscious nation.’ By tracing mainstream IR’s understanding, explanation, and interpretation of its practices, we have shown how logocentrism and Orientalism manifest themselves in the discipline. Therefore, in the rest of this article, we turn to a case study — the rise of China — to examine our deliberation of Self-Other relations in world politics and test our initial proposition about the mechanisms through which and the conditions under which Self-Other relations function when theorising about international relations.

Rising China and Mainstream IR’s Logic of Conquest, Conversion, and Socialisation

As discussed so far, mainstream IR perspectives consider conquest, conversion, and socialisation to be reasonable ways to deal with Others. Although we discussed them discretely for analytical purposes in the previous section, the three modes are closely related and often pervade real politics, the mass media, as well as academic circles simultaneously. In particular, conversion overlaps with socialisation to such a degree that telling one from the other in practice is difficult. More to the point, conquest and conversion/socialisation are two sides of the same coin: they are all about how the superior Self (the West) subjugates inferior Others (the Rest). Therefore, we will now look at the ways in which mainstream IR scholars and practitioners have talked about a rising China since the end of the Cold War, including the advice they proffer.

China as the Threatening Other: Conquering Rising China

Realists do not all have the same opinion about a rising China, but the basic realist stance is that a rising China will transform the Western-led international order, which will lead to resistance and pressure from the existing hegemon, the US. The likely outcome is thus conflict between the hegemonic US and rising China.

According to Mearsheimer [74], a prominent advocate of offensive realism, China and the US are fated to clash and prone to go to war to determine who will be the dominant power. China will attempt to dominate the Asia-Pacific region in the twenty-first century, as the US dominated the Western Hemisphere in the twentieth century. Considering this potential face-off of great powers, Mearsheimer (2013: 89) maintains that ‘The USA does not tolerate peer competitor [such as rising China]... In the end, they [Asian countries] will join a US-led balancing coalition to check China’s rise.’ In a similar sense, Pant [83] states that East Asia ‘is witnessing great power politics at its most pristine and geopolitical competition between the global superpower [the US] and its most likely challenger [China] in full swing.’ In other words, such realists argue that Washington will not allow rising China in East Asia to go unchecked. Pant [83] further argues that ‘the US had to recalibrate its regional policy in response to the growing demand from the region for it to play a more assertive role if it wanted to retain its role as an offshore balance.’ Likewise,

Friedberg [29] is highly sceptical of optimistic expectations that liberal ideas could socialise China into the Western-led international order. Instead, a growing conflict of interests and profound ideological and political differences will render Sino-US relations in Asia increasingly stressed and competitive. He (2011: 8) warns that ‘if we permit an illiberal China to displace us as the preponderant player in this most vital region, we will face grave dangers to our interests and our values throughout the world.’ Friedberg [30] does not shy away from suggesting an all-out strategy to counter and contain rising China by deploying hard power and a ‘community of Asian democracies’ designed specifically to contain China. In general, offensive realism-leaning scholars argue that rising China is a threat to be checked, countered, and contained for the sake of the West.

Likewise, when realist theories of power transition are applied to rising China [33, 58, 79], the following account is commonly used: There is great danger at the moment when the power imbalance between the US and China becomes small. Although China does not pose an immediate military threat to the US, this account expects China to become a military threat to the US in the near future. China will need a better army to protect its steady supply of resources from Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Under that justification, China will start a ‘defensive’ army that is likely to have significant offensive power. It is nearly impossible to build an army solely for defence purposes because defence can quickly turn to offense when needed. At the same time, the hegemonic power of the US is expected to decline, starting a new cycle of struggle over international order. The existing rules and institutions under American management enter into a period of contest and crisis. The legitimacy of American’s position of power is questioned, and it is increasingly difficult for the US to defend the status quo. Out of that situation, China emerges as a new leading state and presents a new set of international rules and institutions. Power transition theory thus tends to suggest that rising China is dangerous to the US/West. Therefore, the West should do something to stop the rise of China before it is too late.

Defensive and classical realists are more measured than offensive realists in their tone, using concepts such as ‘sound judgement’ and ‘prudence’ ([2]: 260–292; [34, 60]: 53–75; [61, 76, 111]). They argue that China might seek to make itself great, but it is a status-quo power that will therefore be cautious and try to avoid conflict by focusing on its internal problems, such as economic development or social problems. It would be foolish for China to attempt to revise the existing international order and dominate the world. The presence of nuclear weapons could weaken China’s revisionist ambitions, and other Asian countries (such as Japan, South Korea, and India) will form an anti-Beijing coalition with the US to prevent rising China from dominating Asia. A reason for Beijing to call its rise a peaceful development is that China does not know the extent to which the West (mainly the US) will allow China to stay on its path. Therefore, they have done their utmost to reassure other states that their development is peaceful and that they are not seeking hegemony in any form. According to these realists, rising China wants to be treated as a great power but not a revisionist one. However, despite their more nuanced language and optimistic tone about international stability, classical and defensive realists still see rising China as a foe: the West should be alarmed, and the menace of China should be managed accordingly. Rising China is the US’s number-one enemy in world politics and should thus be checked and balanced at all times.

By interpreting not-so-realist concepts of culture and history in a seemingly realist sense, some writings have produced realist results — China is a threatening Other to the

West. For example, Johnston [49], in his study of China's strategic culture, suggests that China is no less concerned with military power than any other civilisation. Johnston presented his audience with two paradigms that appear to be present in traditional Chinese military thought: the Confucian-Mencian paradigm (nonviolent, accommodationist) and the *parabellum* paradigm (violent, anticipatory). Johnston explains that the mix of paradigms in Chinese strategic thought has often led to strategic outcomes similar to those a realist would predict because China's strategies must comply with its capabilities. China will use force when it deems it necessary and feasible. This is exactly what a realist would argue, which seems to imply that realism is not a Eurocentric theory but rather a universal paradigm that applies equally to Western and Chinese traditional strategic culture ([49]: 171).

A similar argument can be found in many other scholarly works in the West. Cohen [16], for instance, argues that historically a strong China attacked and exploited the weak, who can be expected to do the same in the future. He ([16]: 683) emphatically states that 'China today is the product of thousands of years of expansion...As China regains its great power status, it can be expected to behave as all great empires have throughout history, resume its place as East Asia's hegemonic power and extend its influence wherever it can in the rest of the world.' Pillsbury [85], in his 2016 book titled *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, proposes a 'secret strategy' thesis that China's historical intention has always been to become the world's hegemonic power. China has just been hiding its desire for supremacy and dominance in plain sight, as revealed in Deng Xiaoping's famous dictum, 'hide your strength, bide your time.' Clearly all these so-called historical or cultural accounts replicate the realist perspective, arguing that China is a fundamentally expansionist power with a strong intention to revise the current international order.

Therefore, to many realist-tilted scholars and practitioners, China is a revisionist power and thus a threat to the West. Holslag [43] contends that China is a deeply dissatisfied rising power that wishes to revise and even destroy the Western liberal order. He adds that it is difficult to protect the security of Asian countries and the liberal world order while satisfying China's ambition to gain and maintain international recognition of its right to rule Asia and even the world. International peace and stability is increasingly placed under grave stress by China. For Kaplan [55], it is evident that '[w]here great powers have emerged and re-emerged on the scene... they have tended to be particularly assertive—and therefore have thrown international affairs into violent turmoil. China is to be no exception.' Therefore, Kaplan [55] foresees that 'when great powers all pursue legitimate interests, the result is likely to be the defining military conflict of the twenty-first century: if not a big war with China, then a series of Cold War-style standoffs that stretch out over years and decades.'

The debate over how to respond to growing fear of a rising China within realism is perfectly exemplified by US foreign policy. For example, the logic of conquest has been at play in the discourses of how to understand the Obama administration's Rebalance to Asia. Broadly speaking, two major discourses can be discerned regarding the Rebalance: China threat and China challenge [13]. The logic of conquest is closely associated with the China threat discourse that treats US Rebalance to Asia as mainly a sort of containment policy – 'check' and/or 'channel' can be used instead of 'contain' in practice – toward a rising China seen as threatening [67, 91, 109]. Militarily, the

Obama administration increased the overall military personnel in the region; the intention was to have 60% of the American Naval Force stationed in the Asia-Pacific by 2020. The increase in military power display is both a responsive and preventive tool [70]. Diplomatically, several new alliances between the US and China's neighbouring countries were formed. Indonesia in 2010, Singapore in 2012, Vietnam in 2013, and Malaysia in 2014 have all established strategic partnerships with the US. It was in this context that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe [1], as a rejoinder to the China threat discourse of U.S. Rebalance, suggested a proposal of 'Asia's Democratic Security Diamond' which is to form a diamond between US Hawaii, Japan, India, and Australia to protect the maritime commons against autocratic China, emphasising that 'nothing is more important for Japan than to reinvest in its alliance with the US'. The military and diplomatic engagement by the Obama administration in return have developed Chinese skepticism and led to China viewing the entire rebalance in a negative light.

Therefore, as Harner notes [39], the Obama administration's Rebalance to Asia is 'a thinly disguised strategy to restrain, constrain, and in the main to thwart China's rising power'. The policy pertains to the debate over whether the U.S. is balancing China (defensive realism) or attempting to preserve their hegemony in Asia (offensive realism). This is a good example of a realist concept of offshore balancing. More interestingly, the recent (American) liberals' concerns over Donald Trump's more isolationist foreign policy stance and his closer relationship with Xi Jinping (e.g. [101]) that could give China the opportunity to eliminate the US as its strongest competitor in the race for hegemony in East Asia ironically also adopt a realist logic.

In short, even though realism does not deny that the Self (the US) is egoistic, its understanding of the Other (China) implicitly projects the moral reasoning that the Self is good and the Other is evil and threatening to the Self. For this reason, many realists take for granted that other Asian countries should and will join the US to contain China rather than work with China to contain the US. Furthermore, they accept without question that the US must pre-emptively contain a rising China whose central psyche is 'conquest before being conquered.'

China as a Would-Be West: Converting or Socialising Rising China

Liberalists often believe that China can be integrated into the Western-led international order through either conversion or socialisation; in other words, China can become part of the Western 'us' or become 'our good friend.' Specifically, they argue that the growing depth and complexity of the economic interdependence between China and the West makes war increasingly unlikely ([35]: 639–682). Moreover, China's participation in international economic institutions such as the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and APEC is perceived to encourage habits of cooperation and compromise and signal the embrace of transnational rather than parochial perspectives ([26, 27]: 46–83; [51]: 241–278; [66]: 206–230; [75]: 22–35; [119]: 3–21). Internally, China's overseas commerce not only encourages cosmopolitan perspectives in China at large [9], but also has the potential to reshape the domestic political composition of China, empowering social groups with an interest in peace and stability. Economic interdependence has therefore been seen as a route to security that can complement the region's weak intergovernmental security architecture ([84]: 209–238). It allows other countries in the region to avoid the need to address contentious historical animosities such as Sino-Japanese

relations ([62]: 205–232) or engage in potentially conflictual democracy-promotion programmes ([114]: 206–213).

Nevertheless, those liberal assumptions sometimes reference the realist pessimists. Friedberg [28], for instance, said that US policymakers identify themselves as ‘liberal optimists’ who ‘believe that bilateral economic exchange creates shared interests in good relations between states. The greater the volume of trade and investment flowing between countries, the more groups on both sides will have a strong interest in avoiding conflict and preserving peace.’ However, he ([28]: 19) warns that ‘[r]ising powers seek not only to secure their frontiers but to reach out beyond them, taking steps to ensure access to markets, materials, and transportation routes; to protect their citizens far from home, defend their foreign friends and allies, and promulgate their values; and, in general, to have what they consider to be their legitimate say in the affairs of their region and the wider world.’ Therefore, even after considering the liberal approaches to rising China, he [29] perceives China to be a grave danger to US interests and values across the world.

Friedberg’s viewpoint is certainly not an exception. In fact, an increase in sinophobia is apparent among scholars who start off with liberal assumptions. In the liberal framework, the rise of China is generally portrayed as a threat to the US and the world in general. Halper [38] for instance first draws a liberal argument and argues that conflict between China and the US is unlikely in both the short and long term because the former is buying the latter’s debt to sustain its macroeconomic engine. In return, Chinese investment in the US guarantees low interest rates and provides the necessary capital for US consumers to buy Chinese goods. Thus today, the economic effects of a war between them would be catastrophic for both sides. However, even though a war between China and the US is unlikely, China remains a threat to the US in Halper’s view, as illustrated by his description of the Beijing Consensus [38].

The term ‘Beijing Consensus’ generally refers to the model of economic development espoused by China after 1976. Obviously, the term is a variation on the ‘Washington Consensus,’ a set of market-friendly policies prescribed by the IMF, World Bank and the US for developing countries recovering from financial crises. Over time, the Beijing Consensus increased in popularity among developing countries because China provided aid without the suffocating conditions of the Washington Consensus. Halper’s study [38] shows how the Washington Consensus deconstructed itself through its dogmatic application, which left many countries looking for a new trade and loan partner. Halper [38] here describes values, or soft power, as the central factor by which the Beijing Consensus will retain its status as the most accredited model of economic development in the upcoming Decades. China has pursued a path toward modernity that is both non-Western and illiberal. In so doing, China has promoted itself as a model that can be followed by many other non-Western Countries. China can thus use its soft power and economic capabilities to shape and even revise the Western-led international order.

In his book *Charm Offensive*, Kurlantzick [64] also focuses on China’s use of its soft power. According to Kurlantzick, China, through trade, investment, and aid, has strengthened its cultural ties and expanded its soft power and cultural influence throughout the world. He predicts that this could have disastrous results for ‘young democracies with weak civil societies because he regards the values and governance structures that China models as unwanted and dangerous. Kurlantzick makes it clear that countering Chinese soft power is an urgent matter because it could easily transition

into hard-power-like activities as China seeks natural-resource security. Thus, he sees China as an inherent threat to the West, not in terms of its military strategies and might, but in terms of the influence its soft power will have on the West. Accordingly, we (the West) should counter China's soft power and, at best, convert China to become one of us — not only a capitalist state but also a democracy.

Converting China into a democracy has been a central agenda for democratic peace theorists, who believe that democracies do not go to war against one another. Their arguments involve the representation of the will of the people, the externalisation of democratic norms, economic interdependence, the structural constraints in democracies, and the guarantee of human Rights. China as an authoritarian state is therefore perceived as a threat to world peace. To address that threat, the Western world should (re)shape China's domestic and international political and economic structure and thereby encourage China to act like 'us.' Given China's drive for economic success, they believe, institutional restructuring in China will both transform its economic institutions and guide its political and societal processes. Those scholars draw comparisons with Taiwan or South Korea and argue that China will follow the same path, i.e., develop into a democratic country ([22, 92]: 94–113; [102]).

This logic of conversion can be discerned in the US Clinton administration's 'National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement' (White House [106]: i). Along with promoting prosperity at home and checking global threats abroad, one of the strategy's key goals is 'to promote democracy abroad', seemingly based on the liberalist 'democratic peace thesis'. The Clinton administration claimed that domestic prosperity and international peace are 'served by enlarging the community of democracies and free-market nations' (White House [106]: 32). Nevertheless, as Pan [82] rightly points out, such effort is destined to fail. According to Pan, 'Western countries have routinely set targets for China to meet, targets in areas ranging from human rights and democracy to non-proliferation, environmental protection and international trade' ([82]: 126). They all aim to convert China into one of 'us', that is, the West. Nevertheless, as Pan continues, this hope will be an ongoing bitter disappointment, because on the one hand it mistakenly sees the world (and China) as a homogeneous entity, and on the other it demands China to 'improve' itself and adopt values set up by the West and considered inherently superior. China's unique political, cultural and social systems are intentionally and unintentionally neglected.

Whereas liberalists worry about the threat that China's alternative model of development poses to the pre-dominantly Western democratic and market-economic system, social constructivists are concerned about the extent to which China has been socialised into the current international system that underpins the Western order and interests. Through socialisation, state actors come to accept the shared values and norms of the international community and change their behaviour accordingly, internalising them until they are taken for granted. Those values and norms can even permeate state borders and affect domestic politics. Some constructivists are therefore optimistic about China's rise because China has been participating in an increasing range of existing international regimes and institutions since the 1980s.

Steinfeld [105], for instance, suggests that China's rise will be beneficial for the West because China 'is playing *our* game' (emphasis added). Steinfeld [105] enthusiastically portrays China as a 'capitalist enabler' and 'capitalist converger.' According to Steinfeld, China's rise as a global manufacturer was only possible because of its

willingness to adapt to the institutional structures underlying capitalism such as the overseas application of laws, labour relations, and macroeconomic management Techniques. China revised its whole state structure in its attempts to move China into the Western global economic system. China's accession to the WTO in 2001 finalised its entrance to the Western-defined Bretton-Woods political and economic structure. The implementation of institutional structures was simply 'outsourced.' As Steinfeld [105] notes, '[t]he bottom line is that China today is growing not by writing its own rules but instead by internalising the rules of the advanced industrial West. It has grown not by conjuring up its own unique political-economic institutions but instead by increasingly harmonising with our own.' In other words, China is playing by the established capitalist rules and embracing internal change, which should be considered a victory for the global community as a whole. In addition, by adopting Western institutional frameworks to a significant extent, China has not only transformed its economic system, but also automatically enabled domestic political and societal transformation, similar to the democratic peace arguments mentioned earlier. According to Steinfeld [105], China cedes 'to a third party the power to define key societal rules that govern and shape social interaction' in China. However, this does not mean that China will become like the West. Unlike liberals, Steinfeld [105] does not suggest that China will inevitably become a liberal democracy in the foreseeable future. He does note, however, that China's adoption of international norms will lead to a decreasing level of authoritarianism in all facets of governance. Hence, China's 'time as an existential adversary [of the US and the West] has drawn to a close' ([105]: 232).

Whereas Steinfeld's study mainly focuses on the political-economic sphere, [50] Johnston's book, *Social State: China in International Institutions 1980–2000*, centres on several instances of China's participation in security institutions. Johnston [50] identifies three separate but related processes of socialisation (mimicking, social influence, and persuasion) through which norms and ideas can be transmitted from one group to another. Mimicking refers to copying the behavioural patterns of significant Others, and Johnston uses it to explain China's involvement in the UN Conference on Disarmament in the 1980s. Social influence involves a state's desire to gain social approval from others. Here, Johnston [50] gives the example of China's behaviour in negotiations for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty from 1994 to 1996 and says that China signed the treaty chiefly to maintain its image as a responsible great power in the eyes of developing states and NGOs. Persuasion is the final process of socialisation, defined as a process of cognition whereby novices are convinced that certain norms, values, or ideas are correct and that they should therefore act accordingly. Persuasion was evident in China's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum, wherein it was convinced that multilateralism was inherently beneficial to it and its national security.

Thus, through learning and socialisation, China has practiced Western norms to a certain extent because of multiple purposes, necessities, and interpretations that coexist in its own system. Indeed, as noted by other scholars, since the beginning of the new millennium, China has become more involved in UN peacekeeping operations and been more flexible in dealing with the tensions between state sovereignty and humanitarian intervention ([104]: 631–655; [100]: 155–192; [5, 32, 65]). Perhaps China wants to portray an image of itself as a responsible international actor to counter US dominance in international politics and reinforce the capabilities of the United Nations. In that case, great powers apparently use laws and norms as indispensable instruments to establish their

status internationally. It could thus be said that each great power (including China) has an incentive to agree to international laws, norms, and institutions, so long as each power can be assured that it can take part in the establishment of those regimes ([6]: 5–36). In this sense, Stähle [104] states that ‘to promote China’s acceptance of international practice, it is apparently effective to take its normative concerns seriously when engaging it in international regimes.’ To some extent, China has stepped up as a ‘normative power,’ which Manners [72] defines as an actor that aims to reshape norms and values in international politics. The constructivist point is that rising China can be socialised and that China is willing to accept socialisation as for its own good.

Whereas the aforementioned authors hold optimistic views about China’s adoption of Western norms, others in the West pessimistically argue that Beijing has slowly but steadily been investing time and money into creating new norms in regional security and economic forums. That Chinese drive will inevitably lead to losses for the West as Chinese influence grows within international organisations. In some instances, Chinese goals will diverge from those of the West, which will force other states to choose one side over the other, leaving one side with unfulfilled goals. Therefore, increased Chinese influence will necessarily diminish the influence of the West (especially the US). Recent scholarly literature on China’s Belt and Road Initiative best illustrates this concern (National Development and Reform Commission of the People’s Republic of China 2018). Mainstream IR literature has focused on not only the economic and geopolitical aspects of the Chinese Initiative, but the normative aspect as well. China’s Belt and Road Initiative as an institutional power serves as a means to promote China’s own worldview, challenging the current global order and establishing a new order in which China is at the centre as the natural leader/hegemon.

Hence, from both the liberalist and constructivist viewpoints, the West should encourage China to increase its integration within the international community to offset the negative effects of its rise. The rationale for this strategy is that the major new challenges in a globalised world can only be effectively addressed by the totality of the global community. Increased integration of China into the international community is thus necessary and inevitable. Such conversion and socialisation efforts have frequently been seen in Western leaders’ remarks about rising non-Western powers. For example, at the G7 summit in 2016, former British premier David Cameron warned China that it must abide by international adjudications and encouraged China to be part of the rules-based world [3]. The obvious subtext is that the existing, capitalist rules of the game and their merits should not be questioned. Overall, rising China is often assumed as a pre-given problem (or even a pre-given threat) in liberalist and constructivist thinking, which is similar to realist thinking; however, liberalists and constructivists believe that rising China can and should be tamed through conversion or socialisation. China could become a would-be West, though it cannot ever be the West per se.

The logic of socialisation seems to constitute the matrix in which, again, the US Rebalance to Asia was operating. As discussed in the realist perspective, apart from a China threat discourse, there was a China challenge discourse [13]. The China challenge discourse treats the rise of China as an issue rather than a threat per se. President Obama (quoted in [109]) once said that he sought to ‘debunk the notion ... that our pivot to Asia is about containing China’. Against this broad background, former US National Security Advisor Susan Rice [90] stated that ‘the United States welcomes a rising China that is peaceful, stable, prosperous, and a responsible player in global

affairs'. In a similar sense, Cronin [19] claimed that the U.S. Rebalance's overriding aim is to erect 'an inclusive, rule-based system in which all countries can live in peace and growing prosperity'. The rationale behind this aspect of rebalancing policy is a belief that China may become a 'responsible stakeholder in a stable, liberal and democratic international order' ([10]: 59). The US can boost China's economy so that they can influence their transition to democracy, which would be a way of 'using realist means to idealist ends' ([10]: 59). In other words, influence Chinese economic development in such a way that the Chinese are not antagonized and in fact adapt to the status quo currently maintained by the US. This line of thinking underlying the US Rebalance insinuates that rising China should opt for residing in the existing Western-led international order. In other words, rising China should be socialised.

By Way of Conclusion: Mimicking Mainstream IR Perspectives in the Chinese School

This article drew on an analytical framework of the Self/Other nexus put forward by critical IR to analyse the recent mainstream IR(–informed) literature on how a rising China should be viewed and handled. No one thinks in a vacuum, devoid of any theoretical presuppositions. We all shape theories and are shaped by a web of theory. The rise of China, is currently seen as a critical IR event and mainstream IR perspectives play a key role in how academics and practitioners in world politics see and deal with it. Mainstream IR's accounts of rising China also inform the practice of real politics. As discussed earlier, epistemologically mainstream IR perspectives tend, as problem-solving theories, to take the interest and prestige of the US/West for granted. Normatively, this is tied up with Western-centrism in thinking about what the world is and how it works. Mainstream IR perspectives, in other words, face a strong epistemological temptation to translate Self/Other relations into a logocentric good/evil binary framework: the "good" West vs. "evil" China. Even though mainstream IR perspectives claim to produce objective, neutral, scientific, and universal knowledge about how the world works, they are not value-free explanations but rather normative perspectives that justify forms of hegemonic power and draw on Orientalism as their hidden normative underpinning. The good/evil logocentric dualism in mainstream IR perspectives thus serves as the moral basis for conquest, conversion, and socialisation in addressing the effects of rising China on world politics. All those methods for dealing with rising China assume it to be either a threatening Other or a would-be West.

At this juncture, one ethical concern should be raised. Mainstream IR perspectives are Western-centric, but their logocentric dualism can be reversed. China's rise has inspired great interest in the study of IR from a Chinese perspective. Multiple Chinese IR scholars argue there should be a Chinese School of IR theories on a par with Western-centric mainstream IR theories and there have been various attempts to establish a Chinese theory of international relations over the past decade. Among others, Yan Xuetong's ([117]; 2016) moral realism, Zhao Tingyang's [120] conception of the *Tianxia* system, and Qin Yaqing's ([87]; 2018) a relational theory of world politics are the most representative and influential. Despite different focuses, all of them draw upon China's historical experiences and use the ideas from the traditional philosophies and traditions of thought embedded in Chinese culture to interpret world politics in a distinctively Chinese way. Yet, we need to

ask to what extent these attempts are mimicking Western mainstream IR, in the sense that they channel Chinese schools of IR into the same logic of conquest, conversion, and socialisation as mainstream IR applies to others in non-Western regions.

Yan [117, 118], for instance, draws on an ancient Chinese political idea of ‘humane authority’ (or *wangdao*) to provide a different understanding of the operation of power. In so doing, he also buys into the basic assumptions of realism set out previously. According to Yan, humane authority is not something that one can strive for; rather, it is acquired by setting an example of virtue and morality. Within this conception of power, humane authority, as opposed to hard power, exerts the power of persuasion and attraction through morality and virtue. While in Yan’s theory the concept of humane authority does not deny the existence of hard power – as Yan argues that the exercise of humane authority relies on a combination of soft/normative power and hard power driven by morality and virtue – he might overlook asymmetric uses of hard power and soft/normative power in favor of the former in Chinese history. It is realism with a Chinese flavor. In *Harmony and War*, Wang [113] looks at China’s pre-modern foreign relations during the Song and Ming dynasties. According to Wang, East Asian IR is not so different from that in other regions both past and present, and the ideational power of Confucian pacifism has not been as influential as has been assumed. In other words, China has also followed realism, more specifically, structural realism: “Confucian culture did not constrain the leaders’ decision to use force; in making such decisions, leaders have been mainly motivated by their assessment of the balance of power between China and its adversary” ([113]: 181). It is a Chinese version of offensive realism and can be seen as a warning to the West, as it suggests that China is essentially and historically aggressive. It is, nonetheless, consumed differently. Realism claims to be universal, so China can use it for the benefit of her own Self at the expense of different Others. Rising China will become more powerful and even hegemonic in the near future. Why would it not attempt to conquer neighbouring countries and the West, replacing Western-centric realism with Sino-centric realism?

The comparison between the Chinese Schools and Western mainstream IR can also be applied to liberalism and constructivism. Zhao [120], for instance, reinvigorates the idea of *Tianxia* – an idealized version of China’s imperial past – as a philosophy of the global system in a contemporary light that transcends the perspective of the nation state so that all have to look at all simultaneously, to the intellectual effect of no one possibly being excluded. According to Zhao, the *Tianxia* system should replace the Westphalian system, that Zhao considers to be a source of current international conflicts. Although Zhao is not an IR thinker but a Chinese philosopher, his idea of *Tianxia* is seen as a possible Sino-centric world order that covers or socializes others through Chinese IR scholarship. Likewise, Qin [87, 88] utilizes the Confucian notion of *Zhongyong*, which sees polarities as immanently inclusive and mutually complementary, so as to explore alternative ways of thinking about relationships between Self and Other, as opposed to Western dualistic, dialectical approaches. Qin’s relational theory of world politics is informed by not only Chinese traditions but also by social constructivism [86]. Both Zhao and Qin suggest that ancient Chinese political thought offers a better approach to global problems through an analytical and institutional framework that embraces differences (or there simply is no “outsider” in the *Tianxia* system) and in which no one is excluded.

Although Zhao [120] believes that China’s traditional hierarchical order is more peaceful than Europe’s egalitarian Westphalian system, critical IR scholars reacted to the revival of the concept of *Tianxia* with great caution. Callahan [7], for instance, is

highly anxious that the *Tianxia* system is destined to be just another new hegemonic construction in which imperial China's hierarchical governance in East Asia is updated for the twenty-first century. According to Callahan [7], the *Tianxia* system was built upon the principle of absolute exclusion and hierarchical inclusion to marginalize "the Other." Prior to the recent development of the Chinese School of IR, considerations about China's Sinocentric past and its influence upon the international system of East Asia were already discussed in John King Fairbank's studies of the Chinese world order [25], though from a historical standpoint. As he noted, the chief political problem for the Chinese empire was how to maintain Chinese superiority, and the principal repertoire of means available to the Chinese rulers in their relations with non-Chinese were military conquest or administrative assimilation when China possessed overwhelming military superiority, or otherwise cessation of contact or acceptance of barbarian rules when China was in an inferior military position, and in between there were alternatives such as indoctrinations of the Chinese view through cultural-ideological means, material inducements or diplomatic maneuvers ([25]: 11–14). As a consequence, the Chinese School risk using the very same logics as Western mainstream IR to view the West and China's neighboring countries as the "other." In this case, Orientalism becomes Occidentalism.

When Orientalist IR meets Occidental IR, hatred and conflict are inevitable and will become perpetual practices in world politics. In that context, the mainstream IR perspectives contribute to a culture of insecurity between rising China and the West while they close down the creative space needed to imagine a different way of engagement. In the dualistic circuit of mainstream IR perspectives, the Self's epistemological violence toward the Other is often justified in practice. This way of thinking conditions everyone to regard the relationship between the Self and the Other as an inevitable clash and obscures the process of learning that has led both the West and China to transform themselves. There is no need to discard mainstream IR perspectives altogether, but neither is it useful to remain boxed inside them when thinking about international affairs. Rather, we need to use mainstream IR thought-patterns critically, rather than treating them as purely objective standpoints that produce Truths. IR knowledge needs to be produced in a reflective spirit. Critical knowledge consumption and reflective knowledge production create the possibility of imagining different modes of the Self/Other nexus in IR that are less conflictual, more democratic, and truly global. Through such processes we can gain a deeper understanding of IR scholarship, introduce greater reflexivity into its debates, and identify ways in which its neo-imperialist lacunas might be addressed.

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Young Chul Cho is Associate Professor in the School of International Studies at Chonbuk National University in South Korea. He is Vice Dean of Global Frontier College in the same university. His primary research and teaching interests are theories of international relations, critical & popular geopolitics, philosophy of social science, and Asian studies. His articles have been published in *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, *International Journal*, *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, *Korea Observer*, *Pacific Focus*, and so on.

Yih-Jye Hwang (PhD, Aberystwyth) is University Lecturer (Universitair Docent 1) of International Relations at Leiden University. He completed his PhD in International Politics from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He served as Convener for Leiden University College's Major in World Politics between 2010 and

2016. He has published widely on politics and international relations in the Asia-Pacific region. He is also co-editor of *Global Challenges: Peace and War* (Brill 2103). His research interests include post-structuralism, nationalism, peace and conflict studies, cultural governance, critical human security, post-Western IR, China's strategic thinking, and the international relations of East Asia.