

## Introduction

# TOWARDS AN EAST ASIAN IR COMMUNITY?

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The methodologies and assumptions that guide our acquisition of knowledge and interpretation of data are context and time bound. Academic disciplines, sub-disciplines, methodological approaches and research agendas are to a large degree conditioned by the 'real world,' and none more so than International Relations. Accordingly, it is important to consider the possible sociological foundations of different epistemologies and paradigms of International Relations. Surely there is more than one way of looking at the world, unless one is steadfastly married to a positivist universal truth. Yet it is interesting that East Asian scholarship and teaching in IR has seemingly not developed strong 'indigenous' regional characteristics, perhaps with the exception of Japan with its large market, long tradition, political freedom and

economic affluence. In fact IR has absorbed and closely followed Western and particularly North American social science. This introduction and the articles that follow will explore the fortunes of IR scholarship and regional studies in East Asia in the context of national and regional environments. It will consider how IR is taught and researched in various national settings, and examine the interaction between IR as a social science and national/regional historical experiences, cultural and pedagogical traditions, and politico-ideological values. The underlining problematique concerns the idea of an East Asian 'IR community': why has this tended to be comparatively weak? How can we envision the development of a more rigorous East Asian IR community, one that is not exclusively judged according to external — and particularly North American — terms of reference and standards? It goes without saying that we are not attempting to antagonize our American friends and colleagues, but simply to stimulate a 'sociology of science' reflection of the discipline in the East Asian regional setting. Two questions serve as the organizing themes of this special issue. The first concerns the primary characteristics of the regional IR community. Many of the papers in this collection point to the dominance of US-originated ideas and theories. The second question arises from the first question: whether these predominant approaches help us to understand the region in a time of change.

Before considering the East Asian characteristics of IR — or rather the lack of them — it is worth noting a number of perennial challenges for IR as a (sub)discipline. The circumstances of modern life mean that the reach of international politics is ever wider and deeper into the lives of everyone as well as into public and private decision-making. This has been both a blessing and a curse academically; the boundaries and vocabularies of International Relations are ever more elusive and arbitrary. Indeed, the nature of IR as a subject has always been fragmented and even contested, as it asserts its distinctiveness from its constituent elements, such as international law, economics, history and philosophy. There is serious debate about the vocabulary and tools

for analysis; there is even disagreement about what should be analyzed.

Is IR too amorphous to be a discipline? There is consensus neither on what are the pressing questions nor on how the questions should be framed. How are we to define these boundaries and vocabularies, and indeed academic identities? If the subject “International Relations” claims to generate propositions with general — perhaps even universal — explanatory range, how does one reconcile this with the variety of approaches, methodologies, and definitions of the subject? On the one hand, there is the contrast between the predominant North American approaches, i.e., empirical preoccupations, and the more discursive trends in Europe. On the other, the interest in North America and Europe with theory, especially in International Relations, contrasts strongly with the more policy- and results-oriented approaches to IR in the developing world.

Yet generally, these perennial challenges of IR as a discipline are reflected in epistemological trends and debates or the necessities of responding to historical circumstances — which is central to the ‘inter-paradigm debate,’ for example. There is generally little attention to the idea that regional differences could be a defining characteristic of variations of IR. Indeed, Waeber (1998) has noted in a pioneering study of IR that there is very little sociology of science research that has been conducted in the area of International Relations. The basic premise of a sociological approach to the subject of IR is that the tools we employ and the questions we ask reflect to some degree a number of national and regional variables, such as culture, political regime, education culture and policy, etc. Waeber believes that interesting light can be shed on the US approach to the study of International Relations when studied using this approach. We want to consider if a sociology of science approach might help to understand the way that IR teaching and scholarship are pursued in East Asia.

It is conventional to recount the history of the IR discipline in terms of great debates: idealism versus realism; behavioralism (positivism) versus traditionalism (the classical approach); the inter-paradigm debate

between realism, interdependence theory, and neo-Marxism; and perhaps a debate between rationalists and reflectivists. The assumption underlying the idea of ‘debates’ or ‘paradigms’ in IR is that they have followed as almost universal epistemological and ideological discourse, not necessarily defined by geographical or sociological context. Where there *has* been serious debate it has tended to be oriented around North American and European axes.

Thus, the ‘big debates’ have obscured possible regional differences in IR teaching and research. The lure of a social science with universal truths has stifled inquiry into contending ‘truths.’ For example, Kenneth Waltz’s neo-realist thesis has permeated IR globally — the idea that the international system is structured in a “top-down” fashion; that the inherently anarchic international system leaves states in a security dilemma requiring prudent rational choices. By this Waltz means that states will make military security a priority, and in so doing perpetuate the structural logic of the international system. What Waltz is effectively doing is suggesting that International Relations is a social science about which we can make universalizable generalizations. Sociologically, Waltz’s work is very important for International Relations because he refocuses the discipline after the dispersal of the inter-paradigm debate, but he is also suggesting that his rather narrowly defined approach identifies the international realm as free-standing, universal, and eternal. What do our observations and the experience of East Asian IR academics suggest about this proposition?

Upon this basis we would like to posit a number of questions that will form ‘signposts’ for the following papers in this special issue. Is there an ‘East Asian IR community,’ and if not, why not? Are East Asians talking and interacting among themselves in a distinct intellectual space — or, rather, through US-mediated ideas and academic constructions? Are North American ideas and standards always the intellectual ‘benchmarks’? Clearly Western, but most particularly North American, terms of reference are deployed in much of the teaching and research in IR in East Asia. Many, if not most, of the prominent

IR academics in East Asia have ties with or were educated in North America. What are the consequences of this for the sociology of academia in the field of International Relations in East Asia, and the ability of IR scholarship to address the needs of, and to fully understand, the region?

In a sense, one could argue that the predominant IR literature is not necessarily “North America” or “Western,” but simply that it is written by academics who happen to be working there. Not everything necessarily has to have sociological underpinnings. Similarly, the leading IR texts — such as those produced by Kenneth Waltz — appear to present formulations that are applicable to the East Asian region, such as the balance of power and deterrence theory. If these are ‘universal truths,’ one could suggest that they transcend sociology and geography. Perhaps the limitations of the regional IR community (we are not talking about regional ‘area studies’) are in part a result of a preoccupation with national agendas, and the nature of the divisions that makes East Asia much less cohesive and monolithic academically than Western Europe and North America. Indeed, one of the unifying forces of IR scholarship in East Asia is the medium of the English language, yet of course this is a primary vehicle for the inculcation of ideas that have originated elsewhere in the world, especially North America and Europe. In other respects — religion, ideology, culture — and of course a recent troubled history there has largely obstructed the development of an East Asian consciousness, and this has pervaded into the academic realm. Where alternative Asian visions have been suggested — such as Confucianism or ‘Asian values’ — they have not formed into coherent or persuasive IR concepts and certainly not contending paradigms.

There thus remains the nagging perception that, despite political, economic and social development, East Asian scholarship is lagging behind intellectually, at least in terms of generating indigenous theoretical models. Here, we should perhaps differentiate between two kinds of indigenous models. One is ‘truly’ indigenous, e.g.,

Confucianism, and may challenge, ontologically and epistemologically, Western theories and theorize outside the Western tradition. The other is indigenously originated, but loyal to the modern social science tradition of the West. There is obviously room for debate about the proposition of theoretically weak indigenous IR, but the fact that the perception exists merits serious reflection. In part the explanation may be found in simple practical factors. The cultural, linguistic and political axes tilted in the direction of the West centuries ago, and the legacy of that in terms of the European academic heritage remains evident. But we must also consider how the relationship between academia and regional (and national) politics has played out. Clearly a number of countries have been or are not conducive to the development of critical social science theory: China obviously, but also Korea and Taiwan. In fact, there has been severe political control of academics. There has been — and still is in some cases — a tension between Western political science and political systems in certain countries in the region.

But the question remains: aside from whether it is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ that most IR in East Asia is viewed through a Western prism, how are IR constructions, such as the balance of power, deterrence, functionalism and integration, and social constructivism, applied to the region? Do the predominant approaches, methodologies and theories of IR in East Asia help us to understand this region in a time of change? The papers in this volume offer a variety of answers to these challenges.

In “International Relations in South Korea,” Chung-In Moon and Taehwan Kim demonstrate how the dramatic history of the country has contributed to a high level of consciousness about international politics. International studies are very popular, and indeed somewhat privileged institutionally and politically. They suggest that it is therefore quite strange that, as an academic subject, international studies has progressed rather slowly and does not necessarily aspire to the standards that it should. In fact it is theoretically weak in the sense that IR is underdeveloped: an intellectual colony of the American International Relations community, lacking in original thinking and tending to

uncritically accept conservative, American theories.

The study of International Relations in Taiwan, as Szu-yin Ho and Lang Kao argue, also displays a wholehearted absorption of US trained social scientists and their methodologies. But in contrast to Moon and Kim, they see this as a largely positive development. It has raised the academic standard and Taiwanese scholars now mingle with their Western counterparts on an equal footing.

Jianwei Wang contribution on “International Relations Studies in China” observes that until the 1980s IR was not a meaningful discipline in that country. As it has grown in popularity and official acceptance, it has sought to balance ‘imported’ (mainly North American) IR theories with China’s distinctive national heritage and needs. Again, the popularity of Western tenets of IR cannot be considered negatively.

Ironically, even though Japan is a very internationalized society in many ways, Takashi Inoguchi’s paper on that country suggests that IR is rather introverted, and has not developed a strong identity distinct from related subjects such as politics, history, or international economics. Nevertheless, he observes that the younger the scholar, the closer to the American pattern. Recent exposure to and interaction with American scholarship has become increasingly visible. In fact, this is no longer unilateral: Japanese scholars are now contributing to American debate as well.<sup>1</sup>

The central theme of many of these papers is how national academies have or have not developed distinct characteristics and approaches to scholarship in International Relations. The backdrop to this is the pervasive Western or North American social science terminologies and models. But there is another contender for explaining international politics in East Asia, and this is the long established tradition of ‘area studies.’ Area studies seek to employ a broad range of sub-disciplines — such as cultural studies, anthropology, economics, political science, linguistics — to deepen understanding of life in particular regions and countries. What can International Relations provide that area studies cannot in East Asia or indeed anywhere else, and how can the two

cohabit the same space? Peter Katzenstein and Gilbert Rozman explore the intersection of area studies and International Relations in Asia and the US.

## **TENTATIVE CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

As the papers in this section demonstrate, the American approach pervades the study of International Relations in East Asia, for good or ill. The relative weakness of the East Asian IR community is borne of a number of factors. Within East Asia, a number of endogenous variables come to mind. A difficult and recent history of military conflict and a lack of regional political co-operation have not fostered official academic exchanges in the area of politics, and have at times clearly obstructed them. In addition, until recently, political systems have not been conducive to free and vibrant social science in some countries. This phenomenon has two aspects to it. Most obviously, certain states — and not only China — had political systems that did not allow complete academic freedom in the social sciences. Again, this has not encouraged critical-mindedness or experimental theorizing. But another aspect is that the International Relations community in some countries has been quite close to government. In some countries the theory and practice of IR have been close, and perhaps too close. Public funding possibilities, and research institutions and research programs have to an extent followed a perceived practical need, but within a context defined and driven by the foreign policy community. South Korea and Taiwan are examples. In many ways this is a positive characteristic; International Relations academics the world over like to have an impact upon policy. But at the same time, perhaps it may have the effect of constraining theoretical entrepreneurship and academic independence, resulting in agendas that are a little too close to ‘national’ concerns.

The perception of the world held by East Asian academics and the



role of the US in the region helps to explain how US IR scholarship has been so readily absorbed. The 'real world' reliance of some countries upon US power, diplomacy and hegemony has led to academic 'role-models' in the class room that follow the US lead. In addition, given the absorption of so much American cultural baggage — on the back of the deep US presence in many of these countries — it would not be surprising if social science in East Asia was inculcated with US precepts. There is also a sense that most East Asian states, in international terms, were 'late comers' to 'international society' (in the case of Japan, emerging from a long period of isolation in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and then experiencing a period of recalcitrance and aggression in the 1930s and 1940). Most East Asian states are not amongst the traditional great powers that formed the central institutions of International Relations. We should not forget an obvious point: the leading American scholars are good at what they do, and East Asians recognize that. Thus, the implication is that IR social science in East Asia assumes the role of a follower and supporter of American IR standards, methodologies and ideas, rather than a leader and independent creator of ideas/norms. When combined with the strengths inherent in the US academy we can understand why the IR community in East Asia has been slow to develop.

The overarching theme running through these essays is that international studies is in a state of flux; and that the dynamics of this transition are symptomatic of imminent, although slow, changes lying ahead. It is of critical importance that academics in these areas of the academy come forward to examine their work critically and consider a new creative synthesis. Most importantly, this calls for a process of reflection amongst scholars in East Asia, and on the basis of this, a reinvigorated IR community.

## NOTES

- 1 *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, a journal of the Japan Association of International Relations, published twice a year by Oxford University Press, has risen fast to become one of the most prominent journals of Asian International Relations.

## REFERENCE

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