Theorizing China's rise in and beyond international relations: an introduction

Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski

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1. Introduction

Significant events and momentous changes in world politics have been closely linked to the cutting-edge development of International Relations (IR) theory (Acharya and Buzan, 2017, 12). Modern realism, for example, emerged 'as a reaction to the breakdown of the post-World War I international order' (Wohlforth, 1994/95, 91). The abrupt end of the Cold War saw both a fall in realism's fortune, and the opening of new space for theories such as constructivism and those from a broadly-defined post-positivist perspective (Lapid, 1989; Smith *et al.*, 1996; Guzzini, 2000). Thus, Wohlforth (1994/95, 91) argues that 'although indirect, the connection between [theory-generating] events and [the development of] theory was undeniable'.

Curiously, however, such an undeniable link is hardly perceptible in the case of an ongoing major 'event' in contemporary international relations, namely, the rise of China. At one level, China's rise has been widely understood, in a seemingly matter-of-factly fashion, as China's emergence into an increasingly powerful and consequential global actor in international relations. It is in this sense that it has been most frequently understood, studied, and theorized (Kang, 2007; Lampton, 2008; Kavalski, 2009; Nathan and Scobell, 2012; Shambaugh, 2013; Christensen, 2015). However, the existing theorizing of China's rise,

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whether based on realism, liberalism, constructivism, power transition theory, or the English School, is primarily about *applying* existing theories to it in order to explain its policy and practical implications. Such conventional theorizing, based on a 'literal' definition of China's rise to be merely explained,[1] does not see 'China's rise' as an 'up-stream', theory-*generating* event in IR.

We contend that this understanding and theorizing of China's rise is inadequate, and contributes to the neglect of China's rise as a complex and still evolving global and regional phenomenon encompassing broader political, economic, and social changes, dynamics and challenges. Though at their core linked to the 'literal' conception, these aspects of the 'China's rise' phenomenon are nevertheless irreducible to it; as a consequence, they demand fresh theorizing. It is largely in this sense that we suggest that the rise of China as a potentially theory-generating event has yet to systematically appeal to the core IR theoretical community.

Animated by and dissatisfied with the puzzling neglect of China's rise as a *source* for IR theorizing, the current Special Issue addresses this gap by opening possibilities for meaningful dialogue on both theory- and policy-relevant questions surrounding the theoretical implications of China's rise for the study of IR. In this Issue, it is our fundamental contention that China's rise represents more than a specific foreign policy challenge or an empirical test case for existing IR theories. It offers an opportunity for more systematic theorizing to enrich and perhaps challenge IR theory as we know it. This will not only have implications for policy responses to China's rise, but also its value lies more in questioning and broadening existing IR theories in the understanding of the changing world more broadly.

It has to be stated at the outset that this endeavor should not be misconstrued as an attempt to overthrow existing paradigms and perspectives, or to claim that the existing IR theories are completely obsolete as far as understanding China's rise is concerned. No doubt, many IR theories, including realism, liberalism, the English School, and constructivism, will continue to have important things to say about

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1   Of course, China's rise has no pure or literal meaning to begin with. Even in its seemingly 'literal' sense, discursive construction is at work. For a poststructuralist critique of such constructions of China's rise in Western IR discourses, see Pan (2012).

China's international relations. However, we suggest that changes and complexities in many aspects of this broadly construed historic event may go beyond the parameters of existing IR theories, hence requiring new theorizing at epistemological, ontological and/or even spiritual levels. We admit that the challenges facing this enterprise are extremely formidable and the goals seem highly ambitious. But we follow James Rosenau's (1994, 527) advice that 'we have no choice but to undertake it' despite the difficulties. On balance, then, we pitch our contribution here at a necessary but more modest level: first drawing attention to this neglected research agenda and creating an opening for dialogue and exchange among IR scholars, and then hoping to offer a first cut at theorizing China's rise in and beyond IR.

2. China's rise: a blind spot in IR theorizing

Contemporary IR theory debates have engaged with a number of important issues ranging from power, time, and emotion to paradigm eclecticism and non-Western IR. Yet, China's rise is clearly not a focus of these debates. In the Special Issue of *European Journal of International Relations* on the 'End of IR Theory', for instance, China or China's rise is mentioned sporadically and in passing by 4 out of the 12 articles (Brown, 2013; Mearsheimer and Walt, 2013; Reus-Smit, 2013; Tickner, 2013). In one of their occasional references to China, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt (2013, 448) note that 'how one thinks about dealing with a rising China depends first and foremost on one's broad perspective on world politics', implying that China's rise is merely an object of analysis by ready-made theories. In another recent theoretical debate: 'Emotions and World Politics' (*International Theory*, Volume 6, Issue 3, 2014), China figures even less in the discussion.

If these are 'wrong' places to look for the connection between China's rise as a theory-generating event and IR theory debates, then we are yet to find 'right' places. True, the debates on non-Western IR theory in general (see the Special Issue of *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2007) and the Chinese School of IR theory in particular seem more promising. The former has led to the formation of a larger 'Global IR' project (Acharya, 2014a; Acharya and Buzan, 2017), which does include China (e.g. Kang, 2003; Kang 2003/04; Johnston, 2012; Zhang and Buzan, 2012; Rozman, 2015; Acharya, 2017). Still, China's

rise is not their main focus, which seems to be mostly on East Asian *history* (of course including Chinese history). Meanwhile, the 'Chinese IR theory' debate has emerged in part against the backdrop of China's rise, and Qin Yaqing (2005) urges Chinese IR theory to devote itself to understanding China's rise. Despite this call, Chinese IR theorizing of China's rise is notable for the lack of it, perhaps with very few exceptions (Ross and Zhu, 2008; Yan, 2015). For instance, the Fudan-based IR theorist Tang Shiping (2013), the first Asian scholar to win the International Studies Association's best book prize for his theoretical book *The Social Evolution of International Politics*, bases his research almost exclusively on American and European IR theorists, and China is not a subject of his theoretical endeavor (Kristensen, 2015, 641).

It may be argued that the study of China's rise is never theory-free. Indeed we agree. Just as 'all theories have a perspective' (Cox, 1986, 207), all perspectives rest on certain theoretical foundations. In this sense, certainly a steady stream of research on China's rise in recent years cannot be faulted for lacking theoretical propositions (Callahan, 2005; Kang, 2007; Chan, 2008; Johnston, 2008; Ross and Zhu, 2008; Buzan, 2010; Fravel, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2010; Qin, 2010; Yan, 2011; Hsiung, 2012; Kirshner, 2012; Li, 2016; Yilmaz, 2016; He, 2017). In particular, a sizeable body of literature on China's rise has been informed by power transition theory and its critics (Lemke and Tammen, 2003; Tammen and Kugler, 2006; Goldstein, 2007; Chan, 2008; Zoellick, 2013; Brzezinski, 2014; Pan, 2014; Walton and Kavalski, 2016).

However, most of these works, insightful and valuable as they are, are best described as 'theoretical explanation' and 'applied theory testing', in the sense that IR theory is used as tools to explain what China is or isn't, what it will or will not do, what China's rise means for other states and the international order as a whole, and so forth. The focus of analysis is largely an empirical one, or the theoretical focus is narrowly-conceived in terms of methodology (Sørensen, 2013). That is, 'Theory is engaged but the contribution is framed as empirical/methodological rather than theoretical as such' (Kristensen, 2015, 642). Even as some studies may be more theoretically reflective and devote considerable attention to the implications for existing theories, the findings often lead to the preference to one *existing* theory over another, or the refinement of an analytical model incorporating a number

of perspectives or a more complete set of variables (e.g. in terms of analytical eclecticism), rather than to a more radical outcome of challenging the assumptions and concepts of existing IR theories per se.

When China's rise is understood 'literally' and treated merely as a case for theory-testing, its theorization tends to be stumped by a twin-tendency in IR: (i) to think-in-paradigms and (ii) to return to familiar concepts. In doing so, it reinforces, rather than disrupt, a popular perception that countries in the Third World are particular examples of some otherwise universal phenomena already observed and theorized elsewhere. Sinologist and political scientist Michael Dutton (2002, 495) once laments 'the impossibility of writing a work that is principally of a theoretical nature but that is empirically and geographically grounded in Asia rather than in Europe or America'. 'Why is it that', he asks, 'when it comes to Asian area studies, whenever "theory" is invoked, it is invariably understood to mean "applied theory" and assumed to be of value only insofar as it helps tell the story of the "real" in a more compelling way?' Dutton's grievance is mainly with the broad field of Asian area studies. But his question is equally applicable to the study of China's international relations.

3. China's rise and IR theory: a case for deeper engagement

It has now become a cliché that China and East Asia in general are the most economically dynamic region in the world. Although we do not necessarily agree with Kenneth Waltz's (1979, 73) assertion that 'A general theory of international politics is necessarily based on the great powers', we argue that no IR theory claiming explanatory power and contemporary relevance can reasonably ignore the case of China's rise and IR in East Asia.

Furthermore, existing IR theories, as many have pointed out, have been based on European/Western experiences (Kang, 2003; Rozman, 2015, 2; Acharya and Buzan, 2017). As such, when applied to the histories and experiences of the wider world, 'long-established truisms in Western IRT [International Relations Theory] are quickly called into question' (Buzan and Little, 2010, 197; see also Kang, 2003, 58; Hsiung, 2012). Chinese foreign policy, for example, has challenged the neat analytical categories of 'status-quo' and 'revisionist' powers in IR

AQ5 theory and practice (Johnston, 2003, 6). For this reason, understanding regional IR can 'expand[s] the conceptual tools for theorizing about IR more generally' (Johnston, 2012, 56). Indeed, Kang (2003/04, 168) has demonstrated that the field of political economy has been able to develop new theoretical concepts such as 'developmental states' and 'varieties of capitalism' through its focus on Asian developments, and he sees no reason why IR theorists cannot enrich IR theory from studying Asia in a similarly way.

Despite such calls for connecting Asia/China with IR theorizing, several factors continue to thwart this endeavour. The first factor concerns the 'demography' of IR theorists. While no longer an American or Western social science (Hoffmann, 1977; Wæver, 1998), the IR discipline at its 'theoretical core' continues to be dominated by 'Western' scholars, who in most cases draw upon empirical case studies from Europe and North America, rather than Asia or China. As already noted, when China enters the theoretical debate, it is often a matter of applying mainstream Western IR theories and practices *to* China, rather than drawing new theoretical insights *from* it. Thus, the road to deciphering contemporary China frequently passes through 'Western' experiences and analogies such as the Thucydides Trap, Monroe Doctrine, 1914, and Wilhelmine Germany (Pan, 2012). Meanwhile, this has not been helped by the fact that the study of China tends to be 'dominated by Sinologists' or area specialists, not IR theorists (Chan, 2008, 121). While more scholars now excel at studying both general IR and China (e.g. Alastair Iain Johnston, L.H.M. Ling, Qin Yaqing, Chih-yu Shih, Wang Jisi, Yan Xuetong, and Yongjin Zhang), they are exceptions that prove the rule.

Second, there is a lack of the 'surprise' factor in China's steady rise, in comparison with the Cold War's sudden and unexpected end (Gaddis, 1992/93). Throughout the past few decades, China's rise has been treated either with some scepticism, or as a normal instance of the rise and fall of great powers. In the case of the latter, it is taken for granted that the same power transition logic should apply. That is, '"Western" theoretical frameworks [continue to] have much to say about international relations in Asia', and such frameworks only need to be more 'context sensitive' in terms of their variables when applied to Asia (Ikenberry and Mastanduno, 2003, 19).

A third factor may have to do with perceived 'Chinese exceptional-ism'. While some see little need for theorizing China's rise because the phenomenon seems nothing new or unusual, others see it as merely one distinctive case, whose 'unique 3,000-year history of essential isola-tion locates itself outside the purview of any general theory that might be applicable to other states' (Rosenau, 1994, 524). For instance, per-ceiving Chinese foreign policy behaviour as 'dictated by a peculiar op-erational code of conduct', Kim (1994, 402–403) argues that 'theorizing about Chinese foreign policy becomes an exceptionally daunting task, and the case against joining the theoretical quest seems rather compelling'.

The perception of China's rise as something either routine or unique reflects a broader problem in mainstream IR theory, namely a 'Columbus syndrome' (Kavalski, 2018, 1–15). The 1492 voyage of Christopher Columbus set in motion a period of European conquest. Columbus failed to recognize the 'newness' of the New World that he stumbled upon; he also refused to recognize that the Amerindians spoke a different language from him. Instead, he merely assumed that the indigenous populations were unable to speak. Thus, 'Columbus' failure to recognize the diversity of languages permits him, when he confronts a foreign tongue, only two possible, and complementary, atti-tudes: *to acknowledge it as a language but to refuse to believe it is differ-ent; or to acknowledge its difference but to refuse to admit it is a language*' (Todorov, 1982, 30; emphases added). In this respect, Columbus 'knows in advance what he will find' (Todorov, 1982, p. 17) and acknowledges only the things that fit his preconceived model, while ignoring all the aspects that were incongruent.

The implication here is that IR's knowledge-production suffers from a similar condition to that of Columbus. That is, when it encounters 'other' concepts, practices, and experience of the 'international', IR more often than not reverts to the prism of its Columbus syndrome: ei-ther it recognizes them as narratives about world politics but does not acknowledge that they are different; or acknowledges that they are dif-ferent, but refuses to admit that they are part of IR (thereby relegating them to fields such as cultural studies, area studies, and anthropology). As a result, the realties, complexities, and dynamism of global life are reduced to fit pre-scripted storylines (Kavalski, 2018, 1–14). In this set-ting, considering that the encounters between IR theory and Asia more

generally have long been plagued by a broader pattern of 'narrow vision, slow awakening to an area long overlooked, and belated theoretical reorientation' (Rozman, 2015, 1), the failure to take China's rise as a significant theory-generating event in IR becomes less baffling.

Some scholars have begun challenging this syndrome. The aforementioned 'Global IR' project—first emerged in an influential Special Issue of *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*—usefully calls into question the ethnocentric limitations of mainstream Western IR theory (see Acharya and Buzan, 2007; Acharya, 2014b). It has drawn attention to two aspects of Western-centrism in IR theory: firstly, its overwhelming focus on Western history and experience; and, secondly, the dominance of Western scholarship in IR theory. Thus far, the emphasis of the 'Global IR' project has been particularly on addressing the second dimension of Western-centrism, as exemplified by its call for better 'engag[ing] IR scholarship from the Global South' (Acharya and Buzan, 2017, 6–13). Bringing in more 'non-Western voices' is no doubt extremely important, but at the same time including seemingly 'non-Western' *issues* (e.g., China's rise) as a theoretical concern equally deserves attention.

While the Chinese IR theory debate has sought to put China's rise as its theoretical core (Qin, 2005), and some Chinese theorists have made important contribution in this regard (e.g. Zhao, 2005; Yan, 2011; Yan, 2015; Zhang and Chang, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Qin, 2018), we argue that China's rise is not a purely Chinese or even regional phenomenon which can be fully grasped from a 'Chinese' or 'Asian' perspective. Rather, as a complex global phenomenon, it should be the subject of theorizing from *global* as well as 'Chinese' perspectives. Over-emphasizing Chinese/Asian perspectives may inadvertently reinforce the very bias that 'non-Western' is non-mainstream, particular, regional and local, whereas the 'Western' is mainstream, universal, and core (Johnston, 2012, 56). Such binaries could hinder the opportunity of cross-fertilization between 'non-Western' and 'Western' sources to understand China's rise. Without underestimating the important and unique role Chinese IR theorists can play, China's rise is nevertheless too important a global issue to be left for Chinese IR theorists alone to theorize. In any case, what matters is not just *whose* theories are relevant and ought to be heard, but also *what* theories or perspectives

can broaden our understanding of the increasingly complex worlds, and China's complex and growing roles within them.

4. Beyond theory-testing, beyond IR

By now, it should become clearer what we mean by 'theorizing', which is not about applied theoretical testing. Driven often by specific or narrow theoretical concerns, theory-testing involves 'bringing more detailed empirical evidence to bear on these debates, perhaps helping to clarify which theories, hypotheses, and findings are more plausible than others, and confirming whether there are clear temporal and spatial limits on theory generalization' (Johnston, 2012, 58). Its testing case is frequently reduced to a source of raw data which may already be framed in accordance with the theory being tested (Acharya and Buzan, 2017, 16). If the collection of data is already guided by the theory in question, such testing is 'self-validating rather than a real test' (Saariluoma, 1997, 148n24). The upshot is that rather than challenging IR theory's ethnocentrism, testing 'Western' theory through case studies from the 'non-Western world' is likely to 'reinforce the image of area studies as little more than provider of raw data to Western theory' (Acharya, 2014a, 650).

In contrast, by *theorizing* here we mean efforts to critically engage with certain fundamental ways of understanding international relations or world politics in light of changes and complexities associated with but not limited to China's rise. So instead of taking the meaning of China's rise as self-evident or debating empirically whether China has been rising or not, the main focus of theorizing is on what this phenomenon is/is not and how a critical analysis of this phenomenon may help unsettle (or partly reaffirm) existing assumptions in IR theory. Questions that may be asked include, for example: In what sense have existing conceptual, theoretical, and ontological assumptions been adequate in understanding this phenomenon? Do the conventional theoretical frameworks have the room for dissenting ways of theorizing? Does it make sense to continue to see China as a more or less unitary actor? How does China's rise challenge the Westphalian conception of the world? What is new about its rise, in comparison to the rise of great powers in the past? Are changes reflected in this phenomenon indicative of some broader and more fundamental transformation in the

world as a whole? Can China's relations with the rest of the world continue to be understood in terms of *inter-national* relations? Are our conceptions of power in general and Chinese power in particular adequate in understanding Chinese power and power practices? Is it possible to produce objective knowledge about China and its international behaviour? What, indeed, does it mean and entail to know China and the world at large?

While not all of these questions can be examined in this Issue, the immediate purpose here is to illustrate the kind of questions may come under the ambit of theorizing China's rise. In doing so, we adopt a less conventional conception of theory as well. For example, we are less interested in the function of theory as primarily predicting regularities (Waltz, 1979, 68), since such theory is ill-equipped to understand change, unpredictability, temporality, and complexity (Kavalski, 2015; Shih and Ikeda, 2016). Instead, our conception of theory is closer to the meta-theoretical, ontological and epistemological rethinking of international relations, which may include challenging the notion of 'international relations' itself. This is in part what we mean by 'beyond IR', in search of global political and social theory about world politics. This should not be misunderstood as a suggestion that the contributors to this Special Issue subscribe to a uniform understanding of what amounts to theory or theorizing. Rather, the diversity that follows is only possible when we eschew a rather narrow view of theory from the outset.

No doubt, this theorizing will have implications for specific IR theories. Yet its main purpose is not about validating or testing a particular theory, or a particular national school of IR theory for that matter. Rather, it is about reflecting on more meta-theoretical, issues such as knowledge-production, power, identity, ontology, relationality, and spirituality. In this sense, it shares some of Global IR's attempts to 'develop concepts and approaches from non-Western contexts on their own terms and to apply them not only locally, but also to other contexts, including the larger global canvas' (Acharya, 2014a, 650). In doing so, it also hopes to contest the myth that 'only the Westphalian Self can theorize about the Rest, not the other way around' and to recognize the 'critical role [of the 'non-Western' world] in *making* world politics (Ling, 2014, 92). Nonetheless, it is not our primary aim to challenge the '*Western* theoretical dominance' (Acharya, 2013, 59, emphasis added) as such, nor is it mainly about bringing *Chinese* ideas

into IR theory (Qin, 2009; Yan, 2011). In fact, we reject the very dichotomies between 'the West' and 'the rest' and between 'the West' and 'China', and seek to embrace all relevant theoretical ideas, be they from China, the West, or elsewhere, so long as they are able to shed light on how China's rise can be best understood and how such understanding may help us better conceptualize world politics.

As well as seeing the need to overcome the Western/non-Western binary, we also advocate the need to go beyond the discipline of IR in order to enrich and stimulate our theorizing of China's rise (and, by extension, other facets of global life). China is never an exclusively IR property, and its existence is conditioned not only by what IR scholars see as the international system, but also by culture/civilization, geography, history, politics, economy, demography, globalization, and social change more broadly. So the study of its rise cannot be confined to the theoretical and conceptual repository of IR, however intellectually rich that repository has now become. Going beyond IR in theorizing China's rise does not mean abandoning IR altogether. It means broadening a discipline whose identity is, or should be, from the beginning multidisciplinary and fluid in nature (Cudworth *et al.*, 2018). In this context, we hope that when our readers read the individual articles in this Special Issues, they would keep an open mind and welcome sometimes unfamiliar concepts and theoretical frameworks from other fields as potential sources for stimulation and cross-fertilization, rather than dismiss them out of hand as alien or arcane.

5. Main themes

The intent of this Special Issue is to spur dialogue across paradigmatic divides; it does not, therefore, seek to impose homogeneity on the contributions and demand that they subscribe to a particular analytical perspective. This commitment, we hope, is evident in their different ontological and epistemic perspectives. But despite this, we highlight four mutually constitutive themes in their approaches to theorizing China's rise:

5.1 Re-theorizing China's rise

China's rise has been debated and understood in various ways, but thus far this phenomenon has been narrowly conceived of as a

relatively unproblematic event of the rise of a different great power. In doing so, it closes off the possibilities of re-imagining China's rise as a point of departure for critical theoretical reflection. The contributors propose different ways in which such re-theorizing can unfold:

Some engage in historical process-tracing. For instance, Buzan points to the framing of China's past by the English School (ES) in order to un-cover the ways in which Chinese experience simultaneously challenges and enriches its framework – in particular, it urges ES to consider the significance of 'hierarchy' and 'face'. Similarly, Shih and Hwang offer a parallel chronological reading of *Sunzi Bingfa* (Sun Zi's *The Art of War*) and uncover the three lopsided modalities of its incorporation into IR theory. Yet, unlike Buzan whose focus is squarely on the ES, Shih and Hwang purposefully seek to 're-world' global IR by excavating the agency embedded in overlooked prior relations and their unintended con-sequences. They urge for 'epistemological equality' between the West and the non-West, which should begin with a restoration of the multiplicity of the West.

Other contributors approach China's growing prominence by probing the established practices for its analysis in IR. For instance, some advocate more diversity both in IR's sociological makeup and the intellectual root-edness of its theoretical perspectives. Thus, the phenomenon of China's rise and its enfolding in the processes of global life requires theorization informed by a 'politics of choice' between different policy consequences of framings rather than based on the abstract and fixed assumption of some general and 'timeless' theory. Nordin and Smith develop this point further by situating the emergence, maintenance, and diffusion of knowl-edge about China's rise in social interactions. In this respect, they pro-pose shifting the practices of such collective sensemaking in IR by focusing on the concept and practices of 'friendship'. This research focus allows them to move away from IR's predilection for dichotomous think-ing by positioning China as part of a global social space defined by on-going and shifting relationships and intersected by the overlapping repertoires of knowledge and power. In a similar vein, Kavalski draws on the concept and practices of 'guanxi' to uncover new modalities for framing China's rise as a socially negotiated practice. The suggestion is that shifts in material capabilities do not in and of themselves reveal much about the patterns of world politics unless these are assessed in their contingent interactive setting. He argues that IR theorizing needs to

learn and employ different languages if it is to offer meaningful accounts not just of China and its international agency, but also of the heterogeneous global life it seeks to comprehend.

And still other contributors interpret China's rise by drawing on the plurivocality of perspectives, concepts, and traditions interacting on the world stage. According to Ling, accounting for the so-called shift to the East in world politics calls not merely for the analytical, political, or ethical emancipation of IR, but for its 'spiritual' liberation. Such an inquiry into the 'heart' of IR requires conscious transgression of the multiple epistemic, ontological, linguistic, and geographic borders established by the Anglophone 'mind' of the disciplinary study of world politics. This requires venturing into the domain of the 'magical', and she demonstrates that the rich repositories provided by the cosmologies of Advaita monism and Daoist trialectics offer veritable roadmaps for embarking on such a journey. Relatedly, Pan draws on another counterintuitive source for IR theorizing – holographic ideas in quantum physics and traditional Asian thoughts. He argues that to better conceptualize China's rise, it is necessary to go beyond the atomistic ontology in mainstream IR, and turn to a 'holographic' one, in which a part does not exist in its own right, but derives its unstable being from its multiple worlds. Such a view makes it difficult to treat China as a homogeneous, self-contained entity separate from its wholes. As Pan demonstrates, China's rise is a renewed process of holographic transition in which the myriad characteristics of its larger worlds are 'enfolded' into what is commonly known as 'China'.

5.2 *Pluralizing the practices of IR's knowledge-production*

The claim of this Special Issue is that mainstream IR theory – regardless of whether it is produced in the West/Global North or elsewhere – is dominated by an extremely narrow monodisciplinary outlook. In this setting, China's rise emerges as a major challenge to the geopolitical and geo-epistemic imaginary of the discipline, as is indicated in the articles by Kavalski and Ling. This then calls not merely for multi-/inter-/trans-disciplinary theorizing, but pluralizing the practices of IR knowledge-production by stimulating conversations across paradigmatic and disciplinary divides. We can engage in such endeavor by acknowledging (i) the lopsidedness of established paradigms – as Buzan has done for the ES, by suggesting that it has to view

institutions in a far more flexible and culturally-attuned fashion than its interlocutors recognize; and (ii) their spatio-temporal inadequacies – as Kavalski finds out in his examination of how Sinophone and Anglophone ideas participate in the shaping and reification of particular social realities. This pluralizing enterprise can also involve (iii) troubling the atomistic metanarratives of IR, which is at the center of Pan's ontological reframing global life as a 'boundless holographic web', with each part of the web both entangled with every other and mirroring the complex whole; (iv) excavating forgotten meanings beneath layers of ossified hegemonic purviews, which is what Nordin and Smith do through the reflexive recovery for IR theorizing about friendship's disposition to consider relations through the prism of 'Self *with* Other, rather than Self *in contrast to* Other'; (v) unleashing pent-up emotions through epistemic compassion for what is often considered by mainstream IR theorizing to be inarticulate background knowledge, as Ling does in her engagement with Asian traditions and lifeworlds; or (vi) reminding IR that theorizing is a process of irruptive translation between the languages and experiences of diverse and infinitely complex worlds – something that Shih and Hwang account for in their assessment of the historical appropriation of *Sunzi Bingfa* by Anglophone IR.

Such pluralizing initiatives see IR knowledge as constituted by multiple, and often contradictory, practices. In fact, it questions the possibility for (let alone, the veritability of) objectivity and communicative or instrumental rationality expected by the established narratives of Westphalian/Anglophone IR. According to these mainstream accounts, anarchy (and by extension, conflict) is the natural starting point of theorizing and global life. As such, China's rise can seemingly only be understood through the conflict potential of its power-projection capabilities and economic output. There is little space to consider friendship, face, let alone the complexity of China, its multiple interactions across time and space, and the diversity of contexts, actors, and agency entangled in these holographic connections and interactions. In other words, IR is incoherent and socially-mediated – just like the everyday patterns and practices of the global life it intends to explain and understand. Thus, the disclosure of a messy pluriverse of practices involved in IR's knowledge-production promises to heal the habits of control, manipulation, and exploitation and foster different ways of seeing and

encountering the world that can help IR generate meaningful answers to the pressing questions of our times.

5.3 Engaging the relationality of global life

As already indicated, the individual contributions indicate different ways in which nuanced conversations with more familiar critical politi-cal lexicons and procedures can take place, but relationality looms as the underlying context of their research endeavors. Whether it is onto-logical as is the case with the articles by Pan and Nordin and Smith, epistemic as suggested in the analyses by Ling and Kavalski, or inter-pretative as illustrated in the studies by Buzan and Shih and Hwang, relationality has been deployed to illuminate alternate ways of discover-ing, questioning, and reflecting about existence, normative problems, and the nature and meaning of events. The acknowledgement of such relationality draws attention to the simultaneous interactions among a multiplicity of sites (be they geographic, gender, ethnic, religious, cul-tural, historical, or of any other kind).

In Ling's case, such relationality is a defining characteristic of the 'world-of-worlds' made possible by the encounter with the pre-Westphalian idea of 'Interbeing'. In a similar fashion, for Shih and Hwang relationality offers a framework for illustrating how different worlds are co-constituted and each informed in its own fluid discourse to the extent that neither one can claim autonomy nor achieve domi-nance. Pan develops this point further through his account of the holo-graphic whole-parts relationship and the informational interconnected-ness that it bespeaks. As Kavalski indicates, such understanding of relationality is about care, attentiveness, humility, and responsibility to others. In other words, relationality is not a deterministic unidirectional 'arrow' linking structure to agency and agency to structure (Huang and Shih, 2014), but a dynamic framework (combining both ideational and material characteristics). This resonates with Nordin and Smith, who insist that relationality creates and maintains our continuous be-coming with others, and the ontological parity of multiple worlds. Such attentiveness to relationality makes a powerful case both for envi-sioning the fluid and indeterminate nature of social interactions and for creating ethical openings to reimagine the complex webs of

entanglements and encounters with others beyond the divisiveness and violence suffusing current domestic, national, and world politics.

5.4 Projecting the future trajectories of China's rise

As has been emphasized on multiple occasions, this Special Issue focuses the ways in which China's rise is theorized and how such experience can contribute to IR's theorizing. These are clearly analytical objectives; yet, despite such primarily theoretical (and in quite a few instances, meta-theoretical) concerns, the analyses included in this Special Issue do not shy away from projecting the likelihood and (normative) implications from the possible trajectories of China's rise. It seems that *mindfulness* is the key word shared by the projections outlined in the contributions to this Special Issue. Such mindfulness emerges from the awareness of coexistence, the nuanced practices of living together, and the cultivation of adaptations sensitive to the emergent, historically-contingent, and self-organizing character of global life. In particular, it highlights the moral and ethical responsibility of observers (be they pundits, policy-makers, or scholars) because what is at stake is not merely the relative position of this or that actor involved in status or power competition, but the well-being of societies and, indeed, the whole world. To be sure, it is not the intention of the contributors to romanticize the consequences of China's rise or projecting a necessarily peaceful trajectory about it. As will become clearer in the individual contributions, China's complexity, relationality, and holographic entanglements suggest contingent and interactive rather than singular and predetermined trajectories.

It seems that most discussions of Beijing's growing prominence draw on China's historical experience in order to make inferences about its future directions. Yet, as the contributions to this special issue indicate, while welcome, such analyses are often problematic both because they project a particular territorialized idea of China into the past and treat China as a homogenous and unchanging constant. Consequently, the strategic calculations that such analyses make are suspect as they rest on and reify a stylized and idealized vision of what China is and how it interacts with others. For instance, Shih and Hwang argue that the simplistic framing of China's rise in terms either of conformism or revisionism overlooks a variety of other possibilities as well as denies the

heterogeneity of strategic cultures interacting on the world stage. Instead, meaningful observation needs to heed the nuances of specific space-time dynamics and interactions (Shih and Yu, 2015). With this in mind, Pan proposes a framework for 'holographic transition' to articulate the contingency of assemblages such as China and world affairs. For instance, in the case of China, the possible trajectories of its rise are embedded in the plurality of 'holographic reflections' of the multiple worlds with which China is inextricably bound up. Thus, China's rise and its global implications are not linear, but contingent on its dynamic and reciprocal relations with its multiple worlds.

And Nordin and Smith remind us, taking mutuality and connectedness as a point of departure for our assessments discloses more relevant depictions of global life than those premised on antagonism and disconnection. The contributions by Kavalski and Nordin and Smith suggest that the direction and future trajectories of China's rise would be shaped in the context of international interactions – such relations provide a socially organized context within which world political effects emerge. Drawing on insights from Advaita and Daoist teaching, Ling outlines a five-rank protocol for reappraising China's rise. While these suggestions might not be particularly palatable for the bullet-point-preferences of foreign policy analysts, the contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate that only by acknowledging the multiple sites, voices, and faces of global affairs can we begin a meaningful conversation not only on the implications of China's rise, but also a much-needed reconsideration of key concepts of IR (such as power, identity, security, strategy, and history).

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of China's rise offers IR an extraordinary opportunity for critical reflection and self-appraisal. The contributions included in this Special Issue see themselves as part of the ongoing 'search for a vocabulary ... by means of which we can start to ask systemic questions about the possibility of fundamental international transformations today' (Ruggie, 1993). In pursuit of these aims, the contributors offer meaningful discussions of how we might be better able to understand China, while simultaneously exploring how the case of China could provide opportunities for IR scholars to rethink the ways in

which we have long theorized international relations. The contention of the contributors to this issue is that the transformative nature of China's rise for world politics is also a point of departure for theoretical innovation, reflection, and transformation in the discipline of IR itself.

The contributions to this Special Issue do not intend to offer a definitive resolution to all the posers associated with the theorization of China in IR; however, by illuminating their complexity, the following articles suggest some outlines of new IR modes of critique, thinking, and knowledge capable of imagining global life other than what it currently is. At the same time, this special issue should not be misunderstood as an exercise in ordering or classification; instead, it aims to draw attention to the multiplicity of Chinese engagements in and with world affairs as well as their footprint on IR theory-building. Accounting for such complexity demands an open source medium for this conversation to overcome the aforementioned 'Columbus syndrome' in IR. It is hoped that the contributions to this special issue make a constructive first-cut in such an endeavor.

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