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Introduction: Are Asia’s Thinkers Accommodating China’s Rise?

Niv Horesh

The foci of discussion

In 1998, Professor Lucian Pye made famous scathing remarks about East Asia’s chronic memory-blockage and the consequent identity malaise muting any East Asian claims to global leadership. At the height of the Asian Financial Crisis and merely a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Pye deemed neither China nor Japan capable of rising above their own parochialisms and cultural self-absorption to find an appropriate global idiom with which to envision an alternative East Asian world order. Pye was not even sure China, despite its economic promise, fitted at all into the dominant nation-state world order, being as it was a ‘civilisation pretending to be a nation state’.  

Over the next decade, the Chinese nation-building project steam-rolled ahead, and it would seem more than apposite to re-evaluate erstwhile strategic as well as intellectual paradigms. Indeed, until recently, Western readership had been accustomed to the notion that much of the China boom was oversupply in disguise; that China’s implosion was imminent; that at heart its ‘economic miracle’ was predicated on state-run banks diverting capital to resuscitate moribund state-owned behemoths; that China did not embrace the ‘free-market’ and ‘de-regulate’ its economy quickly enough. These attributes might have stemmed from a Beijing-centric outlook rather than from a well-informed survey of the last three decades of complex and often contradictory economic reform thrusts in their entirety. As it turns out, the lingering economic crisis in the US is a constant reminder that leading Western banks do not seem to have allocated capital much more rationally than their state-controlled counterparts in the People’s Republic of China (PRC).
In contrast to Pye, Warren Cohen suggested not long ago that the question was not whether China would eventually compete with the US but precisely how soon this might happen. Cohen had little doubt that China would eventually act just as aggressively on the world stage as late nineteenth-century European powers. Ironically, China sees those very same European powers as ones that did not just colonise much of the rest of world, but also as aggressors against Chinese sovereignty a century ago.

Thus, Cohen did not accord much faith to the rhetoric emanating from Beijing from as far back as the 1980s, which has been stressing the PRC’s intent on a ‘Peaceful Rise’ (*heping jueqi*) and considerably softened Mao-era references to ‘Western imperialism’, ‘Soviet revisionism’ or ‘world class warfare’. This year’s leadership transition at the helm of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping has arguably laid to rest Deng Xiaoping’s long-running ‘hide and bide’ policy (*taoguang yanghui*), if not in substance than surely in form. Evidence to that effect was on full display, for example, in Trinidad and Tobago in June 2013, when Xi and First Lady Peng Liyuan touched down in the small, oil-rich island for a state visit. There was something unmistakably ostentatious – almost a swagger – in Peng’s turquoise attire and Xi’s matching tie, as the pair strode down the gangway. Such swagger would have been less remarkable had this been any other first couple. Yet, perhaps due to the haunting memory of Jiang Qing, Chinese first ladies had hitherto shunned the limelight. Also, in comparison to Xi, there was something very drab in how Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao seemed to conduct themselves in public.

In short, China is nowadays seeking to project soft power in parts of the world where hitherto it had been operating more quietly. To be sure, the literature on Chinese soft power is fast growing, as is the literature on China as a global economic powerhouse. However, little to date has been published in English on the new aspirational narratives of global leadership that are presently being spun in Beijing for domestic, academic, and foreign audiences. And while China’s rise is no longer a fresh news item around the developing world, let alone around China’s neighboring countries, much less in known about if and how the Chinese academic discourse on contemporary international relations – or for that matter the above-mentioned aspirational narratives – are impacting on perceptions of China outside the West.
The key questions of investigation

Current preoccupations with the ‘rise of Asia’ attest to the nascent contestation of the very idea of what the pattern of international politics should look like and how it should be practiced. Hence, if democracy has indeed become ‘the fundamental standard of political legitimacy in the current era’, it is to be expected that the (con)current ‘democratization’ of international relations would enunciate a cacophony of alternative (and non-Western) voices promoting alternative visions of the ‘appropriate’ forms of legitimation and authority in global life. Moreover, as Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan argue ‘if we are to improve IRT [International Relations Theory] as a whole, the Western IRT needs to be challenged not just from within, but also from outside the West.’ Thus, paraphrasing Hedley Bull’s and Adam Watson’s well-known adage, the ‘rise of Asia’ becomes shorthand for the expansion of international societies.

This volume is therefore singularly aimed at transcending the conventional focus in the literature on Sino–American, Sino–Japanese, or Sino–Indian rivalries, carrying over as these all do from the Cold War, in a bid to identify fresh geo-strategic and intellectual shifts within Asia. For the sake of the argument, and for comparative purposes, we include Australia in this Asian exploration, yet we are by no means suggesting Australia’s “Asianness” should be taken for granted.

Can we see new Asian post-Cold War rivalries or alliances forming along strategic or ideological lines? How is the once influential ideology of pan-Asianism faring at present? As a team of specialists in International Relations Theory (IRT), Asian history and business, the contributors all aimed at tracing such new developments not just in the scholarly literature but also in the collective historic memories of peoples across the region, including where necessary those memories that are projected by the popular media.

Tentative shifts across Asia are best understood when placed against the backdrop of a resurgent China, and an awakening India, and in view of the financial crises engulfing the US and Europe which have led in some quarters to a perception of the latter’s relative decline. More specifically, we will examine various Asian responses to China’s engagement with the continent, and discuss the extent to which such responses might cohere into an intellectual ‘decentering’, namely, a pan-Asian shift away from the West-centric epistemological paradigms. Or, perhaps to the contrary, such shifts presage a rally around the US in a bid to make it stay engaged.
in the region in order to hedge an overly assertive China? At a practical level, however, each of the chapters will invariably touch on the extent to which China’s state-endorsed ‘New Confucianism’ and the so-called ‘China Model’ of economic reform might transcend token praise and win over support across Asia by way of ‘soft power’ or – as some Chinese IRT might put it – by way of ‘humane authority’ (wangdao 王道).8

Yet this volume should not be misunderstood as an attempt to suggest that there is a singular non-Western pattern of international interactions (just as there is no single Western one). Instead, what it draws attention to is the realization that there are distinct newly-emerging modes and models of global politics that lend themselves to the broad generalizing labels of ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’. In this respect, China has become a hub for the scholarly, policy, and popular fascination with this ‘shift to the East’. Thus, while after the end of the Cold War, commentators were pondering how far Western ideas can/would spread, today the debate seems to be how far Chinese ideas will reach.

The comprehensive assessment of the complex interaction between Asian states and China is intended to offer veritable responses to this quandary. Thinking about the changing context of contemporary international relations as a result of the shift of economic and increasingly political power towards Asia gravitates easily towards the realms of fiction and fantasy. Thus, an ungainly but important task is to distinguish between the phantoms and substance in the engagement with the foreign policy attitudes towards China in Asia. The volume proposed here does just that by offering a much-needed scholarly reconsideration of international interactions between smaller Asian nation-states, Beijing and Delhi. In this respect, it will provide valuable and much-needed insights on the conceptualization both of the rise of Asia and assessing the prospective trajectories of a Chinese-inspired resurgence of pan-Asianism.

Pan-Asianism was, in the main, a pre-World War II anti-colonial ideology that the Japanese propagated so as to rally sympathy across the continent. First advanced in the late nineteenth century by intellectuals Tokichi Tarui and Kentaro Oi, that ideology came to be particularly influential in the 1930s, as Japan aimed to portray its own Asian colonial project (Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere) as an antidote to European colonialism, and as being a liberator from the White Man’s Yoke. However, Japanese pan-Asianism was intrinsically at odds with the Meiji modernizers’ notion of Japanese exceptionalism and early twentieth-century Japanese attempts to racially distance Japan from China and Korea. Thus, except perhaps for Subhas Chandra Bose
(1897–1945) in India, that ideology never came to command much traction in impacting Asian intellectuals and freedom fighters even if it had earlier made some impact on Rabindranath Tagore’s and Sun Yat-sen’s ideas.

Can China resurrect a more benign variant of pan-Asianism as part of its charm offensive? Does China meaningfully learn from the Japanese pre-war experience in its bid to become more globally influential? In tandem, the two parts of the book raise and discuss a raft of similar pertinent questions examining the likely trajectories of Asian engagement with China and vice versa. Part I is therefore dedicated to an exposition of the new theoretical strands in Chinese IR thinking, which in turn shed light on how Chinese intellectuals are perceiving its rise and place in Asia and the world at large; and on how Chinese IR scholars navigate between Chinese exceptionalism and Asianism. Part II will then gauge the responses that China’s rise elicits outside America and Europe, with particular reference to Asia. Part II will also touch on the extent to which intellectuals in Asia pay any heed at all to these new strands in Chinese IR thinking.

In tandem, the two parts investigate – firstly on the theoretical terrain and then through the practice of international affairs – what kinds of changes are likely to emerge in the near future? These are important queries which the burgeoning literature on the interactions between Asian actors does very little to address. The comprehensive and thoughtful engagement with the reactions of Asian states to China’s rise aims not only to offer a critical assessment of the actual and prospective roles of Asian actors in global life, but also seeks to rethink the historic narratives, everyday practices, and frameworks through which their interactions are both explained and understood in the analysis of world politics. In this respect, the volume is distinguished by the kinds of questions that it raises:

- what rules, norms, and strategic cultures are likely to dominate international life in the ‘Asian Century’?
- should the ‘Asian Century’ be understood solely as a trope for China and India’s rise?
- how are regional issues reframed and addressed in the context of Asian interactions with China?
- is there something distinctly ‘Asian’ about the emerging patterns of global affairs?
- to what extent can Asian pre-modern or early-modern history help us predict future international relations patterns in the region?
In other words, just as the kind of bilateral relationship that the individual Asian countries and China develop will have a crucial bearing on the patterns and practices of global affairs, the ability to account for their rise to prominence through the language of an ‘Asian’ International Relations theory will be of equal consequence. Thus, the key distinguishing feature of this volume is the examination of how Asian countries respond to China’s relational governance.

In recent years, commentators have begun to notice that Beijing’s both bilateral and regional interactions are premised not on rule-based behavior, but the practice of relationships. While subtle, such a shift has radically altered the dynamics of international agency in global life. Thus, rather than relying on the ‘logic of appropriateness’ or the ‘logic of consequences’ as Western international actors have done (and still do), China has advanced a distinct ‘logic of relationships’.9 The proposition is that this logic allows Beijing to engage Asian states as ‘individuals in a group rather than individuals per se’.10 Such contextualization of China’s external outlook assists with the development of a deliberate practice of Asian socialization, exhibiting the ability to condition the conceptions of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behavior.

What is crucial about China’s ‘logic of relationships’ is its assumption that while the future is unknown, the partners in the future are the same as in the past and present. Therefore, the significance of any specific interaction lies in how it shapes a particular relationship. The bottom line in a relationship logic is that both sides feel that they are better off if the relationship continues – this is the most fundamental meaning of ‘mutual benefit’.11 A normal relationship does not require symmetry of partners or equality of exchanges, but it does require reciprocity [i.e. respect for the other].12

The emphasis here is that Beijing’s normative power engages other states in the practice of doing together – that is, they do as China does. This pattern is distinct from the international interactions practiced by Western actors, which are premised on the conditionality of ‘do as I say, not as I do.’13 Some commentators have noted that such logic of relationships has emerged out of a contingent ‘policy of “pre-emptive participation”’ intended to maintain China’s ‘status’ while Beijing develops reassurance-strategies to allay the fears of others.14 Scholars elsewhere point to the Confucian underpinnings of Chinese strategic culture as the progenitor of such relational security governance. In this setting, showing respect for the other intends to demonstrate Beijing’s ‘self-discipline and self-restraint’ in the process of developing ‘positive relationships among actors for the common good, including cooperation
and coordination to create an extensive social network of win-win results.\textsuperscript{15}

In moving away from the European and American responses to China’s rise, we do not claim that these matter less nowadays, only that they have been studied extensively already. The contributors to this volume still see Sino–American relations as one of the most important international interactions shaping the prospective contours of world affairs in the twenty-first century. However, whether or not China can effectively articulate affinity with its Asian neighbors in particular will in all likelihood re-configure American responses to China’s rise, as discussed in the following chapters. It is otherwise all too easy to couch the nascent US–China rivalry in terms of an established power (e.g. the British Empire) coming to terms with a rising one (e.g. Wilhelmine Germany). Such analogies and analytical frameworks were and still are abundant in the scholarly, policy, and popular mainstream. In fact, they pre-dispose US responses to China’s rise in no small measure. However, much more than that is intellectually at stake in gauging new Chinese IR strands and new intra-Asian dynamics (to the extent that the latter can be traced).

Any simplistic portrayals of a politically divided yet corruption-free and morally upright democracy (United States) vying for global primacy with an efficiently run but repressive and deeply corrupt party-state (China) may no longer be very useful. For all their stark differences, there are a few startling similarities between the two countries to which one might humorously point: they both seem to put a huge portion of their population behind bars and look pretty comfortable with capital punishment and with sky-high Gini social inequality figures. Indeed, the suspicion with which Chinese inbound investment is viewed around the world might well ignite in the future something akin to the kind of visceral anti-Americanism one can find in Central America or the Middle East.

In his recently published tome \textit{On China}, Kissinger (2011: 520) characteristically noted that:

\begin{quote}
The United States and China have been not so much nation-states as continental expressions of cultural identities. Both have historically been driven to visions of universality by their economic and political achievements and their peoples’ irrepressible energy and self-confidence. Both Chinese and American governments have frequently assumed a seamless identity between their national policies and the general interests of mankind.
\end{quote}
Those two cases of ‘self-confidence’ might invite speculation about a future showdown, quite irrespective of whether China’s political system decides along the way to open up in order to become more palatable to citizens of the world. Yet, China’s unparalleled size, the realities of nuclear proliferation, and the climate challenges of the present era make it difficult to argue that its ascent on the global stage would neatly follow in the footsteps of the catastrophic Japanese or German imperial projects. Similarly, the impressive degree of openness China has shown to foreign ownership over the last three decades and the gusto with which CCP elites are enrolling their heirs into elite US universities are not entirely consonant with the postwar Japanese miracle.

So, will China try, at the very least, to leverage its economic might in a bid to divest the region of US military presence, thereby proclaiming a kind of East Asian Monroe Doctrine soon? One would be naïve to assume that China’s recent commissioning of an aircraft carrier or its extensive space program is designed for purely altruistic purposes. It would be tempting, from the Chinese perspective, to pursue regional hegemony in the long term. But it could no doubt prove counterproductive if attempted prematurely. Domestic politicking can, in any country, hijack a judiciously developed foreign-policy agenda. In this context, one might add, former Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi’s recent outburst towards ‘small countries’ in Southeast Asia – perhaps more than any foreign containment measure – tarnished the credibility of the PRC’s ‘peaceful-rise’ rhetoric, and reignited tension around the Spratly Islands.

**Structure of the volume**

The volume presented here has been crafted precisely so as to shed more light on these issues. But before Asian reactions to new Chinese intellectual paradigms can be gauged, we must better understand what these paradigms are in essence. In Part I, contributors therefore first elucidate precisely what the new Chinese academic discourse on international relations is and how it may be linked with more politically-geared aspirational narratives on global leadership emanating from the CCP. Since the protagonists of this new discourse are many and varied in their opinions, the contributors in the main focus on two prominent thinkers that have already stamped some mark in the West: Yan Xuetong and Wang Hui. In addition, an intimate yet judicious retrospective of Wang Gungwu’s life-time work on the Chinese world view is offered by way of a counterpoint to PRC-centric narratives.
Part II then aims to examine the extent (if any) to which thought and ideas like the ones propounded by Yan, Wang and others have had any impact on the academic discourse, outside the West, with particular emphasis on Asian middle-powers – such as South Korea and Japan. In addition, Part II explores whether China’s higher international profile over the last decade has had any impact on the intellectual as well as popular perceptions of Chinese aims and Chinese modern history, with particular emphasis on Central Asia, the Middle East and Australia. In this way, the volume attempts to offer a relevant response to the grievance that ‘the rich comparative and foreign policy scholarship on China’ remains poignantly ‘under-theorized’ – in particular, it demands more purposeful engagement with the ‘theoretical insights of international relations’. Therefore, as it will be demonstrated at length in the Conclusion to the volume, the frameworks for understanding and explanation embedded in Chinese IRT (as illustrated by the contributions included in Part I of this collection) emerge in the context of observing China’s international interactions (as outlined in the chapters incorporated in Part II).

More specifically, in Chapter 1, William Callahan provides a penetrating critique of the cultural essentialism and determinism – if not triumphalism – which in his view often underpin the arguments by authors such as Martin Jacques, Liu Mingfu or Yan Xuetong. Callahan’s study provides an apt reminder that there is no certainty that China’s rise will continue unabated. Even if it did, there is no clear evidence to suggest that a more powerful China will necessarily seek to entrench rather than further alter the existing ‘rules of the game’, namely, the way in which the international community has operated since the end of World War II.

Singularly focused on Yan Xuetong, Chapter 2 by Linsay Cunningham-Cross explains how ancient Chinese history is often invoked or even re-imagined to tap into current perceptions of China’s rise, and how it might change international relations in the future. Cunningham-Cross notably observed that, triumphalism notwithstanding, Yan’s thought can be at times less particularistic than is often assumed. Moreover, Yan’s thought is evidently starting to influence debates in IRT outside of China. This chapter is valuable not least because it presents many examples of scholars in the US and Europe, who are taking a keen interest in Yan’s efforts to enrich international relations theorizing with insights from ancient China.

In Chapter 3, Yongnian Zheng and Dan Wu survey Wang Gungwu’s invaluable contribution to our understanding of the historic narratives
which inform modern China's world view. As one of the greatest and best-known intellectuals amongst overseas Chinese over the last few decades, Wang emphasized that it was not easy to determine the exact relationship between how the Chinese see themselves and how others see their action. This is important in exploring Chinese foreign-policy rhetoric vs. praxis at present.

Chapter 4 by Ralph Weber extends the scope of discussion in showing that intellectuals from outside the realm of Chinese IRT can help us better understand the Chinese Weltanschauung and its corollaries in IRT. Focusing on Wang Hui’s thought, Weber concludes that there is no evidence to suggest Wang, who is one of the best-known Chinese intellectuals in the West, has influenced Western IR theoreticians. Nevertheless, by likening Wang Hui to a ‘Nietzsche waiting for his Morgenthau’, Weber seems to allude to the possibility that Wang's ideas may prove more influential in the future.

Opening Part II, Chapter 5 by Colin Mackerras explains Australian popular and intellectual attitudes and responses towards China’s rise. Mackerras concludes that since 2005 there has been a trend towards greater suspicion of China in Australia, sometimes approaching fear. However, Mackerras seems to allude to the fact that this trend is somewhat less pronounced in Australian academe than in the popular domain.

Similarly, Yitzhak Shichor finds in Chapter 6 that the notion of new Chinese IRT is all but meaningless in the Middle East. Moreover, China Studies are underdeveloped in most Middle Eastern countries, with the exception of Israel. China may be respected in the Middle East, but is still suspected. If anything, such suspicion is all the more evident in recent years. America, in that sense, has been a soft target for criticism and hate across the region, but is still perceived as the ultimate arbiter of the prevailing world order.

In Chapter 7, Michael Clarke suggests Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, while on the surface pragmatic and in alignment with Beijing’s goal of establishing a ‘harmonious’ international order, in fact provides the capital city of Astana with the strategic option of hedging against China, mainly by invoking rhetoric similar to Russia’s. Kazakhstan’s self-conscious construction of Kazakhstan as a ‘Eurasian’ state that ‘bridges’ both East and West is suggestive of the ways it is cautiously situating its allegiances, and the intellectual distances it maintains from Beijing and Beijing’s historically-framed narratives.

Chapter 8 by Hyun Jin Kim shows that most South Korean intellectuals and policy-planners are ill-at-ease in formulating responses to
the rise of China. Once again, practical considerations resonate with historic imageries whereby left-leaning figures aim to play up Japanese aggression towards Korea after the 1910 annexation and colonization. By contrast, right-leaning figures foreground pre-modern history to heighten the risks of Chinese hegemony. Thus, Korean nationalism can readily feed both pro- and anti-Chinese sentiments, as economic reliance on the Chinese market becomes more pronounced.

Chapter 9 by Peter Mauch shows that the new Chinese IRT has so far had little effect on the field of IR in Japanese academe. This is perhaps partly because Japanese academics are reluctant to acknowledge that China’s growing economic clout might be an imminent challenge to the US-maintained status quo in East Asia. Moreover, a significant portion of academics believe that Japan’s ongoing economic malaise is reversible, and that Japan must articulate a stronger voice on the world stage. If Japanese intellectuals aimed at portraying their country as a rising Asian power in the lead-up to the Pacific War – namely, one that was destined to liberate the continent from submission to the West – they now seem wary of buying into pan-Asian sentiments so as not to undermine Japan’s perceived exceptionality and its special relationship with the US.

Lastly, Chapter 10 brings our exploration to a closure by highlighting the discourse on new Chinese IRT in a polity that is, or used to be thought of, as culturally Chinese itself. Here, Chih-yu Shih and Ching-chang Chen explain how, over the last decade and a half, Taiwanese IR scholars have in fact come to view Taiwan as historically distinct. Shih and Chen detect growing rather than decreasing American-centeredness among Taiwanese intellectuals in this period, and a new consensus formed around democratization, if not de-Sinification per se. To be sure, the Chinese discourse on a new multi-polar “harmonious world” is far from unknown in Taiwan. But for the most part, it seems to be interpreted in Taiwan as a ploy serving Beijing’s purpose of constructing a favorable international environment necessary for China’s economic development; a means to assure the international community that China is a status quo power, and at the same time to subtly undermine American hegemony, while allowing for China to remain undemocratic in the face of globalisation.

In this way, the collection interrogates simultaneously the nascent outlines of Chinese IRT scholarship and the pattern of international interactions that it informs by outlining a wide spectrum of Asian responses to China’s involvement in the region. However, the collection should not be misunderstood as an exercise in ordering or classification;
instead, it aims to draw attention to the multiplicity of Asian engagements with China. Accounting for such complexity demands an open source medium for this conversation. It is hoped that the translation of the interactions of Asian states with China intended by this volume makes a constructive foray along such a long-term endeavor.

Notes


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