

# Translation and Interpretation: The English School and IR Theory in China

Written by Roger Epp

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ROGER EPP, MAY 5 2013

In a recent article in the *Review of International Studies*, Zhang Xiaoming identifies what he calls the English School's theoretical "inventions" of China.<sup>[1]</sup> On one hand, he notes, Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and the British Committee in which they were active participants showed a serious, historical interest in China at a time when the field of international relations typically did not. China figured in their explorations of comparative state-systems, standards of civilizations, and the so-called revolt against the West. Wight's undergraduate lectures introduced traditions of classical Chinese thought in parallel with European traditions on the question of the barbarian. Bull, indeed, travelled to China for three weeks in 1973. But on the other hand, Zhang argues, these engagements are marked by selectivity and ethnocentrism. The story they tell is a European one, with China the outsider, sometimes the provocateur. The effect, he concludes, is to limit the English School's appeal relative to other imported theoretical positions.

My purpose in this short essay is neither to correct Professor Zhang's careful reading nor to defend the English School – a "brand" about which I have my own doubts – as a universal project. Rather, in response, it is to make a more modest case for an interpretive mode of theorizing,<sup>[2]</sup> one that begins by embracing Professor Zhang's point: "Every IR theory is provincial in cultural terms."<sup>[3]</sup> Interpretive theory pays attention to history, words, meanings and translations; it risks honest encounters with what it is unfamiliar; and it is willing to rethink its own certainties on the basis of those encounters. It does not assume incommensurability. It asks instead what interpretive resources – what bridges – might be present within a theoretical tradition to enable a fuller understanding. Needless to say, this orientation stands outside the mainstream. At a time when IR has become established at universities around world, its theoretical literature nonetheless is still overwhelmingly parochial and positivist. As one sobering new study has shown, the reading lists that form the next professorial generation at leading graduate programs in the United States and Europe consist almost entirely of the conventional Western canon.<sup>[4]</sup> Whether that canon's endurance is proof of its scientific validity, intellectual hegemony or timidity, the result is a discipline "rooted in a rather narrow and particular historical experience" and hard-pressed to envision a "future outside of the Westphalian box."<sup>[5]</sup>

In China, where IR has emerged from the practical imperatives of ideology and foreign policy, there is no shortage of theoretical activity.<sup>[6]</sup> Some of it is done uncritically within imported templates – aided by doctoral educations overseas and a continuing airlift of professors and texts in translation from the US. But China, as one scholar has put it, is now "between copying and constructing."<sup>[7]</sup> Increasingly, theory in the social sciences is assumed to have a geocultural dimension. Scholars have turned to their own civilizational sources, whether it is Confucius and other classical thinkers on humane statecraft in the Warring States period<sup>[8]</sup>; the imperial tributary model and the corresponding world-order concepts of *tianxia* ("all-under-heaven") and *datong* (harmony)<sup>[9]</sup>; or else the more recent experience of colonial humiliation, revolution, outsider status and "peaceful rise." The quest for IR theory with Chinese cultural characteristics is meant typically not as a hermetic enterprise but as a step towards engagement with other scholars.<sup>[10]</sup>

The English School is well-placed to take up this conversation, I think, so long as it is clear about its purposes. If its influence in China a decade ago was "marginal,"<sup>[11]</sup> it has now acquired a modest following, for reasons that include its humanistic and historicist orientation, its value as a counter-weight and, not least, its implicit encouragement of a

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parallel “Chinese School.”[12] Selected texts like Bull’s *Anarchical Society* are available in translation. But there is something at stake in China other than market share and brand-penetration. China represents a practical test of the commitment to interpretive inquiry. It will not flatten easily into the realist shorthand of national interest or the liberal teleology of peace through cultural-commercial convergence. Its scholars ought to be engaged, not with offers of inclusion in the “expansion” of academic IR, not with a theory of the whole, not with a rigid or exoticized assumption of civilizational difference, but out of a respectful need for interpreters, translators and collaborators in understanding a complex world – one in which the West is no longer comfortably at the centre.

Wight’s work will be particularly helpful in this respect. His published lectures and the essays in *Systems of States* treat the modern state-system as a historical-linguistic artefact, born of a “peculiar” *European* culture. He provincializes international society. He delimits its ethical experience in terms of “Western values.”[13] But, equally, he explores its outer limits, spatial and temporal, how it reveals itself, how it is constituted by what happens on its frontiers. He traces the emergence of the idea of Europe against the spectre of the Turk and of modern international law through the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish encounter with the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas: were they fully human, were they peoples, and, if yes, what was owed them? His lectures on the barbarian keep the memory within IR of colonial atrocities, political exclusions, dispossessions by force and by law, and, a century ago, tutelary rationalizations of empire.[14] If Wight’s inquiries are ethnocentric, they are not uncritical. Invariably, they think through an encounter from one side of it, but they do not leave that side untouched; for in any such account it is the West – many “Wests” – that must also be interrogated. What accounts for the periodic “fits of world-conquering fanaticism?”[15]

It would be disingenuous for me to prescribe an IR theory with Chinese characteristics. At most, it is possible to say what a cross-cultural theoretical encounter might require, namely: risk, dialogue, attentiveness and introspection. In this sense, interpretive ways of thinking might be said to mirror the communicative practices of international diplomacy. They involve a double movement, towards the unfamiliar and then the familiar, describing and redescribing, rethinking that which had once seemed obvious. They show how much hinges on words, translations, gestures and protocols. The dialogue, in fact, may be “uneasy.”[16] But Western scholars oriented to history, language and culture ought to be fascinated by the lead taken by their Chinese counterparts, for example, in excavating the range of meanings of *tianxia* and its possibilities for shaping a different global or regional order. They will wonder – this is the risk of the question – whether *tianxia* necessarily stands in contradiction with the insistence in Chinese policy on state sovereignty and territorial integrity, whether the former, hierarchical rather than horizontal, is, in fact, more deeply rooted culturally than the latter, and whether it should be regarded as pacific or aggressive.[17] The answer will require, *inter alia*, an account of how the word sovereignty itself is rendered in a language into which it once had to be translated and made intelligible. In the process, IR’s “universal” – for surely we all know what sovereignty is – will have been historicized and resituated on all sides with distinct cultural-linguistic nuances. Even sovereignty will not be the same, which is why IR theory in the West, parochial and stale, may need Chinese scholarship at least as much as the reverse is true.

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[1] Zhang Xiaoming, “China in the conception of international society: the English School’s engagements with China,” *Review of International Studies* 37:2 (2011), 763-86. I am grateful to Professor Zhang for the opportunity to present some of the ideas at a graduate seminar at the School of International Studies, Peking University, in October 2012.

[2] Roger Epp, “The English School on the frontiers of international society,” *Review of International Studies* 24:5 (December 1998, Special Issue: The Eighty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1999), 47-63.

[3] Xiaoming, “China in the conception of international society,” 785.

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[4] Jonas Hagmann and Thomas J. Biersteker, "Beyond the published discipline: toward a critical pedagogy of international studies," *European Journal of International Relations*, first published on October 18, 2012 as doi:10.1177/1354066112449879

[5] Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, "Preface: Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7:3 (2007), 285-86.

[6] Zhang Yongjin, "The 'English School' in China: A Travelogue of Ideas and their Diffusion," *European Journal of International Relations* 9:1 (2003), 87-114, including an account of systematic U.S. influence starting in the 1980s at 101-103. See also, e.g., Qin Yaqing, "Development of International Relations Theory in China: Progress through Debates," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11 (2011), 231-57; Ren Xiao, "Toward a Chinese School of International Relations?," in Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian (eds), *China and the New International Order* (London: Routledge, 2008); Qin Yaqing, "Why is there no Chinese International Relations Theory?," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7 (2007), 313-40; Gustaaf Geeraerts and Men Jing, "International Relations Theory in China," *Global Society* 15 (2001), 251-76; and Song Xinning, "Building International Relations Theory with Chinese Characteristics," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10 (2001), 61-74.

[7] Wang Yiwei, "China: Between Copying and Constructing," in Arlene Tickner and Ole Wæver (eds), *International Relations Scholarship Around the World* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[8] See such diverse texts as Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Daniel Bell and Sun Zhe (eds), trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Gustaaf Geeraerts and Men Jing, "International Relations Theory in China"; Joseph Chan, "Territorial Boundaries and Confucianism," and Ni Lixiong, "The Implications of Ancient Chinese Military Culture for World Peace," in Daniel Bell (ed.), *Confucian Political Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Hsu Cho-Yun, "Applying Confucian Ethics to International Relations," *Ethics and International Affairs* 5:1 (1991), 148-69.

[9] For example, Zhao Tingyang, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept, 'All-Under-Heaven' (*Tian-xia*)," *Social Identities* 12 (2006), 29-41; Qin Yaqing, "Why is there no Chinese International Relations Theory?"; Shen Wenhua, "Redefining Sovereignty," in Wang and Zheng, (eds), *China and the New World Order*; William Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-hegemonic or a New Hegemony?," *International Studies Review* 10:4 (2008), 749-61.

[10] Wang Gungwu and Zheng Yongnian, "Introduction," *China and the New International Order* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 17; Zhang Xiaoming, "China in the conception of international society," 786.

[11] Zhang Yongjin, "The 'English School' in China: A Travelogue of Ideas and their Diffusion," 98.

[12] See, e.g., Zhang Yongjin, "The 'English School' in China: A Travelogue of Ideas and their Diffusion," 99-101; Ren Xiao, "Toward a Chinese School of International Relations?," 297; Muthiah Alagappa, "International Relations studies in Asia: distinctive trajectories," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 11:2 (2011), 193-230, at 211.

[13] Martin Wight, "Western Values in International Relations," in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).

[14] Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977); *International Theory: The Three Traditions*, Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (eds), (Leicester: Leicester University Press/Royal Institute of International Affairs), ch. 4. I have relied on Wight's openings to think – in North America – about the presence and absence of aboriginal peoples in international theory. See "At the Wood's Edge: Toward a Theoretical Clearing for Indigenous Diplomacies in International Relations," in Robert Crawford and Darryl Jarvis (eds), *International Relations – Still an American Social Science?* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

[15] Wight, *International Theory*, 68.

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[16] Geeraerts and Jing, "International Relations Theory in China," 251.

[17] While he is critical of Wight and the English School, William Callahan is a fine exemplar of the approach I have described. In addition to "Chinese Visions of World Order," see his *Contingent States: Greater China and Transnational Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), and *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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## About the author:

**Roger Epp** is Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta. His work includes *We Are All Treaty People* (2008), which reflects a larger interest in place and situated knowledge. His work on Martin Wight, the British Committee, applied hermeneutics, and the idea of the limit in international theory has appeared in numerous journal articles and edited collections, most recently *The English School Guide to International Studies* (2014).