# China and International Relations

## The Chinese view and the contribution of Wang Gungwu

*Edited by*
**Zheng Yongnian**


China Policy Series

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# China and International Relations

Despite Beijing's repeated assurance that China's rise will be 'peaceful', the United States, Japan and the European Union as well as many of China's Asian neighbours feel uneasy about it. Although China's rise could be seen as inevitable, it remains uncertain as to how a politically and economically powerful China will behave, and how it will conduct its relations with the outside world. One major problem with understanding China's international relations is that Western concepts of international relations only partially explain China's approach. China's own flourishing, indigenous community of international relations scholars have borrowed many concepts from the West, but their application has not been entirely successful, so the work of conceptualizing and theorizing China's approach to international relations remains incomplete.

Written by some of the foremost scholars in the field of China studies, this book focuses on the work of Wang Gungwu – one of the most influential scholars writing on international relations – and includes topics such as empire, the nation-state, nationalism, state ideology, and the Chinese view of world order. Besides honouring Wang Gungwu as a great scholar, the book explores how China can be integrated more fully into international relations (IR) studies and theories; discusses the extent to which existing IR theory succeeds or fails to explain Chinese IR behaviour, and demonstrates how the study of Chinese experiences can enrich the IR field.

**Yongnian Zheng** is Professor and Director of the East Asian Institute at the National University of Singapore. His many books include (as author) *Technological Empowerment, De facto Federalism, Globalization and State Transformation in China, Discovering Chinese Nationalism in China*, and *Will China Become Democratic*, and (as co-editor) *The Chinese Communist Party in Reform*, and *China and the New International Order*.

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# Preface

*Zheng Yongnian*

Studies of China's international relations (IR) are now at a critical point. China is rising fast to become a great power in the world, and its rise is increasingly affecting world affairs. The international community – especially big powers like the United States, Japan and European Union (EU) – is anxious about China's rise.[1] While China's rise is inevitable, it remains uncertain how a stronger China will behave in world affairs. Among others, one major source of uncertainty comes from the inadequacies of existing IR theories in helping us understand China's international behaviour, since how China is perceived depends on the theoretical framework employed.

Theoretical frameworks have often defined IR debates. In North America and some parts of Europe, the two major IR theories, namely realism and liberalism, and their neo-versions have dominated the field for decades. Realism is associated with the exercise of power by states and it places an overwhelming premium on the concept of power which is a measure of state influence. Liberalism emphasizes the workings of international laws and regimes, morality, as well as international institutions as factors of constraint on the exercise of raw power. Such ideas have imposed the idea of universalism of Western scientific tradition on parts, if not the whole, of East Asia. Neo-liberalism and neo-realism differ little from their older versions. Both neo-liberalism and neo-realism emphasize power relations. In the Western worldview, international relations can be applied to China elegantly as China's rise is either an opportunity or a threat – depending on the perspective of neo-liberalists or neo-realists.

China does not fit into these two major frameworks perfectly. If the influence of a state is proportional to its power, then China seems to be far less influential than its size permits (especially if population is taken into consideration). This is also reflected by the fact that the post-Deng regime did not assert Chinese power projections into the region or the world in proportion to its size and instead harps on peaceful rise. Distinctly non-realist, it has also idealistically promoted six-party talks; an ASEAN–China free-trade agreement (FTA); allowing ASEAN to be in the driver's seat for regional integration, and so on. It also does not fit into the concept of liberalism, given its ability to strike back when its core interests are threatened (e.g. war against Vietnam in 1979; Paracels in 1974; Mischief Reef in 1995; missile firings across the Taiwan Strait in mid-1990s, etc.) and its suspicions of Western attempts at promoting democratization and human rights as defined by the West

(e.g. arc of democracy by Shinzo Abe; trilateral talks by Rice and Downer; US allies' exercises in the region; India-Vietnam-Japan-US cooperation, etc.).

Some scholars in the West have also employed constructivism to reconstruct concepts and theories of China's inter-state experience in the past to explain and predict China's international behaviour. But these scholars have met with only limited success.[2] Scholars within China are often suspicious of any explanation and prediction on China by Western scholars. They, however, are not ready to provide any alternative approach to explain the international behaviour of their own country, despite rapid development of IR studies as a discipline. In China, IR first emerged as an autonomous academic discipline in the early 1980s. Over the past two decades, it has grown into a vigorous field in spite of severe political inhibitions and ideological constraints. China can now boast one of the largest IR epistemic communities in the world in terms of numbers of student, faculties, research centres, policy analysts and practitioners. Increasingly intense discussion about international relations has been taking place among Chinese scholars and those beyond Chinese borders, particularly with the China's rise in power over the past decades. Nevertheless, the past decades have also witnessed the Americanization of China's IR studies. Chinese IR scholars have borrowed concepts developed out of Western experiences in international relations to develop IR studies in China. Many inside and outside China have realized that both mechanical applications of the existing concepts or Americanization will not help in the proper understanding of China's international behaviour.[3] Indeed, scholars in other disciplines encounter a similar situation. For instance, Western sociologists and political scientists tend to take, as their starting point, the experiences of European nation-states and ask if the theories derived from Western nationalism could readily be applied.[4]

In recent years, there has been a call for developing a Chinese school of IR studies, but the call has not gone beyond itself. No serious work has been done in conceptualizing/theorizing China's international behaviour from a non-Western perspective. While it is debatable whether a Chinese school of IR studies is needed, it is important to analyse China's international relations within a theoretical framework given the role China is playing on the world stage. Such an endeavour will contribute significantly to IR studies in general and to China studies in particular. Indeed, any IR theory, if it cannot adequately explain Chinese international behaviour, will become less useful.

How to bring together the studies of China and theories of IR? This volume aims to move towards that goal by examining Wang Gungwu's scholarship. As a historian, Wang has written on various subjects, including China's international relations. Many scholars have benefited tremendously from his insights and wisdom about international relations, especially with regard to China's relations with the outside world. Although he does not always employ IR concepts to interpret China's relations with the outside world, his historical and humanist approaches are very heuristic to our thinking about Chinese IR. We believe that his writings can serve as a bridge between China studies and IR theories.

All the contributors in this volume are inspired by Wang. The chapters examine China's international relations from different perspectives, drawing on Wang's

insights and wisdom. Therefore, this volume is intended not only to honour Wang as a great scholar, but, more importantly, to make a concrete effort in integrating China into IR studies. In this volume, we want to achieve two related goals. First, we want to examine the extent to which existing IR theory succeeds or fails in shedding light on Chinese IR behaviour. Second, we will show how the study of Chinese experiences can enrich IR theories. In other words, we want to perform two related research tasks. The first important task is, as emphasized by Wang, to demonstrate why we need to realize that human society has progressed and will progress in different ways. This realization will enable us to see how China's behavioural patterns have differed from those of Western powers. The second task is to explore how China has behaved differently from other powers. This is to examine what distinguishes China from the West.

According to Wang, the view that human society has progressed in diversified ways is important in order to understand both a given country's domestic affairs and its international relations.[5] The Western vision that the world would inexorably converge towards something like Western society is problematic. This linear view has particularly dominated the US's foreign policy agenda since the end of the Cold War, reaching an extreme under the Bush administration when the neo-conservative forces attempted to promote American democracy in different parts of the world. Such a linear view has actually appeared in modern China. Mao Zedong used to struggle with such an idea of progress. The view that human society could progress in a linear way captured Mao's imagination in his struggle for a new China. Learning from the Western experience of development, Mao was very much convinced that the clue to China's failures in modern times lay in the lack of application of science. Mao's generation of elites strongly believed that the solution was to apply scientific thinking to the task of governing China. Mao took such a view even further. In Mao's view, to progress, one needs to engage in creative destruction. Mao indeed inspired a whole generation of Chinese along this line of thinking. Of course, there were also Chinese classical theorists who tried to revive faith in the human approach as advocated by traditional Confucian teachings. They had to struggle between a pluralistic view and a linear progressive view as advocated by Mao. In Mao's view, such debates could only be settled on the battlefield and never intellectually. Indeed, in China's modern times, the proponents of the linear progressive view won. To a great degree, the victory of Mao's revolution was a victory of the Western view of revolutionary progress.

According to Wang, the key question today is whether the present leadership in China is still committed to a linear progressive view or whether it has its doubts. The answer is so far not clear. Chinese leaders somehow remained enamoured of the power of science. They have the mindset that science is supreme. Anything that is not scientific is therefore worthless. If this situation persists, then all else will be inadequate and unsatisfactory. From this perspective, the Americanization of China IR studies should not be regarded as a good sign since it might lead China to adopt a confrontational policy towards the rest of the world when it rises. At the policy level, people could be terrified by the thought that nature can be changed by unrestrained human activities since such activities have already caused irrevocable

damage to the biosphere. If the linear progressive view is applied to international relations, this might lead to destructive effects to human life and history. On the other hand, Wang also observed that the present leadership from time to time has also begun to employ Confucian terms like 'harmonious society' and 'harmonious world'. Indeed, Wang stressed that China might have actually given the linear progressive view an entirely different character. Confucian scholars who did not win on the battlefield could still play a role by speaking in their leaders' ears and influencing how the world could be perceived. That fits the traditional Chinese way of thinking that while you might still need '*yang*' to win battles, you would also need '*yin*' to remind those in power not to be too arrogant. At the policy level, while the Chinese government is still very much influenced by Western linear progressive thinking, it has also learned from Western experiences of international relations that such a line of thinking could lead to human disasters. Therefore, the post-Mao leadership has proposed different policy concepts with Chinese characteristics such as 'peaceful rise / peaceful development' and 'harmonious world'. A similar change has also occurred in China's academic circles. While many Chinese scholars continue to believe that only by following Western ways can China become a strong nation-state, they have also realized that concepts or theories of international relations which are based on Western experience can hardly explain their own country's experience. Therefore, they have begun to search for alternative concepts and theories that are likely to be based on China's own historical and contemporary experience.

That brings us to the second task, namely of explaining the difference between China and the West. In other words, what factors should one consider when conceptualizing and theorizing China's international behaviour? Wang's writings are particularly relevant to the performance of this task. Wang has written on a wide range of topics related to IR studies such as empire, nation-state, nationalism, state ideology, Chinese view of world order, Chinese overseas, and religions in world politics. Based on Wang's writings on all these topics, contributors to this volume have gone one step further to explore the possible explanations to China's actual international behaviour in the past and in modern times.

The chapters in this volume are organized in a way that enables us to perform these two tasks. It would be unwise to provide a summary of each chapter simply because such a summary is impossible. All authors discuss how they have been inspired by, and have benefited from Wang's writings and ideas one way or another. They have also provided substantial examinations of a particular aspect of China's international relations. Furthermore, while all authors focus on examining one particular aspect of China's international behaviour, they have also made great efforts in conceptualizing and theorizing China's international relations. As emphasized earlier, we hope that an examination of Wang's writings and ideas will become a starting point in the search for China's concepts and theories of international relations in the long run.

This volume is divided into five parts. Part I looks at historicity and the social foundation of China's domestic order and international relations. China's international relations can be regarded as an extension of its domestic order. Elements

of the social foundation (e.g. morality, philosophy and religions) of China's domestic order also affect its external relations. Meanwhile, this social foundation also differentiates China from other countries in international affairs. The authors of the four chapters in Part I attempt to explore why a linear progressive way of thinking is empirically not true. They also demonstrate how China has developed its approach to international relations and how this differs from Western ways of thinking. Part II reinterprets China's traditional 'world order'. China's traditional *tianxia* (all-under-heaven) theory and the institutional expression of this theory, namely the 'tributary system', have been explained by various Western concepts and theories of international relations in modern times. The three chapters in Part II provide different (re)interpretations of China's traditional 'world order'. These reinterpretations are important to gain an understanding China's international relations, both in the past and now, since applying Western concepts and theories of international relations to Chinese experience could be too simplistic and misguided. The three authors try to explain China's traditional 'world order' as it was. Part III of the book focuses on Chinese overseas and on China's international relations. While Chinese overseas have been an important factor affecting Chinese foreign relations, this factor has been unduly neglected both by mainstream international studies and by Chinese scholars themselves. The authors of the three chapters in Part III discuss key issues in the studies of Chinese overseas and their relevance to and implications for China's international relations. Part IV examines China's behaviour in contemporary world politics and addresses some important issues in China's international relations. Finally, Part V discusses the continuity and transformation of China's international relations. Three authors demonstrate the relevance of Wang's writings to understanding China's international relations and directing China's IR studies. These chapters also demonstrate how China's past has continued to shape its international relations and how China's international relations have been transformed in this new age of globalization.

## Notes

1 There is a growing body of literature in this area. For some recent works, see, for example, Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Future of US-China Relations: Is Conflict Inevitable?', *International Security*, 30(2) (2005): 7–45; Will Hutton, *The Writing on the Wall: China and the West in the 21st Century* (New York: Little Brown, 2007); Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer, 'Clash of Titans', *Foreign Policy*, 146 (2005): 46–50; Edward Friedman, 'China's Rise, Asia's Future', *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6(2) (2006): 289–304; and T. V. Paul, 'Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy', *International Security*, 30(1) (2005): 46–71.

2 An example is *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) by Alastair Iain Johnston. In this book, Johnston employed a constructivist approach to reinterpreting China's international behaviour in the Ming dynasty. The book shows how Western scientific approaches could be used in constructing a theory of China's international behaviour. Nevertheless, his approach has been criticized. For example, Anthony A. Loh, 'Deconstructing *Cultural Realism*', in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), *China and the New International Order* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 281–309.

3 Some China scholars have called for establishing a Chinese school of IR studies. See Ren Xiao, 'Toward a Chinese School of International Relations?', in Wang and Zheng (eds), *China and the New International Order*, pp. 281–92.
4 Wang Gungwu, 'Nationalism and its Historians', in *Bind Us in Time: Nation and Civilization in Asia* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2003), p. 12.
5 This discussion is based on Wang Gungwu's reply to Robert Cox in their dialogue on the historicity of China's international relations.

# Acknowledgements

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There are many people whom the editor would like to thank for their enormous contributions. Wang Gungwu is such a great scholar. Without our concerted efforts to convince him that his writings have made a huge contribution to China's international relations studies, he would not have agreed to our beginning this project. He has been extremely supportive and helpful in identifying key topics in his writings related to IR studies.

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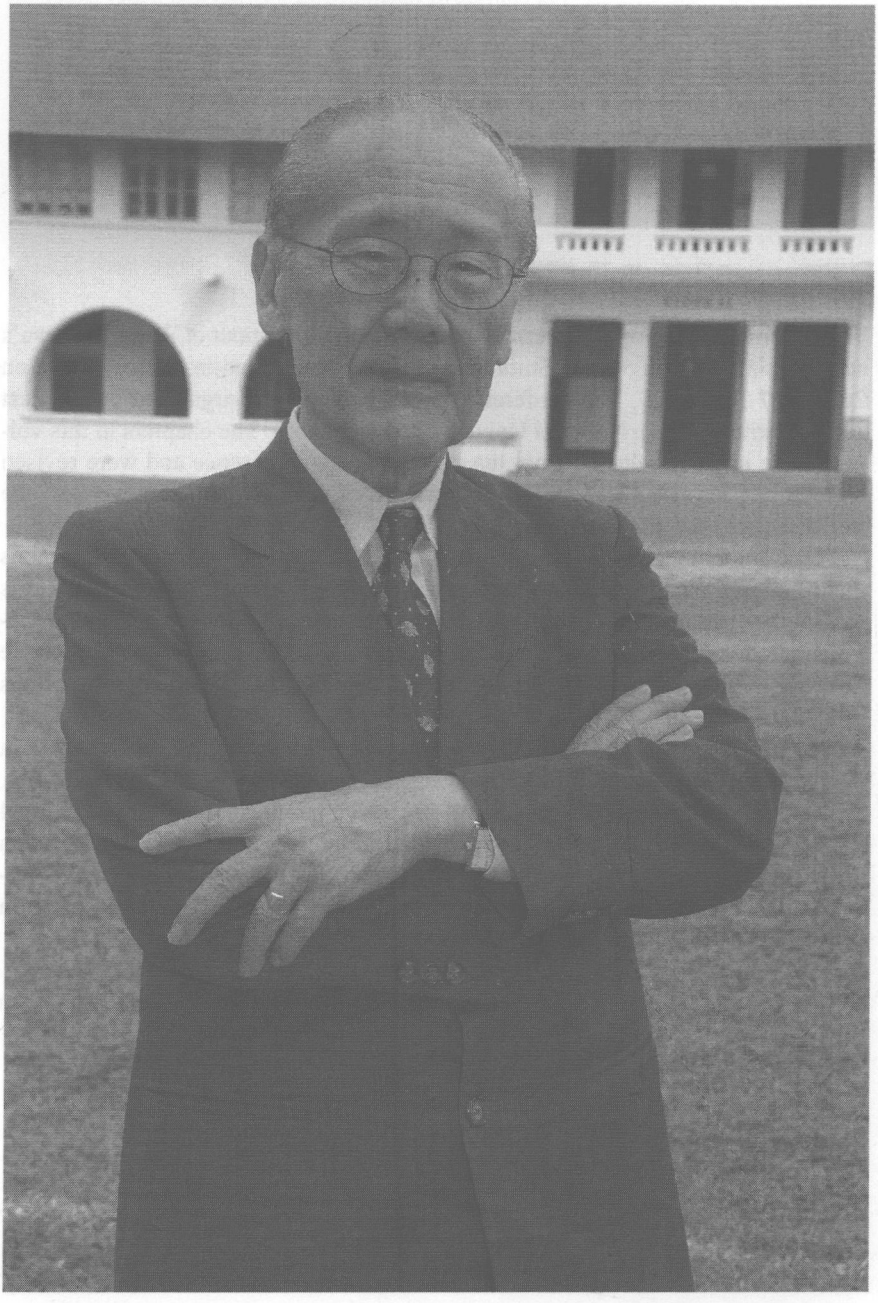

Professor Wang Gungwu

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