

## A Relational Theory of World Politics

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Yaqing Qin



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## Preface

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### I

My father once took me to Mount Tai, the most famous mountain in Northeast China, when I was a teenager. As we were climbing, he told me to recite a short poem by a well-known Chinese scholar-poet, Su Shi (1037–1101). It is about Mount Lushan, another famous mountain in China. The poems go as follows:

I see a range from one side and a peak from another,  
I have different views from above or below, from far or near,  
I fail to get the true face of Mount Lushan,  
Simply because inside the mountain I myself stand.

My father told me on the spot that you see a different image from a different angle even if you are observing the same thing. In addition, you can only see one image at one time without being able to see the whole picture simultaneously because you yourself are an observer from within.

It seems quite true of society and social scientists. Every social scientist is an observer from within society and can see only one side of it at one time. The whole picture perhaps exists, but no human can see it as it is. A different angle is significant, for it provides people with a different image they cannot see from other angles. A new image implies creation.

Cultures provide different angles for observation and different perspectives for understanding and interpretation. Culture is the shared background knowledge of a community of practice. It is true that there are commonalities across cultures, but there are also differences among them. These differences enable observers to have different angles from which they observe. As Su Shi's poem tells, an observer sees the mountain as a peak from one angle and as a range from another. It is not that the mountain changes; rather it is the angle of the observer that changes. It is exactly the reason why culture is a rich resource for theoretical invention and creation.

Society is similar. There are common features of a society anywhere, and power, authority, norms, and rules exist in every society. But how to

understand and interpret such phenomena depends very much on the background knowledge of a cultural community, which has formed, accumulated, and developed over long history and practice. Gradually it has become part of their life, shaping their way of thinking, speaking, doing, and representing, just as people from different parts of the world have different mindsets and speak different languages. It is not a question of being true or false; it is a matter of perspectives.

I define culture in terms of shared background knowledge. However, I do not agree with the view that places background and representational knowledge in a dualistic structure. Theorists of the international practice approach argue that there is a representational bias in social theorizing, which overemphasizes the role of representational knowledge and overlooks the significance of practical knowledge. This dichotomization of representational and practical knowledge is misleading. Representational knowledge is produced by people embedded in background knowledge. Academicians who generate representational knowledge are members of a community of practice, sharing completely the background knowledge of this community. Representation is practice, and doing academic work is practice, too, reflecting important elements of the background in which the producer of representational knowledge is embedded. Since background knowledge is the unintentional and preintentional that make the international function, as Searle argues, representational knowledge grows out of the background knowledge and the two are complementary and mutually reinforcing. A knowledge producer can hardly create some representational knowledge irrelevant to or different from the background in which she grows and develops. Background enjoys ontological priority and provides nutriment for representational knowledge to be generated; at the same time, representational knowledge articulates and reinforces important elements of background knowledge. They are the two sides of the same phenomenon.

Civilization-based cultures provide perhaps the most significant angles for observation. The more distant the two cultural communities are from each other, the more different are the angles they provide. It is because the background knowledge that defines them has more different and distinct elements inside. Western culture is obviously different from Chinese culture, which is in turn very much unlike Islamic culture. If culture is defined in terms of background knowledge and if background knowledge provides different angles for observation of social facts, it is crucial to explore cultural resources for innovation in social theorizing. In the discipline of International Relations (IR), scholars in the West have done a great deal in this respect, finding and refining significant concepts and perspectives for their knowledge production and reproduction. Non-Western cultures, however, remains very much an underexplored land.

## II

This book is organized around a key concept: relationality.

One of the most significant concepts of Western scholarship is, perhaps, “rationality.” It is a key word of the representational knowledge of the West and comes from the background knowledge of Western communities, fully explored and continually refined by Western knowledge producers especially since the Enlightenment. It has contributed remarkably to progress in many areas. It constitutes a most important worldview which believes in the universal and ultimate rationality and reflects the understanding and interpretation of Westerners about the natural, the social, and the human.

What then can we get from the angle of the Chinese culture? I argue that “relationality” is perhaps to Chinese what rationality is to Westerners. As rationality, relationality is a key concept that has been embedded in the long practice of Confucian communities. It has been repeatedly emphasized by ancient Chinese thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, and many others thereafter. It comes from Chinese practice and in turn has influenced Chinese practice for millennia. To some extent, Chinese society is called a “relational” society, meaning that the social is first of all a nexus of relations. Unfortunately, it remains an underexplored concept in modern times, especially since China met the West. As a result, it continues to be highly significant in practice, but fails to be refined as a significant element of the representational knowledge.

A careful conceptualization of relationality is therefore very much needed. To do it we should begin to ask some fundamental questions that are behind the concept itself. First, what is our world and what is our world composed of? It is a question of ontological significance. Although some IR scholars oppose discussion on ontological issues, it is highly important, for the answer to such questions sustains where one starts theorizing. Mainstream scholarship in the West largely sees the world as composed of discrete and independent entities acting and interacting, very much with the push of outside forces. An application of this logic to the social world leads naturally to a belief that individual actors are entities independent of one another and each is endowed with *a priori* properties and attributes. A clear identification of their properties and attributes will tell us what they are and how they behave. Rationality is indeed a great discovery, for it defines clearly and succinctly the characteristic attributes of human beings: They are egoistic individuals, always ready to maximize their self-interest at the lowest cost. Starting from rationality so many influential social theories have been developed, from economics through sociology to political science. Thus, I argue, this most

significant concept of rationality is a spirit that has haunted the field of Western social theorizing and is rooted in the soul of Western knowledge producers. And I further argue that it is a concept drawn and refined from the practice of Western societies and a frame from which the world is seen and interpreted. It is an angle, a perspective, or a worldview that influences members of Western communities when they try to observe, understand, and conceptualize what is around them.

Relationality comes from a different angle. Chinese tend to see the world as one composed of complex relations, relations among the heaven, the earth, and the human, relations among humans, and relations among all things under the sun. In the social world it pays special attention to human relations in society. Its focus is not on the individual actor, but on relations among them. Its emphasis on human relations leads to some meaningful corollaries. In short, it holds that self-existence is simultaneous with coexistence; that self-identity is formed in and through social relations; and that self-interest is shared with other-interest and collective interest. Contrary to many who believe that traditional Chinese culture values collectivity at the cost of individuality, Confucianism values both. Because it places special emphasis on relations among actors, it holds that self-existence, self-identity, and self-interest are all related to other-existence, other-identity, and other-interest. In society, for example, self-existence is significant, but the self exists simultaneously with others. It is therefore wrong to argue that self-existence comes before or enjoys ontological priority over coexistence, and vice versa. It is also true of self-interest. While self-interest should be recognized as legitimate and significant, it is hard to define in isolation. Since the self exists simultaneously with others, their interests are related, shared, and realized through joint effort. It is mistaken to assume that self-interest is of primacy and it is equally mistaken to assume that collective interest comes before everything else. For Confucianism, a balance of the two is the key to a healthy society and governance, for they depend on each other for articulation, realization, and evolution.

The relational theory takes “relation” as its central piece and conceives the world in general and the international relations world in particular as composed of dynamic relations. Then how do we understand the multiple relations that connect actors in such a world? What is the nature of such relationships? How should such relations be managed? These questions are relevant in terms of both epistemology and methodology. The Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics provides a useful lens in this respect and it is also the methodology for my relational theory throughout. It assumes two poles, *yin* and *yang*, or the feminine and masculine forces in both nature and human affairs, and believes that all in the universe is

made by the interaction of these two forces. Since the *yin-yang* relationship is representative of all other relationships, it is the “meta-relationship.” The *zhongyong* dialectics studies the relationship between these two opposite forces. It first of all posits that the basic state of this meta-relationship is harmony. From such an assumption it is inferred that all relations are fundamentally harmonious and are able to be managed as such. This postulation about the basic state of the meta-relationship differs fundamentally from the Hegelian dialectics, which also assumes two opposite forces but at the same time interprets their relationship as fundamentally conflictual. Second, *yin* and *yang* are immanently inclusive of each other. Unlike the opposite terms in the Hegelian philosophy, which are interactive but not immanent, *yin* and *yang* are of each other and within each other. They are simply two inseparable parts of the same whole. In the final analysis, therefore, conflict between the two is ontologically baseless, while the basic state of harmony is well grounded. Third, *yin* and *yang* are complementary. The two inclusively interacting items complement each other in a dynamically interpenetrating process. *Yin* and *yang*, or any pair of seemingly contradictory polar terms, such as cold and hot, weak and strong, nothing and something, etc., are complementarily related to each other so that they together create life and lead to a balanced form of life. The balance is not static, for it is always maintained through the dynamic complementation of the two extremes. The strength of one pole implies simultaneously its weakness, which is necessarily made up for by the strength of the other pole, and vice versa. *Yin* and *yang*, fundamentally different from the Hegelian thesis and antithesis, constitute co-theses which are inclusive of and complementary to each and whose immanently dynamic interaction enables what I term “coevolutionary harmony.” This dynamic interaction is at the same time a process of generating new life, which inherits from both co-theses but is irreducible to neither.

From these basic assumptions, we may get a logic of relationality. It means that human action is based on relations. The IR literature has discussed some important logics of human action. The logics of consequences and of appropriateness, for example, are the mainstream arguments, one dealing with the instrumental aspect of human action, and the other highlighting the normative dimension. Even though in recent years the study of international norms has become a conspicuous project in IR research, due mainly to the rise of social constructivism, people can hardly tell which, interests or norms, is more important as a mover of human action. The logic of practicality is said, in theory, to have ontological priority over other logics. It is so indeed. Practicality provides the

ontological foundation for any other logics that are concerned with human action. But in the actual analysis by practicality scholars, it has been equaled with other logics, making the debate between the logic of practicality on the one hand and the logics of consequences and appropriateness on the other one that tries to figure out which logic is more significant as a base for action. The logic of relationality argues that a social actor weighs carefully the various relationships involved before she takes an action. Instrumental rationality works only when the relationship between actors has been defined. A business person's rational action toward her customers may not be rational and is even irrational when she does the same to her family. Norms are useful as an important mover of action in society, but norms are designed more to govern relationships rather than individuals. Each of the five cardinal relationships defined by Confucius has a corresponding norm to govern and manage such a relationship. Filial piety is the norm for the father-son relationship and sincerity for the relationship between friends. There is no norm that comes into being without a relational context. In this sense, the logic of relationality enjoys priority over the logic of consequences and appropriateness. Or rationality is defined in terms of relationality. At the same time it comes from long practice, and therefore the logic of practicality has ontological priority over the logic of relationality.

These assumptions constitute the major part of the relational theory. It sees the world as one composed of complex relations and the social world as one composed of human relations, giving "relation" an important ontological status and assuming humanity as the key to the understanding of the social. It employs the Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics as its major device of epistemology and methodology and with this dialectics argues that the basic state of the various and multiple relationships is harmony. It also proposes the logic of relationality, which holds that human action is based largely on relations. The simultaneity of self-existence and coexistence, of self-identity and co-identity, and of self-interest and co-interest indicates that relationality is a key concept in understanding human action in the social context. In short, from a different angle, we see a different world and a different social world; from such a world we develop a theory of relationality; and with such a theory we may reconceptualize some key ideas in international relations.

### III

There are three parts in the book. Part I posits that culture provides one of the richest resources for social theory construction and knowledge production. Of course cultural influence is not linear and does not provide

direct causality. Rather culture, defined in terms of shared background knowledge, shapes the mindset, the way of thinking and doing, and the worldview of knowledge producers who are also members of a certain cultural community. Since background knowledge tends to be inarticulate and unreflective, its influence is often subtle and imperceptible, but it is everywhere, bearing on everyone embedded in a cultural community, which is also the prototype of a community of practice.

Chapter 1 discusses the two approaches to social theory construction: monism and pluralism. The former holds that natural theory and social theory are not substantially different and therefore should follow the same logic of theorizing. It implies that reality is the same everywhere and its explanation should be the same accordingly. It thus denies a place for culture to play a role in theory development. Pluralism, on the other hand, argues that the social world is not identical with the natural world and that social theory also differs from natural theory in that the former is not only to explain, but also to understand, interpret, and even construct and create. Ideas, values, mindsets, and worldviews therefore matter a great deal. The monist approach is self-closed and would naturally lead to a poverty and decay of social theory, while the pluralist attitude provides an open system in which various nutriments, including culture, may prosper the growth of social theory in general.

Chapter 2 focuses on one concept: the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core. Culture matters for social theory development mainly through its long and invisible influence on the mindset of students who generate social knowledge. It is most deeply reflected by the metaphysical component of the hard core of a social theory. The hard core defines a social theory, but it is not a monolithic whole. Rather it consists of two parts: the substantive and the metaphysical. While the former perceives, the latter conceives. Once the substantive component receives signals from the outside world, they are sent to the metaphysical component for understanding, interpreting, and constructing. The substantive component deals with the more material and visible out there and the metaphysical component digests them and provides meaningful feedback. It is exactly this metaphysical component that is nurtured and informed by the background knowledge that comes from the long practice of a cultural community.

Chapter 3 further explores how the metaphysical component may contribute to theoretical innovation. Knowledge producers who come from different cultural communities are likely to have different mindsets and therefore produce different metaphysical components of the hard core for a social theory. Observers may see the same thing, but their angles are different and their understanding and interpreting differ accordingly.

The different understandings and interpretations are valuably positive rather than negative, for each angle may provide a fresh and meaningful theoretical perspective. They greatly encourage innovation for social theorizing. Since the metaphysical component is quite decisive in theoretical innovation and since it is nourished in culture, defined in terms of shared background knowledge, efforts to explore cultural resources for social theory development should be encouraged for the prosperity of the social sciences.

Chapter 4 uses the Western mainstream IR theory, referring mainly to neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and social constructivism in the United States and also including the English School of IR theory, as typical cases to illustrate the importance of the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core. Deeply implied in the metaphysical components of these theories is an element deeply embedded in the background knowledge of Christian culture and explicitly articulated by generations of knowledge producers in the West. It is individualistic rationality. It is a big idea indeed, and has produced enormous influence on theorizing especially since the Enlightenment. IR is no exception. All the three major paradigms in the United States share this key element in the metaphysical component of their theoretical hard cores. It is true that they have identified different master variables that influence the behavior of the individual actor. They are, respectively, distribution of capabilities, international institutions, and normative ideas. But all the big three theories depend on individualist rationality to work as social theories. It is instrumental rationality for neorealism and neoliberalism and normative rationality for constructivism. The English School used to be a distinct theory with its initial idea of “international society” to distinguish itself from mainstream American theories in the post-WWII years. But with the rise of Wendtian constructivism, the English School and American constructivism found a ready echo in each other and normative rationality was identified as a shared element in their metaphysical component. The convergence of American mainstream IR theories, and between the American mainstream and the English School, seems to be no accident. It is the shared metaphysical component in their theoretical hard cores that has led eventually to such a happy rendezvous.

Part II develops a relational theory of world politics. It explores the Confucian philosophical and cultural tradition so that a different angle can be found to see the world. Chapter 5 describes the world from a Confucian perspective of ontology: a world of relations and a universe of relatedness. Furthermore, the social world is seen as one of human relations. It is ontologically significant because a world of relations differs from a world of atoms. In such a world, relations become the pivot of

society and accordingly should constitute a most important unit of analysis. Actors in such a world are relators, relating and being related all the time. As mentioned above, self-existence is simultaneous with coexistence, self-interest simultaneous with collective and other-interest, and self-identity is shaped in and through relations. In short, to relate is human. The social world is a relational world and humans are relational animals. It subverts the dominant assumption that the world is composed of discrete individuals who follow the logic of individualistic rationality.

A major epistemological scheme and methodological device is presented in Chapter 6. It is the Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics. The discussion of this dialectics is unfolded in a comparison with the tenets of formal logic and the principles of the Hegelian dialectics. It differs from formal logic mainly in its particular emphasis on a “both-and” rather than an “either-or” way of thinking and on its appreciation of the “middle” rather than its exclusion. Two opposite arguments, for example, are not taken as one being true and the other false. Rather there may well be something reasonable in each and both of them. It agrees with the Hegelian dialectics in that both understand things as consisting of polarities and their development through the interaction of such polarities. It differs from the Hegelian dialectics in that the *zhongyong* dialectics interprets the basic state of the relationship between the two polarities as harmonious while the Hegelian dialectics sees conflict as the nature of such relationship. This difference is fundamental. The two polar terms, seemingly opposite, are in fact two sides of the same phenomenon, immanently related and inclusively interdependent, relying on each other for life and for the production of new life. It does not deny the fact that conflict exists, but does deny it an ontological status. Conflict is a necessary deviation from harmony. There are no such dichotomous terms such as “thesis” and “antithesis”; there are only concepts like “co-theses.” Thus the *zhongyong* dialectics always tries to find the appropriate middle where the common ground lies, while the Hegelian tradition tries to diagnose the key contradiction, which is key to crumpling the old and creating a new synthesis.

The proposed relational theory explains human action and Chapter 7 puts forward the logic of relationality. It argues that a social actor takes action in a relational context and therefore bases her action on relations. It is not an argument against the logics of both consequences and appropriateness, both of which take individualistic rationality as the sustaining assumption, instrumental rationality for the former and normative rationality for the latter. The logic of relationality holds that social actors are rational because they are relational in the first place. It is relational rationality. As the well-known example by Wendt shows, the

US nuclear policy toward Britain differs fundamentally from that toward North Korea. It is not an issue of double dealing; rather it is a consideration and action based upon different relationships. Every state does the same. It is also true of norms. Actors are able to apply norms to action only after they know well what relationship constitutes the context where norms are to be applied. Norms for a Hobbesian anarchy differ from those for a Kantian community because the nature of relationships among actors in a jungle is fundamentally unlike that in a community marked by friendship. What action to take and what norm to apply depend very much on the nature of relationships. Relations select.

Part III provides from a relational perspective a reconceptualization of power, cooperation, and governance respectively in Chapters 8, 9, and 10. Chapter 8 discusses power. As a key concept, it is commonly taken in IR as the ability to overcome resistance and realize one's interest, making others do what they otherwise would not do or wish to do what they otherwise would not wish. It is understood that power is influence based upon resources and that resources are possessed by the individual actor as her essential property. However, if it is assumed that self-existence is simultaneous with other-existence, and coexistence and self-interest simultaneously shared with other-interest, then power may well come from relations among actors and is more the ability to co-empower rather than to coerce. Just as *yin* and *yang*, they are always in an ongoing process of co-empowering, complementing each other and making up for each other's weaknesses. As such, power is sharable and exchangeable. It enables actors to overcome and destroy, but also enables them to empower and produce. The negative dimension of power has been more than fully explored, perhaps because international politics has been defined largely as the struggle for survival through overcoming the threat in anarchy, but the positive dimension has long been unduly neglected, thus making the power of power politics even more powerful.

Chapter 9 provides an alternative answer to the question "Why do actors cooperate?" Cooperation research has largely been carried out around the basic assumption that the individual actor is an egoist, trying to maximize her interest at the lowest cost. Whatever is the motivation for cooperation, it is the individualistic rationality that makes independent decisions. From the perspective of relational theory, I suggest that relatedness is a primary mover for cooperation and hypothesize that the more intimately related the actors are, the more likely they are to cooperate. Family members are the least egoistic in their dealing with one another and close allies in international relations are more ready to help

each other. A single-move prisoner's dilemma (PD) game leads naturally to defection, while an iterated one is more likely to produce cooperation. No matter what other causal mechanisms work there, the shadow of the future or the expectation of continued relationship, for example, one factor is significant: The two players become related after their first encounter. It is the relatedness between them that makes a difference. Cooperation in a relational world is thus realized through three mechanisms: kin selection, the Confucian improvement or reciprocity, and Mencius optimality. Kin selection most explicitly shows how intimate relatedness promotes cooperation, reciprocity indicates that continued relationship makes cooperation more likely and easier, and Mencius optimality tells that a community of harmonious relations provides the best overall condition for its individual members to realize their self-interest. In a relational world, a serious obstacle to cooperation is kinsperson's dilemma (KD), or relator's dilemma, which occurs when one cooperates with a related actor, and she has to defect from another equally related actor, even though she wants to cooperate with both. In world politics, therefore, to get related facilitates cooperation and, furthermore, how to manage relations constitutes a major problem for decision-makers.

Chapter 10 discusses global governance. The IR theoretical literature on governance is perhaps the narrowest in scope and the most destitute in content. With some discussion of hegemonic stability as the background, it has grown mainly out of the study of rules and regimes, which became a most attractive research area. It is not an exaggeration to say that the globalizing tide since the late 1980s and early 1990s has been accompanied by the dominance of neoliberal institutionalism, with almost all the emphasis placed on governance by rules embedded in international institutions. It is undeniable that rules and regimes are extremely important, but governance does not rely completely on one single model. In other fields, governance should and can be explored in a much broader sense. Scholars of business management, for example, have been studying relational governance for years, especially since the rise of Asian firms. The model of relational governance, within the framework of my relational theory, contains three important factors: trust, relations as the governed, and governance as a process of relational management. "Trust" is not in the instrumental sense as the business management literature has defined it in its dealing with relational governance. It is genuinely human and provides the foundation for a fiduciary community. A security community, for example, is first of all a fiduciary community where members genuinely believe that force is not a means to solve conflict. The governed in the relational governance

model is relations among actors rather than actors *per se*, shifting the focus of governance from individuals to relations among them. Furthermore, global governance, and in fact any form of governance, is a process of relational management. It is a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex and multiplex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust evolved over a shared understanding of social norms and human morality. Of course, relational governance is also one of the many models for governance and a synthetic model of rule-based and relation-based governance may prove more practical and effective.

#### IV

The relational theory of world politics proposed in this book tries to see and interpret the international relations world from a different angle, the angle of relationality. It is not out of thin air. Rather it comes from the long practice of Confucian communities and constitutes an indispensable part of their background knowledge. It has been extensively discussed and refined by generations of Confucian scholars and therefore is perhaps one of the most important concepts, if not the most important, in the representational knowledge that they have generated.

To relate and be related is human. Relations are significant in every society and the concept of relationality goes far beyond Confucian communities. Despite the fact that there are various understandings of relations, relationality as social practice is everywhere and generically human. It is, however, a very much underdeveloped and underexplored concept in the global academic world. To some extent, it has been overshadowed by the dominant concept of rationality, which has been a great idea in Western culture. Individualistic rationality has been so significant in modern times and is related to many of the human ideals and pursuits such as freedom, independence, and dignity. Together with it there have been great theories and institutions. But at the same time rationality becomes the ultimate word and the most powerful super force that has been moving farther away from humanness. The process of theorizing in IR, for example, is at the same time a process of dehumanization. Enormous efforts have been made to reduce to the minimum the complexity, reflectivity, and potentiality embedded in humanness so that general laws may be found to regulate and predict human behavior and to develop universally applicable theories. Gradually it has become an integral part of the shared background knowledge and the academic culture of Western societies.

But, what is the soul of IR as a discipline and what is the essence of world politics as practice? It is humanness. World politics, or politics of any kind, is human in the first place. Devoid of this spirit, there would be no world politics and no IR. To foreground relationality in social theorizing, therefore, is perhaps a small step toward bringing humanness back to the study of world politics.

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I began to have an idea to develop a relational theory of world politics when I joined scholars from various countries in the project entitled “Why is there no non-Western IR theory,” organized by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan in 2005. The inspiration I got from it is that it is far from sufficient simply to discuss why there is no non-Western theory. Rather it is more important to develop non-Western IR theory so that IR can become a genuine global discipline. As I was writing my paper for the project, “Why is there no Chinese international relations theory,” this initial idea loomed larger. I started thinking about an IR theory from a Chinese perspective when the project was completed and the findings in the form of seven articles were published in the *Journal of International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* in 2007. My sincere thanks therefore should go to Acharya and Buzan as well as all the participants in the project, for the initial idea was inspired by the dialogue, discussion, and debate. In addition, Acharya and Buzan have discussed with me many times over the past ten years. Their valuable suggestions are highly appreciated.

I published in Chinese the book *Relations and Processes* in 2012 with Shanghai People’s Publishing House (SPPH), which was my first effort to develop a systematic theory of IR by exploring Chinese cultural and philosophical thoughts. During the five years between 2007 and 2012 when I was writing the book, many of my friends and colleagues helped me with their time, advice, and even unconditional support. I would like to thank Peter Katzenstein in particular, a long-time friend who always encourages and inspires me intellectually and academically. I am also very much grateful to the following: Wang Yizhou, Chen Yue, Liu Debin, Zhu Liqun, Sun Jisheng, Wei Ling, Gao Shangtao, Tang Shiping, Guo Shuyong, Fang Changping, William Callahan, David Blaney, Arlene B. Tickner, Joshua Ramo, Benjamin Creutzfeldt, and many others. I owed a lot to my doctoral students, among whom my draft was often first discussed. They were young and energetic, having from time to time interesting ideas that refreshed me and their enthusiasm always encouraged me to keep on working. My sincere thanks also go to Fan Weiwen,

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*Part I*

**Culture and Social Theory**



# 1 Social Theory and the Multicultural World

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The universality of social theory has long been both a dream for realization and a topic for debate. Theory of the natural sciences is almost universally acknowledged as universally applicable, and, following this logic, the behavioral revolution in International Relations (IR) seems to have won an overwhelming triumph in the debate between the scientific school and the traditional approach, making universality the standard for evaluating a social theory. Mainstream theorists of IR, especially those in the United States, have persisted in the principles of the natural sciences, trying to develop theories that are universally valid, across time and space and beyond culture and geography.

At the same time, challenges to this mainstream belief have also been persistent. It is true that a well-established social theory should have broader applicability and gain more validity, even though no social theory is completely universal in the final analysis. However, it is absolutely necessary to discuss how a social theory originates in the first place. Social theory may well aim at universality and it is in a sense justifiable, but no theory starts from a temporo-spatial null, in a uniform homogeneity, and with an initial universal meaning. A social theory tends to originate in a particular geo-cultural setting, which shapes the practices of the cultural community and thus defines the efforts to develop theory, too. Social theory is therefore from the very beginning imprinted with the characteristic features of the cultural community of its origin, for it is this community that shapes the background knowledge of its members and thus provides the menu for the theorist to choose throughout the process of her theoretical construction. Furthermore, the theorist herself has lived in this community, being immersed in its culture, following its practice, and thinking spontaneously and effortlessly as a member of the community. In other words, social theory bears a cultural birthmark, which will be with it even when it becomes a well-established theory with a higher level of universality. This birthmark is indelible.

It is thus clear that I place particular emphasis on culture as a significant incubator and shaper of social theory. In fact, culture used to be taken as an important factor for social studies. “In the 1940s and 1950s, much attention was paid to culture as a crucial element in understanding societies, analyzing differences among them, and explaining their economic and political development.”<sup>1</sup> In IR, “from the 1940s to the 1960s culture played a meaningful part in IR theory and research.”<sup>2</sup> However, in IR, as well as in other disciplines of social studies, culture as an analytical element declined conspicuously in the United States later on due largely to the triumph of the behavioral revolution and the rise of the ambition for grand and scientific social theory. Even with the revived interest in culture as an explanatory variable since the 1980s, culture seems to be used mostly for analysis of actors’ behavior and has never had a place in building and developing IR theory. I intend to explore the link between culture and social theory construction, arguing that to a significantly large extent, culture shapes social theory. It is not a far-reaching exaggeration to argue that the social sciences are in fact the cultural sciences, for “nature” is paired with “culture” rather than “society.” It is undeniable that social theory is developed by people, who are cultural beings and have deeply embedded background knowledge of the cultural communities where they are brought up. In this sense, social theory is a product of culture. As to exploring how and why culture shapes theory, we need first to discuss social theory and analyze the two major approaches to social theory building and development.

### Theory and Social Theory

Theory is a system of ideas. No matter whether it is in the natural or the social sciences, theoretical construction means to systemize ideas<sup>3</sup> and produce abstract knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant has made a meaningful

<sup>1</sup> Harrison and Huntington 2000, xiii–xiv.    <sup>2</sup> Lapid 1997, 5.

<sup>3</sup> The definitions of “theory” in *the Oxford English Dictionary* include, *inter alia*, : (1) “A scheme or system of ideas and statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena; a hypothesis that has been confirmed or established by observation or experiment, and is pronounced or accepted as accounting for the known facts; a statement that is held to be the general laws, principles, or causes of something known or observed;” (2) “Systematic conception or statement of the principles of something; abstract knowledge or the formulation of it: often used as implying more or less unsupported hypotheses.” *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 3284.

<sup>4</sup> The definitions of theory by *Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language* include, *inter alia*,: (1) “the body of generalizations and principles developed in association with a field of activity . . .”; (2) “the coherent set of hypothetical, conceptual, and pragmatic principles forming the general frame of reference for a field of inquiry . . .”; (3) “abstract knowledge.” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*, 2371.

definition of “system” by referring to architectonic. It is meaningful because it shows clearly why we should take theory as a system of ideas or systematic knowledge. He says,

By architectonic I understand the art of systems. Since systemic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science, i.e. makes a system of a mere aggregation of it, architectonic is the doctrine of that which is scientific in our cognitions in general, and therefore necessarily belongs to the doctrine of method.

Under the government of reason, our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody, but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of manifold of cognitions under one idea. This is the rational concept of form of the whole, insofar as through this domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*.

For its execution, the idea needs a schema, i.e., an essential manifoldness and order of the parts determined *a priori* from the principle of the end.<sup>5</sup>

I do not mean here to discuss Kant’s ontological position, his argument on the rule of reason, and his means-end justification, but what is important in his understanding of theory is the difference he makes between an “aggregation of ideas” and a “system of ideas.” His differentiation of “system” from “aggregation” indicates the essential quality of theory and his “one idea” refers to a system or a “schema” of thoughts. Thus, “a system of ideas” provides a general definition of theory. It is acknowledged by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan as they point out one of the important conditions for IR theory: “its contribution identifies it as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about the subject matter of IR.”<sup>6</sup>

It seems true that there is little argument or disagreement about this general definition of theory, but controversies and debates flare up when social theory is drawn into the picture. One of the most conspicuous disagreements is whether social theory is the same as natural theory, behind which is the argument as to whether the social world is the same as the natural world. In the study of IR, for example, Kenneth Waltz distinguishes between “theory” and “thought,” arguing that Raymond Aron and Hans J. Morgenthau provide mere realist thoughts and not realist theory because theirs do not “take the fateful step beyond developing concepts to the fashioning of a recognizable theory,”<sup>7</sup> which, among others, has distinctive dependent and independent variables to explain the causality.<sup>8</sup> Robert Keohane discusses “rationalistic” and “reflective” approaches to the study of international institutions, believing that the latter is “less specified as theories,” need to develop testable

<sup>5</sup> Kant 1997, 691. <sup>6</sup> Acharya and Buzan 2007, 292. <sup>7</sup> Waltz 1995, 71. <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 70.

hypotheses, and carry out “systematic empirical investigations.”<sup>9</sup> Martha Finnemore believes that the English School of IR cannot be qualified as theory in a strict sense.<sup>10</sup> It is clear that all these scholars have a deeply internalized yardstick to judge what social theory is and their primary benchmark is no doubt the principles for theory construction in the natural sciences, underlined by a strong positivist worldview, one that has existed in the background knowledge of the IR community, especially in the United States, represented by mainstream theorists there and reinforced by IR students elsewhere in the world.

Acharya and Buzan, in a project for exploring non-Western IR theory,<sup>11</sup> gave two different definitions of social theory: “the harder positivist, rationalistic, materialist and quantitative understandings on one end of the theory spectrum, and the more reflective, social, constructivist, and postmodern on the other.”<sup>12</sup> Their categorization of hard positivism and soft reflectivism, similar to the distinction of “scientific” and “hermeneutic” theories by Martin Hollis and Steve Smith,<sup>13</sup> has important implications: The former, dominating in the study of IR in the United States, recognizes only one form of social theory, i.e. theory that fits into the “hard positivist definition” and stresses “being scientific,” which means the provision of neat explanations, including hypotheses with clear causality, rigorous empirical testing, and a deductive approach to observation. Causal mechanisms are considered the objective of theorizing and empirical testing is the method for “scientific” research. The latter, or the reflective definition, is much “softer,” requiring putting forward meaningful questions, setting out systematic ideas, and developing a set of concepts and categories for the production of abstract and general knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Acharya and Buzan label correctly their own approach as the “pluralist view,” for it recognizes various

<sup>9</sup> Keohane 1989a, 174.   <sup>10</sup> Finnemore 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Acharya and Buzan organized a project entitled “Why is there no non-Western IR theory: reflections on and from Asia?” The participants were mainly scholars from Asian countries. The title suggested that it was a challenge to the monist approach to IR theorizing. The organizers were puzzled by the situation: On the one hand the Western IR theory cannot readily answer questions that have arisen from a globalizing world and on the other hand there is no non-Western IR theory that is recognized by the academic IR community. The participants listed several causes that have led to such a situation, among which the one that all were agreed on was that IR remained massively dominated by Western thinking though it was now a global activity. However, “the case studies” in the project, as the two organizers said, “point to the existence of abundant intellectual and historical resources that could serve as the basis of developing a non-Western IRT that takes into account the positions, needs and cultures of countries in the region.” Acharya and Buzan 2007, 427.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.   <sup>13</sup> Hollis and Smith 1990, quoted in Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 2001, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Acharya and Buzan 2007.

forms of theory through identifying a “theory spectrum,” including hard positivism, the soft reflectivism, and perhaps some others in between.<sup>15</sup>

Buzan uses “pluralism” and “monism” to tell the methodological position of the English School theory of IR from that of the American mainstream IR theory. He has argued that American mainstream IR theories, such as neorealism and neoliberalism, take a monist approach to social theorizing, for they believe that all theory, natural and social alike, should follow the single and same set of standards, while the English School adopts a pluralist approach, for example, taking history into serious consideration.<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of this study, I will explore in some more detail the two approaches of monism and pluralism and analyze their implications for the construction of IR theory, especially in non-Western cultural settings.

### **Monism**

Monism holds that the natural sciences and the social sciences are both scientific by definition, and therefore the ontology, epistemology, and methodology should be the same.<sup>17</sup> Science aims at finding laws, laws in the natural world and laws in the social world, too. The most important or the essential law, by the influence of the Enlightenment, is causality. For every effect there must be a cause. In this sense, there is little difference between the natural and social sciences. International studies used to be more flexible, combining a multiplicity of factors such as history, law, and culture. However, IR in the post-WWII United States, especially since the behavioral revolution, has typically reflected the positivist and scientific tendency. Monism has become the signboard of the mainstream American IR theory and exerted strong influence in the rest of the world.

Monism seeks homogenization of social theory. In Robert Cox’s words: “In the Enlightenment meaning universal meant true for all time and space – the perspective of a homogeneous reality.”<sup>18</sup> Inspired by Cox,

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 290–291.   <sup>16</sup> Buzan 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Patrick Jackson has discussed in detail dualism and monism. He defines dualism as an ontological stance whose “central presupposition is a kind of gulf or radial separation between the world and the knowledge about the world,” and monism as its opposite that does not posit such “a radical gulf and does not begin by separating things and thoughts as dualism does.” Monism assumes a fundamental continuity of knowledge with the world. Jackson 2008, 132, 133. I do not use here the term of monism as Jackson does. Rather I argue, with Acharya, that the opposite of monism is not dualism, but pluralism, for it covers more areas and concerns competing ontological positions even inside the social sciences.

<sup>18</sup> Cox 2002, 53, quoted in Acharya 2014, 3.

Acharya criticizes the dominant meaning of universality in today's IR discipline as follows:

The dominant meaning of universalism in IR today is what I would call a monistic universalism, in the sense of "applying to all." It corresponds closely to Enlightenment universalism, which may also be called "monistic universalism." . . . And the Enlightenment has a dark side: the suppression of diversity and justification of European imperialism . . . In IR theory and method, such universalism manifests as a way of much arbitrary standard setting, gatekeeping, and marginalization of alternative narratives, ideas, and methodologies.<sup>19</sup>

Since there is only one set of standards, there is necessarily only one form of theory. Furthermore there is only one form of social reality, too. Representative of this approach is no other than Kenneth Waltz, whose monumental work of *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 seems to have won the decisive battle for the scientific school over the traditional school in IR. For him, IR theory is a set of laws and must satisfy three conditions: It is a distinct system of the international; it indicates with clarity the causal directions; and it is parsimonious and rigorous.<sup>20</sup> He admires Newton's theory of universal gravitation, for it "provided a unified explanation of celestial and terrestrial phenomena. Its power lay in the number of previously disparate empirical generalizations and laws that could be subsumed in one explanatory system . . ."<sup>21</sup> He stresses the universal oneness, the explanatory power, and the empirical testing, and his structural realism is indeed an imitation in the international relations world of the Newtonian theory in the natural world: An international system with anarchy as its ordering principle, a systemic structure with the distribution of capabilities as its most distinctive feature, and rational nation-states as the like units of the system, who abide by the principle of anarchy, weigh rationally the structural balance of power, and take action through a means-end calculation.<sup>22</sup> In this way Waltz does not only establish a distinctive system of international polity clear of all other features and develop a systemic and scientific theory of international politics, but more importantly, he sets the homogeneous standards for evaluating an IR theory. A theory is qualified as a theory if and only if it satisfies the conditions set forth by this homogeneity. The publication of *Theory of International Politics* not only marked the triumph of structural realism over other strands of IR theories, but also started an era of Waltzianization of IR theory, which is characterized by using one set of overwhelmingly positivist standards for evaluating all IR theories: It is qualified as a theory if the Waltzian standards are satisfied; otherwise it is dismissed as a non-theory. Thus the standard-setting and gatekeeping

<sup>19</sup> Acharya 2014, 3. <sup>20</sup> Waltz 1995, 67–82; Waltz 1979. <sup>21</sup> Waltz 1979, 6. <sup>22</sup> Ibid.

role of the Waltzian phenomenon is much more influential than his substantive theory of structural realism. Later comers within the mainstream camp, despite the fact that they have strongly criticized the assumptions and hypotheses of structural realism, have followed closely Waltz's logic of theorizing, the positivist principles, and the scientific methodology. The emergence of neoliberal institutionalism and social constructivism, rather than fundamentally challenging Waltz, have in fact proved and reclaimed the victory of Waltzianization and of homogeneity in IR theoretical development. Its powerful influence or perhaps unconscious violence has continued to exist in a dominant way up to date.

Homogeneity means, by necessity, exclusion. The mainstream of the American IR studies, for example, offers little recognition of the reflective approach, and scholars of mainstream theories, especially the "big three" in the United States, simply refuse to give credit to it. Waltz believes that anything that does not follow the positivist tradition cannot be qualified as "theory": Non-positivist studies provide mere thoughts, for they are the "kind of work that can neither provide satisfactory explanations nor lead to the construction of theory. Such studies cannot explain the causal mechanisms with certainty and clarity."<sup>23</sup> Keohane, in his influential presidential address to the International Studies Association in 1988 entitled "International Relations: Two Approaches," contrasts the rationalistic approach with the reflective approach, arguing that the former is hard while the latter is soft, very much like the Acharya-Buzan categorization, and that the former is positivist while the latter is analytical; that the former is rigorous while the latter is complex; that the former aims at finding the causal mechanisms while the latter seeks coherent arguments. Keohane explicitly supports the former and believes that the rationalistic approach, despite the fact that it is not perfect, has made remarkable achievements, for it successfully explains actors' behavior. Scholars who use this approach are self-conscious about the methodology and their products are widely recognized.<sup>24</sup> As for the reflective approach, Keohane puts forward sharp criticism, saying:

Indeed, the greatest weakness of the reflective school lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective research program that could be employed by students of world politics. Waltzian neorealism has such a research program; so does neoliberal institutionalism, . . . Until the reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a program, and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues in world politics, they will remain on the margin of the field, largely invisible to the

<sup>23</sup> Waltz 1995, 68–69.    <sup>24</sup> Keohane 1989a, 160.

preponderance of empirical researchers, most of whom explicitly or implicitly accept one or another version of rationalistic premises.<sup>25</sup>

Keohane's criticism of the reflective approach in fact indicates his belief that such an approach cannot produce qualified social theory because it does not have theoretical hypotheses and pays little attention to rigorous empirical testing. His emphasis on a clear research program, on causality, and on the function of explanation shows that what in his mind constitutes theory is the positivist one or the so-called scientific one and other theories can be only on the margin of IR studies until they change and live up to the scientific standards or until they become the same with rationalistic theories like Waltz's and his own. Before they become the same as positivist and scientific theory they are no theory at all. Keohane, with his neoliberal institutionalism, has not reduced the significance of Waltzianization. Rather, he has helped the Waltzian way of theorizing to further establish itself as a universal standard. Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba again stress the importance of causal inference and further define the model process of scientific research by dividing a research design into four components: the research question, the theory, the data, and the use of the data, making the standards for being scientific more specific and operational.<sup>26</sup> As one of the most influential textbooks in IR methodology, *Designing Social Inquiry* tells IR students the right way to carry out scientific inference in qualitative research.

The scientific standards and positivist assumptions embedded in the mainstream IR theory of the United States have thus become the only yardstick to judge whether or not a self-claimed theory is a theory. Martha Finnemore expresses similar views about theory in her criticism of the English School. She again argues that the English School does not produce theory, that it lacks clarity in methodology, and that therefore its effort for theory building is not successful. American IR studies focus on causal relationship, make clear hypotheses on it, and try to find it in rigorous testing, while "much of the English School work does not fit well into the independent/dependent variable language that dominate the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 173. Keohane later realized the importance of ideas in international relations. The book coedited by Judith Goldstein and himself was entitled *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political Change* (Goldstein and Keohane 1993). However, his rationalistic way of thinking did not change and the ideational factor was treated as a mere additional causal variable. As the editors said, ideas helped actors to clarify principles and conceptions of causal relationships, and to coordinate individual behavior, but they do not "challenge the premise that people behave in self-interested and broadly rational ways" Goldstein and Keohane 1993, 5.

<sup>26</sup> King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, 13.

American IR,” making it “difficult for the American scholars to incorporate it into their research.”<sup>27</sup> Even Wendtian social constructivism follows very much this tradition, supporting the positivist standards and explicitly hypothesizing the constitutive causality. It is exactly because of this characteristic that the constructivism developed by Alexander Wendt has become a mainstream theory of IR in the United States. It is the fact that most English School scholars lack the clarity about causal relations between operational variables that prevents it from completely entering the mainstream in the United States.<sup>28</sup> It would not qualify as a social theory by merely raising meaningful questions, setting out systematic ideas, and developing a set of concepts and categories for the production of abstract and general knowledge.

It should be abnormal or even absurd to take non-positivist theories as non-theories, but it is the case today because of the persistent dominance of the positivist mainstream in the theoretical discourse of IR despite voices against it.<sup>29</sup> Robert Crawford, from a different perspective, sharply points out such dominance. He has found that American IR theory has a conspicuous tendency and strong ability to change a heresy or a heretic theory into a paradigm. The English School is a telling example. It started as a unique theory that the American mainstream paid little attention to in the so-called inter-paradigm debates until it was “discovered” by the American mainstream, especially the key concepts of international society, international cooperation, and international regimes. Once discovered, it has become supplementary to the mainstream study of international regimes and institutions rather than a unique and original theoretical system of its own.<sup>30</sup> Even inside the United States, a similar story is seen. John Ruggie has argued that the rise of constructivism can be traced to such classic roots as Weber,<sup>31</sup> who believed that the social sciences are differentiated from the natural sciences because the former has the task of interpreting the meaning of social action. However, it is clear that the social constructivism developed in the United States soon merged into the mainstream and became a positivist research program and that the study of international norms, for example, is now a “scientific” discourse with the independent/dependent variable language, having been rigorously tested through either

<sup>27</sup> Finnemore 2001, 509 and 510–512.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* I will discuss it later on, arguing that the situation is changing not only because of the effort made by the English School to join the American mainstream, but also because of the fact that they do share something essential that makes their integration easier.

<sup>29</sup> See Smith, Booth and Zalewski 1996; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Tickner and Blaney 2012; Tickner and Blaney 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Crawford 2001, 6–7. <sup>31</sup> Ruggie 1999, 217–222.

quantitative inference or case studies.<sup>32</sup> In this way, exclusion is both the result of homogenization and a way to reinforce homogenization through either elimination of alternatives or assimilation of dissidents.

Monism is also cultural nihilism. It is perhaps the most profound and effective way for hegemonic dominance, for it negates completely historical heritages and cultural traditions, and denies their important role in the construction of social theory. Whereas there is plenty of criticism against the poverty of the monist approach to social theory, there is little questioning about the connection between culture and theory building. For international studies, a monist, from her view and standard of social theory, would argue that there should be no national borders, for IR theory, and any theory indeed, if it is scientific, is universally applicable, across time and space and beyond geography and boundary. The two criteria to evaluate whether it is a scientific theory or not are universality and replicability, which constitute the absolute and ultimate standard for theory evaluation.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, there can be schools of theory, but there cannot be theory with national labels. Nobody, for example, can say Newton's theory is British and Einstein's theory is American or Jewish, for no matter where it originates it is true everywhere. It is also true in the social sciences. Any theory should have rational assumptions and falsifiable hypotheses, and must go through rigorous testing so as to reach scientific conclusions. Theories, such as the English School, do not fit into these standards, and thus cannot be defined as theory.<sup>34</sup> Concepts based upon local and practical knowledge are termed false concepts, and efforts to construct social theories with a local focus are criticized as either un-scientific or culturally nationalistic.

This is a clear and categorical inclusion/exclusion dichotomy. Consciously or unconsciously, monism draws a single line to distinguish theory and non-theory, to define a strict boundary to tell knowledge which is inside from non-knowledge which is outside. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner have criticized: "IR . . . fails to see alternatives because those who make it assume the West, its science and its development as the universal 'norm'."<sup>35</sup> If this disciplinary view dominates, then even if some advocate pluralism and encourage dialogue between the mainstream IR and the marginalized theories, such plurality can only be one "that evolves within a (narrow) space allowed for by the United States and Western European core, which exercises a strong disciplinary

<sup>32</sup> For example, *International Organization* published many articles on international norms, most of which follow the positivist and therefore scientific tenets. See *International Organization* 59 (Fall 2005) and 61 (Winter 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Kagan 2009, xi and 1. <sup>34</sup> Finnemore 2001. <sup>35</sup> Blaney and Tickner 2013, 7.

function in terms of the theories, concepts, and categories authorized to count as knowledge of world politics.”<sup>36</sup>

Fundamentally, it is a matter of culture. Underlying the monist view of theory building, it is the monism that embraces the “self-culture” as the only rational culture, advanced and superior, and regards the “other cultures” as simply non-rational, backward, and inferior. They should catch up and become the same as the self-culture. Since I argue that culture plays a particularly important role in social theory building, this monist view of culture implicitly but fundamentally believes that only the Western culture works to make theory, and other cultures cannot produce key concepts, provide proper categorization, and therefore are not qualified as resources of social theory. It thus denies completely the multiple possibilities for the prosperity of social theory and plays the role of gate-keeping to prevent other cultures from producing systematic knowledge. The result, in fact, would be the demise of IR knowledge as well as the eventual fall of the mainstream IR theory dominant in the discipline today, for they simply would have nothing to dominate over and would therefore prepare themselves for the final demise.

### **Pluralism**

The second view, pluralism, argues that the social world differs significantly from the natural world, for the latter focuses more on matter, while the former is lived by people with the students and the studied both as human beings. In social sciences, therefore, no study is value free and they cannot treat human beings, who are the studied, as iron, gold, or mechanical parts. The social sciences should try to find social laws, but equally important, they need to understand social meanings and interpret social phenomena. It should encourage multiple interpretations, just as artists and architects express the observed from their respective perspectives. Furthermore they create social facts, give meanings to make the social come alive, and construct laws through human agency in this process. The social sciences thus differ essentially from the natural sciences. It is the latter function of understanding and interpreting that natural theory does not have and therefore becomes the characteristic feature of social theory. And this feature is so significantly primary because it is human in nature.

Pluralism, by definition, does not seek and work for homogeneity. As the broader definition by Acharya and Buzan of IR theory goes, they include contributions that are substantially acknowledged in the IR

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 4.

academic community as being theory, self-identified by its creators as theory, and recognized as a systematic attempt to abstract or generalize about the subject matter of international relations.<sup>37</sup> Pluralism does not privilege one type of theory over others and can help find theories of a local produce.<sup>38</sup> The most recent advocate of pluralism is the Global International Relations (GIR) agenda put forward by Acharya in his presidential address to the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, in which he outlines the important dimensions of the GIR agenda, including pluralistic universalism; use of world history rather than just Greco-Roman, European, and US history as its foundations; incorporation of existing theories and methods; integration of regional and area studies; and eschewal of exceptionalism, and recognition of multiple forms of agency.<sup>39</sup>

Since respect of diversity is the essential idea, pluralism is an inclusive rather than exclusive approach to social theory construction. Acharya expresses it clearly in his explanation of the GIR project, whose mission is to “chart a course toward a truly inclusive discipline, recognizing its multiple and diverse foundations,” because the discipline of IR “does not reflect the voices, experiences, knowledge claims, and contributions of the vast majority of the societies and states in the world, and often marginalizes those outside the core countries of the West.”<sup>40</sup> It requires a new understanding of universalism or universality. In contrast to the monistic universalism, Acharya proposes a pluralistic universalism as the foundation of his GIR project. As the opposite to monistic universalism, it is, using Tickner’s words, “to uncover stories about forgotten spaces that respect difference, show tolerance and compassion, and are skeptical about absolute truths.”<sup>41</sup> For IR, it specifically encourages:

comparative studies of international systems that look past and beyond the Westphalian form, conceptualizing the nature and characteristics of a post-Western world order that might be termed as a multiplex world, expanding the study of regionalisms and regional orders beyond Eurocentric models, building synergy between disciplinary and area studies approaches, expanding our investigations into the two-way diffusion of ideas and norms, and investigating the multiple and diverse ways in which civilizations encounter each other, which includes peaceful interactions and mutual learning.<sup>42</sup>

Perhaps the most profound significance of pluralism, as well as the most relevant dimension to this study, is its recognition of cultural pluralism, its encouragement of civilizational dialogues, and its respect of cultures as firm groundings for theory construction. Max Weber has described such

<sup>37</sup> Acharya and Buzan 2007, 292. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 290. <sup>39</sup> Acharya 2014, 3. <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> Tickner 2011, quoted in Acharya 2014, 4. <sup>42</sup> Acharya 2014, 1.

functions of the social sciences, believing that the social sciences can be an independent system, for it differs from the natural sciences in terms of the purpose of social studies. Human beings have a special faculty, that is, their ability to create and construct meaning for the social world, or in Weber's words, "to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and to *lend it significance*,"<sup>43</sup> while matter in the physical world does not have such a capacity. In the study of the social, the most significant purpose is to understand the social meaning of human agency. Meaning belongs to the ideational domain, and therefore the social world is very much concerned with ideas and meaningful actions, i.e. practices that these ideas are embedded in and create in turn. The natural world, on the contrary, is fundamentally about matter, which exists objectively and has a homogeneous ontological status, and the study of such a world aims to find objective laws about the properties of the material. As such, explanation is the most appropriate way. Objective laws exist, identical everywhere and all the time. (Even this view is questionable today.) Human beings, as explorers, can at the best find such laws and retell them as representational knowledge. The social sciences are not alike. Subjective existence and intersubjective reflection are normal phenomena in the social world, and even "social facts" are often conscious or unconscious social constructions, subject to change all the time. Thus, in the social world, there are at least two purposes of scholarly pursuit, both to find law-like patterns of action if they exist and to understand the meaning of social subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Understanding, both as an epistemological approach and as a methodological device, is indispensable in social studies.<sup>44</sup> In addition, understanding itself, by definition, includes interpretation, which unavoidably involves human agency through the activation of their practical knowledge, for social facts themselves are products of social practices.<sup>45</sup> By definition, interpreting is multidimensional, for it depends on the human beings who do the interpreting. According to Wang Yangming (1472–1528), a Chinese philosopher in the Ming Dynasty, interpreting occurs when the knowledge in one's heart/mind and the object being observed meet and combine.<sup>46</sup> Different people tend to have different interpretations of the meaning in a social setting and observers and the angles of observation matter a great deal. People from different cultural or even subcultural backgrounds may understand differently the meaning of a Van Gogh, a Matisse, or a Qi Baishi,<sup>47</sup> for the observers have different background

<sup>43</sup> Weber 1949, 81, quoted in Ruggie 1999, 219, emphasis in original. <sup>44</sup> Qin 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Carr 1964; Alker 1996. <sup>46</sup> Wang (Yangming) 2014.

<sup>47</sup> A late master of traditional Chinese painting.

knowledge and different collective experiences, which lead to different ways of interaction between the painting and the observer. The dialogue itself is a process of understanding and interpretation. For such a process, there is perhaps only one correct answer in the natural world, but there are many answers in the social world, none of which can be judged as absolutely correct or wrong. Pluralism is thus the characteristic feature of social studies, and human agency, activated by practical knowledge, is the crucial factor in the construction of social theory. Nothing social is as rigorous as linear causality and no law is so neat as Newton's law of universal gravitation or Einstein's theory of relativity.

A pluralist, therefore, believes that it is perhaps justifiable for the natural sciences to claim no national or geographical borders, but that social sciences can have national boundaries, which are not purely geographical, but mainly geo-cultural. When national borders fit fairly well with cultural ones, a national label is justifiable, for it is not the national borders that matter and what really matters is culture. A Chinese IR theory, for instance, is first of all related to the Chinese culture rather than the Chinese territory, to the ideational rather than to the physical. When the so-called "non-Western IR theory" is discussed, it is more cultural than geographical. Geography matters if and only if it fits with a cultural sphere.<sup>48</sup> We have just discussed the importance of understanding and interpreting as epistemological and methodological devices in the social sciences, which are exactly embedded geo-culturally. Understanding is cultural, for it is based upon the practice of a particular cultural community. It is human and social in the first place and no social science is over and beyond the human. Western brides wear white at the wedding, while white is the color for funerals in China. The social meaning of color differs because of the different practices of the two cultural communities. Time and space, cultures and collective memories, and ways of thinking and doing may well lead to different ways of understanding and therefore interpreting. In other words, different cultures nurture and are nurtured by different practices over time, and practical knowledge thus produced, accumulated, and fermented, in turn, leads to different understanding of the seemingly same "objective" fact, reproducing and representing different meanings in their ideational schema. Theory as a system of ideas follows this logic, inseparable from the culture, history, language, and ways of thinking and doing of a particular community of practice. It is exactly in this way that theory is initiated in a cultural setting and always bears its birthmark.<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx speaks of history, saying that history is made by people, but "they do not

<sup>48</sup> Nisbitt 2003.    <sup>49</sup> Zalewski 1996.

make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found.”<sup>50</sup> It is also true of social theory. It is made by people, but they do not make it just as they please. People make social theory under circumstances defined by the practical knowledge embedded in their cultural communities. No matter how a social theory is created and developed, it is related with the culture of its origin and it is created by cultural humans. When we use a national label that reflects a culture to indicate its cultural birthmark, it is not only justifiable, but also most reasonable.

Pluralism thus legitimizes the production of systematic knowledge in general and of IR theories in particular outside the boundary drawn by the Western mainstream and opens the door to social theory construction in non-Western contexts and cultures.

### **Social Theory Construction**

Having discussed the two approaches to social theory construction, we need to come back to the general definition of theory, that is, “a system of ideas.” The monist approach does not go against this definition, but limits it to a particular type of theory – the hard positivist one – and refuses to recognize other types as theory. The pluralist view also conforms to the general definition, but has a much broader and more open definition of social theory. The English School, dependency theory, feminist IR theory, and perhaps even more, are all theories if they constitute a system of ideas and a coherent scheme of knowledge. They may not have clear dependent and independent variables, may not focus on finding the causal relationships, and may not provide neat and rigorous explanations. However, they do use historical, social, and humanitarian phenomena for reflective analysis, and they do develop concepts and analytical frameworks for understanding and interpretation. In the social world, we need explanation, and we also need understanding and interpretation. In IR, different theories exist in terms of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, but if they constitute a system of ideas and are recognized as such by the academic community in general, they are theories. There is and cannot be a single set of standards for the ultimate judgment.

We insist on the general and broad definition of theory and social theory, not only because it is a widely accepted definition, but also because it cherishes an open mind for theoretical construction and stands as a fundamental opposition to discursive hegemony. It has several connotations. First, theory is about ideas, human ideas. No matter

<sup>50</sup> Ruggie 1999, 278.

what theory it is, it is constructed by humans through human practice. Since it is human, human agency is indispensable in theory construction and development. But human agency does not work completely as it pleases. It is conditioned, to paraphrase Marx's saying again, by circumstances directly found and immediately experienced. In IR, structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, social constructivism, dependency theory, and the English School are all human products and have been produced in relevant circumstances. As such those who have produced them are enabled and constrained by the circumstances, too. It is culture that provides the most meaningful circumstances and therefore constitutes a most ready treasure house where new ideas and concepts can be discovered. On the one hand, therefore, we need to explore the cultural resources for theory development, believing that the multiplicity of cultures facilitates production of social theory; on the other hand, we also need to remember that a social theory will always bear this cultural birthmark and absolute and complete universality is impossible.

Second, theory must be a system of ideas. Thoughts can be systematic and can also be sporadic and disparate. Spontaneous inspiration produces great poetry, but cannot by itself create social theory. A system of ideas includes clear definitions, key concepts, and logical reasoning that makes the definitions and concepts meaningful and coherent. Mainstream American positivist IR theories reflect systemized ideas, and so do the English School, dependency theory, and feminist theory. They may have very different approaches to theorizing, but they all fit into the general definition of theory. There is no reason to exclude any one of them, just as none of them can claim that positivist theory is no theory simply because they are different in ways of organizing ideas. When the question "Why is there no non-Western International Relations theory" is raised, there is no doubt that the Western mainstream IR theory plays a crucial role in gatekeeping. However, we also need to reflect seriously on one more question: "Do non-Western IR scholars consciously develop concepts, carry out conceptualization, and systemize ideas for theorization by exploring the resources of their own cultures?"

Third, there are many paths to systemize ideas and thoughts. Pluralism is the key word here, because if we use only one set of yardsticks to judge, there would be no theoretical prosperity and intellectual progress, and knowledge production and reproduction would be retarded in a homogeneous fiefdom. As Burchill and Linklater have pointed out, theory is defined not as merely being "scientific," and cannot be limited to the one function of explaining. Positivist theory of

IR is only one of many.<sup>51</sup> The American positivist mainstream is a particular form of IR theory and cannot be taken as the theory and even more cannot be used as the standard to evaluate other theories. Theory should be in the plural form, or paraphrasing Peter Katzenstein's definition of civilizations, they should be "plural and pluralistic":<sup>52</sup> Across cultural communities it is pluralistic with many theories of different background knowledges competing with and complementing one another, and within a cultural community it is plural with many theories of different types competing with and complementing one another. This is the precondition for theoretical prosperity. It is perhaps understandable that theorists wish to make their respective theory the theory. However, no matter how influential it is, no theory can ever be the theory and the development of a theory is always going through a process of debating and competing with other theories. A theory, as well as any other form of knowledge, is dead at the moment when it becomes the theory.

The insistence on the broader and more general definition has another important dimension, which is related to the concept of "worldview." When Buzan used the terms of monism and pluralism, what he had in mind was perhaps more methodological and therefore used "methodological monism" and "methodological pluralism" to indicate that the difference lies largely with the methodology.<sup>53</sup> I argue that what they reflect is much more than a mere methodological dimension. Rather they represent different worldviews. Monism is sometimes termed "naturalistic monism" to indicate the belief that the natural and social sciences follow the same logic and therefore should follow the same way of theory construction.<sup>54</sup> It is true that the debate started in the discussion of the two types of sciences, and it is also true that the debate in IR seems to have started from the disagreement over methodology. But for my study here it is much more than a view that "the social sciences can be built on the same model as the natural sciences."<sup>55</sup> More relevance lies in what may be labelled as "cultural monism," which, perhaps an extension of naturalistic monism, believes that social theory produced in one cultural community is and should be perfectly universal and valid across cultural communities, for the multiple cultures that exist in the world differ only in one thing: whether it is an advanced culture or a backward culture. The "advanced" culture represents the correct and rational, while other cultures should follow this role-model and eventually become it.

Such a view is much more than merely methodological. It is indeed a worldview. As we discussed in the previous paragraphs, monists not

<sup>51</sup> Burchill 1996, 1. <sup>52</sup> Katzenstein 2010a. <sup>53</sup> Buzan 2001. <sup>54</sup> Ruggie 1999, 219.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholson 1996, 130.

only believe that the natural sciences provide the standard for all sciences, but also hold and even take it for granted that social theory created in one societal and cultural setting is universal all over the world, no matter what culture it is applied to. The underlying assumption is that reality in different cultural settings should be essentially the same, for universal theory must rest on universal reality. Even if the reality in another culture or society seems different, it should eventually become the same or it should be made the same. If we should take the monist view, especially in the second sense, then there would be indeed no other form of social theory except the hard positivist one. Thus, cultural monism has created a self-closed system with homogeneity as its goal, exclusiveness as its distinct feature, and uniform application as its belief. By definition, such a system cannot achieve lasting prosperity despite momentary magnificence, for it represses the creativeness grounded on other cultural resources.

I tend to interpret pluralism as more cultural than methodological, too. Cultural pluralism rests on a belief in the plurality of social reality. As social reality is largely constructed through human practice and as many different kinds of human practice exist in the world, there cannot be only one social reality. In other words, there are many worlds with various realities, both the terms in the plural. Berger and Luckmann hold that reality is socially constructed. "What is 'real' to a Tibetan monk may not be 'real' to an American businessman."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Searle argues that social reality is constructed and maintained by custom and habit, that is, by practice based upon background knowledge.<sup>57</sup> If this is the case, culture plays a most important role in the construction of social realities, for it is closely related to custom and habit, or to the practice of members of a particular cultural community. Monism is underpinned by the belief that there is only one reality throughout the world, across and beyond cultures and civilizations. It is exactly because of this belief that a particular set of standards for evaluating social theory is taken for the universally applicable standards. Recognition of plural realities as well as recognition of realities as social construction thus paves the way to the recognition of cultural pluralism.

A good example is Acharya's encouragement for grounding IR in world history rather than in just Greco-Roman, European, and US history.<sup>58</sup> The mainstream IR theory rests almost exclusively on the history of the Westphalian international system, especially its anarchic nature, without realizing that it is only one of the many international relations histories, or one of the many international relations realities that have existed in the

<sup>56</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966, 3. <sup>57</sup> Searle 1995. <sup>58</sup> Acharya 2014, 3.

world. The dominant worldview, formed, embedded, and distilled from culture and through history, very much indicates what order is to be established. While recognizing that the Westphalian institution is made as a reality by rationalistic agents with strong individuality featured by sovereign identity, we need to see and understand that other histories may not be like it and may present different realities in relations among nations or peoples. In other words, there is no singular reality, but only plural realities. Balance of power, for example, was a Westphalian reality. But it was in fact what the agents made of it, just as Wendt's discussion of anarchy goes. The Tribute system was also a historical reality in East Asia for hundreds of years, where balance of power and anarchy were neither a reality nor a systemic feature at all, for the agents there made realities different from what has been found in the Westphalian international system. Following the advice by Berger and Luckmann on the sociology of knowledge,<sup>59</sup> we need to analyze how and why agents in different settings construct different realities, rather than to apply the reality of one geo-cultural space to the whole social universe. Similarly, concepts derived from the Westphalian reality are ones from a particular geo-cultural locale and may not apply to other geo-cultural settings, and, moreover, different concepts may well be derived from other cultural communities. It is also indicated by feminist IR, the reality of which differs very much from the reality of mainstream IR theory.

Pluralism not only recognizes the existence of multiple realities, but also embraces the multiple ways of perceiving the social world. Let's again use the example of the English School theory of IR. Scholars of the English School mainly turn to reflective thinking and logical reasoning, and rarely can we see in their analysis neat scientific hypotheses with the beauty and rigor of equations in physics, indicating the causal relationship between clearly defined independent and dependent variables. They seldom use mathematical modeling and quantitative statistical analysis.<sup>60</sup> Rather, they may well put forward an original idea or thought, design a set of key concepts, and then construct a systematically coherent framework through historical reflection and logical reasoning, discussing how the

<sup>59</sup> Berger and Luckmann 1966.

<sup>60</sup> According to Tim Dunne, the English School originated with "the fundamental questions of 'international society'" (1998, xi). He uses the term of "three preliminary articles" to describe the characteristic features of the English School, including a particular tradition of enquiry (an awareness of a body of literature, a set of central questions, and a common agenda), an interpretive approach, and a belief in the normative nature of international theory. These features are in contrast with those of American mainstream IR theories. Particularly, the second article, an interpretive approach, expresses a clear position against the scientific approach dominant in the United States. See Dunne 1998, 6–11.

international system works and what international society means. It appears indeed to some that the debate between the English School and the American mainstream is one about methodology. In fact the difference is more about how they see and understand the international relations world. While analysts in the United States were exploring the international system in every detail, English School scholars put forward and analyzed the key concept of “international society,” thus making a theory primarily around the systemization of this idea. Later on, Buzan developed Bull’s theory and focused on the evolution of international society to world society, taking into consideration the post-Cold War trend of globalization.<sup>61</sup> The system-society debate is in fact a debate between two worldviews extended to the field of IR. The former takes the international relations world as a system with discrete and like units, which resembles a billiard table with an external force driving the billiards to interact, while the latter understands the international world as a society, with rules, norms, and values binding its members together. It is well acknowledged that the greatest contribution of the English School is its big idea of “international society,” the invention of which rests on a world perceived differently from what American IR scholars see. Without such a worldview there could have been no invention of the concept of “international society.” For me, it is this different angle for observing the world, or different worldview, rather than mere methodological dissimilarity that has made the English School.

Even greater difference can be seen between the Chinese and the Western worldviews. Monists take the natural sciences and the construction of natural theory as their model. The underlying reason is that the world out there, or the natural world, is what they explore in the pursuit of knowledge. It is undeniable that modern sciences started in the West. It is also understandable because people in the West have spent much more time and energy exploring the natural world, trying to know it and to control it. “Matter” has thus become one of the biggest words that attracts generations of talents. In other words, the worldview of Western societies is very much around the word “matter” in the natural world, which is both something to know and something to exploit. Most of the material achievements by humans have been made through the efforts based upon this worldview. Moreover, the success of the West in sciences and technologies in terms of accumulated knowledge and material achievements have led to the belief that such a success is fungible and extendable to other fields, such as the social world. Even if the social world has conspicuous differences, it should be made into something

<sup>61</sup> Buzan 2004; Bull 1977; Vincent 1986.

similar to the natural world. Despite the protest and criticism from all the post-modernist strands, it is reasonable, although arguable, to say that this worldview focusing on the natural world and the material thereof continues to dominate.

The worldview of the Chinese is quite the opposite. It starts with the human rather than nature, focusing on the human heart/mind rather than on things and matter. It has never taken the natural world as a separate space and has never considered “matter” as what they should spend much time and energy studying. The Chinese tradition is to place more emphasis on humans rather than matter, for the decisive factor in the world, both natural and social, is human. While Westerners have tried to discover and create knowledge in the process of their exploration of nature, Chinese have paid much more attention to finding and exploiting knowledge in their own heart/mind. It is not to argue that traditionally Chinese did not pay any attention to nature, but they did understand nature in a way different from their Western counterparts. Confucianism, for example, has a profound belief that truth as well as knowledge is not out there for us to discover, but lies within us in our inner selves. As Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-lan) comments:

In another place, he [Mencius] said: “All things are already in us. Turn our attention to ourselves and find there this truth: there is no greater delight than that.” . . . Happiness and truth are in our mind. It is in our own mind, not in the external world, that we can seek for happiness and truth.<sup>62</sup>

Thus Chinese may turn inward to their inner selves for knowledge and truth rather than go to the external world. Similarly, they also feel that the cultivation of the human heart/mind is the most important and most difficult work. In particular, it is far more significant than the control of the natural world. While readers may well admire Hemingway’s old man who singlehandedly struggles against the storm or sympathize with Melville’s Ahab who fights against Moby-Dick, the biggest challenge, for the Chinese, rises always from one’s own heart/mind and a profound person is one who daily examines himself and controls unhealthy desires.<sup>63</sup> Control of nature is not easy, but control of one’s heart/mind is the most difficult. Education in the West may teach more about how to

<sup>62</sup> Feng 1991, 587. (Fung Yu-lan, is the spelling used for the *Selected Philosophical Writings of Fung Yu-lan* published in 1991, which includes most of his important works. The standard translation of his name is now Feng Youlan. In the following chapters, therefore, I will use Feng Youlan instead of Fung Yu-lan.)

<sup>63</sup> Confucius et al. 2014, 5. Later Confucian scholars have followed and interpreted this line of reasoning, stressing the importance of self-cultivation. Zhu Xi (1130–1200) advocated “eradicating human desires and maintain the heavenly principles,” and Wang Yangming (1472–1528) argued that the most difficult thing in the world is not to eliminate bandits in the greenwood but to “eliminate the bandits in one’s heart.”

understand nature and find natural laws, while education in traditional China was first of all the most important means to cultivate one's heart/mind. Thus this Chinese worldview is more human-based, and more introspectively oriented. It is worth exploring what big idea or ideas can be found and what social theory can be developed in a culture that focuses more on the human. This is the effort I am making throughout this book.

### **Conclusion**

Social theory is shaped by culture. Monism holds that natural theory and social theory are of little substantial difference, for both are used to explain reality. It implies that reality is the same everywhere and that the path to explain reality should be the same. No matter where a theory is initiated, it is and should be universal in the first place and therefore culture matters little for theoretical development. By definition, it denies the role of culture, i.e. ideas, values, attitudes, perspectives, worldviews, etc., in the building of social theory. Pluralism, on the contrary, argues that the natural sciences and the social sciences are of significant difference, for the latter is not only for explanation, but also for understanding and interpreting social reality, and moreover for constructing social reality, too. If understanding and interpretation are added to the process of social theory building, culture becomes significant, for such understanding and interpretation are based on practical knowledge that is developed through generations and embedded in a particular cultural community, or that is created by and creates a cultural community. Culture, therefore, matters. Different cultures may produce different social theories.

We place emphasis on pluralism in general and cultural pluralism in particular, for in an increasingly globalizing world with more cultural communities joining in international and global affairs, the multiplicity of cultural resources may provide a rich treasure trove for the prosperity of social theory construction and intellectual dialogue. If we want to make it come true, a pluralistic approach to social theory construction is necessary. And, furthermore, it has been recognized that there is basically no non-Western IR theory, and that there exists in IR a hierarchical structure which sees a division of labor between Western scholars who theorize and non-Western scholars who provide raw data.<sup>64</sup> To change this situation, non-Western scholars need to consciously explore their own cultural resources for social theory construction and for the enrichment of the existing edifice of IR knowledge. Such effort is a must.

<sup>64</sup> Wemheuer-Vogelaar et al. 2016; Maliniak et al. 2014.

## 2 Theoretical Hard Core

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The previous chapter argues that culture shapes social theory. In this chapter I intend to answer a related and fundamental question: How does culture shape social theory? My presumption is that culture matters in social theory construction. In other words, culture leaves an indelible birthmark on a social theory through shaping the mind of the cultural beings who produce knowledge and develop social theory. It means that a social theory is initially constructed in a particular geo-cultural setting, which defines the practice of the cultural community and thus orients the efforts to develop theory, too. Different cultures may produce different social theories. I thus provide here a tentative answer: Culture informs and nurtures the metaphysical component of a theoretical hard core, out of which a social theory grows.

In this chapter I first argue that any social theory needs in the very beginning a theoretical hard core, or a nucleus, maturing from it gradually into a system of ideas through a process of nucleation. I further argue that the hard core is composed of two parts, the metaphysical and the substantive. The latter helps members of a cultural community observe and perceive empirical facts, while the former helps them understand and interpret such facts. Culture matters in theoretical construction exactly because culture is the sediment of long practices of members of a cultural community, making them tend to think and do in a culturally oriented way. It is their collective custom and habit, their common worldview and shared knowledge, thus becoming the lens through which they see, understand, and interpret. It is the angle from which one observes the world. Culture therefore provides the essential elements of the metaphysical component of the theoretical nucleus, without which no theory could even be started. In the following lines I will discuss these issues in detail.

### **The Theoretical Hard Core and Its Constitution**

If theory is a system of ideas, then construction of theory is a process of organizing ideas and integrating thoughts into such a system. The American mainstream IR theory and the English School have gone through such a process of organization and integration, which structures ideas and thoughts in a logical and reasonable way so as to form an intellectual framework. So do feminist IR theory and dependency theory. If this understanding is correct, then a theory is a system with parts, of which the most important is the theoretical core. If we compare a theory to an intellectual system, the hard core is the nucleus from which a process of nucleation starts. It is like a life that starts from an embryo or a seed. The nucleus is thus the soul of the theory, for its forming, growing, radiating, and crystalizing constitute the whole process of theorizing. The smallest and core component is the beginning, deciding whether the system can stand, develop, mature, and evolve. Thus a theory, as a system of ideas, starts from a theoretical nucleus, a core that would give life to a sustainable theory.

Imre Lakatos' discussion of the hard core of a research program is highly inspiring in this respect. A set of theories form a research program, as he discusses in his book, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, which by definition is a system of theories, somewhat similar to a meta-theory or paradigm. He holds that a research program should have two important components: the hard core and the protective belt, each having its own functions and both maintaining and sustaining the theory. The former decides the fate of the theory: If the hard core collapses, the theory is dead and abandoned. What is highly relevant here is his idea of the "hard core," which defines a research program and makes it different from other programs.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this study, I term it the "theoretical hard core," largely following Lakatos' definition of the hard core of a research program, and argue that it is applicable for a social theory, too. Theories, no matter whether they are about the natural or social worlds, have their hard cores and protective belts, with the former as the defining element of the theory and the latter as the flexible and expendable protection of the theoretical hard core from damage or destruction. Lakatos, even though strongly influenced by Karl Popper, argues against Popper's concept of the critical experiment, for he believes that a single and even critical experiment cannot falsify a theory if the hard core is not hopelessly damaged, or it is successfully protected by the belt. Unless the hard core collapses, a theory continues to stand.

<sup>1</sup> Lakatos 1978, 6.

Despite the fact that his discussion focuses more on the natural sciences, such as Newton's Laws of Motion and the Universal Principle of Gravitation, the concept of the theoretical "hard core" which defines and sustains a theory is enlightening.

The hard core is therefore the life of a theory. It makes one theory different from another and constitutes the identity of the theory: Once a hard core is being formed, a new theory is in the becoming. Although Lakatos does not discuss in particular the formation of a theory, he does point out that a research program starts from an initial model, growing gradually into a research program through testing and verifying. I term it a process of "nucleation," or a process of a hard core or a key idea of a theory being formed and growing, starting a related process of the formation of the theory itself. If this is the case, then we need to raise an essential question when we discuss a theory or a system of ideas: What is the hard core of a theory? In the natural sciences it is not that difficult. The idea of gravitation, for example, is the hard core, which then tells us that an apple would not fly into the sky unless some other forces overpower the gravity of the earth and that a spacecraft should overcome such gravity so as to fly into space. The causality is clear, indicating that the hard core is solid. In the social sciences, however, it is perhaps much more complicated, but the process of theorization is similar. Following somewhat Wang Yangming's heart/mind theory and putting it in a most simplistic way, the hard core of a theory is an initial idea activated by an observation of some thing by a particular theorist.

The social sciences are human. The subjects and objects are both human beings and social beings, too, and therefore social studies cannot be value free and provide such simple, neat, and beautiful theories as Newton's and Einstein's, which indicate causality so directly and can be clearly expressed by mathematical formulas. The monist view has a fatal flaw, i.e. equating the social sciences to the natural sciences and copying the materialness, objectivity, and certainty of the latter directly or blindly into the former. At a certain level and during a certain historical period (such as the era of modernization), it seems that such efforts have made remarkable progress, but fundamentally it will fail, for it is non-human in the first place while the social world is primarily human. The history of the mainstream IR theory is a process of dehumanization, with increasing objectification and decreasing humanness. In IR, Waltz's structural realism is perhaps the closest in form to natural science theory, but its simplistic materialism and purposeful parsimony result in glaring flaws in explaining human behavior. It shows that social theory would fail if it should take humans as non-human and treat the objects of social studies as material and uniform. International systems, for example, are human

constructions and may therefore vary across civilizations. Ever existing uncertainty in the social world creates opportunities for human creation. The performance of the Westphalian international system in Europe differs significantly from that of the Tribute international system in East Asia, though they share certain similarities. Theories based upon the performance and practice of the former then may not be the same as those based upon the latter and, similarly, concepts derived from the former may not even be thought of in the latter. To develop valid social theories, the human factor must go equally with and even weigh more than the material factor. (Even for the theory of gravitation, we perhaps also need to ask why Isaac Newton had such an idea while his Chinese contemporaries did not.) It is, therefore, necessary to differentiate the constitution of the hard core of social theory from that of natural theory and to break it up in order to study its constituent parts, paying special attention to the part which is more human and more cultural and which plays the role of understanding and interpretation, a defining feature of any social theory.

I argue that the hard core of social theory is composed of two parts, one substantive and the other metaphysical. The former is the component that plays the role of perception, taking signals from the real world and presenting them to the latter. It is more about observation, about substantive issues, and about the physical world. The metaphysical component plays the role of conception, processing signals through the ideational filter and representing them as a meaningful question. It is essentially about understanding, about worldviews, and about culture and philosophy. It embeds and brews meaning. In a certain sense, the former is more material because it deals with the “facts” out there, something like Searle’s “intrinsic features of the world,”<sup>2</sup> and the latter is more ideational, attitudinal, and agent/observer-sensitive, for it treats the facts through a process of understanding and interpretation, with the observer’s worldview as the most relevant background knowledge.

The two parts or components of the theoretical hard core, the substantive and the metaphysical, are complementary to and conditioned by each other.<sup>3</sup> They work simultaneously and interact in a way to have impacts on each other. For the purpose of analysis, however, we separate them in our discussion as two constituent components. As discussed above, the substantive component is related to the world out there, dealing with the objective facts based more on perception and receiving signals from the outside. For example, everyone can see poverty and

<sup>2</sup> Searle 1995, 9–13.

<sup>3</sup> As illustrated by the Chinese *ying-yang* diagram. See Brincat and Ling 2014, 4–5.

prosperity in life and war and peace in international relations. It is an objective fact, too, that Chinese soldiers went across the Yalu River into Korea in 1950 and the United States launched a war against Iraq in 2003. On the other hand, the metaphysical component is about the fundamental worldview, about conception, and about understanding and interpretation. It gives meaning to the facts and signals received through the substantive component. It does not only explain what causes poverty and war and what leads to prosperity and peace, but also interprets such facts. Thus it is very much an attitudinal judgment if we say that the Iraqi war was a major US effort to destroy a tyranny, or that it was a war by the wrong people, in the wrong place, and at the wrong time. Furthermore, the substantive component is more material, activated through direct contact with things out there at particular temporospatial points, and therefore is subject to empirical verification and falsification. The metaphysical component is not subject to such empirical testing. It is related to experience and reality, but not formed through the experience and reality here and now. The metaphysical component is a product of the long practice of a group, or people of a certain cultural community, representing their shared practical knowledge, manifesting their worldviews, and reflecting their ways of thinking and doing. It is not formed at any particular time and space. It is processual in nature, accumulated and formed during an open process of continued practice over a long history. Thus, it is the fruit of historical sediments and of the practical knowledge of a group of people.<sup>4</sup> Its importance lies in the fact that a real world fact, such as the poverty of the third world, is perceived and received through the substantive component of the theoretical hard core, goes through the metaphysical component to be processed as a puzzle, and comes out with a particular meaning given by this interpreting process. Thus the poverty of the third world can be seen either as a result of their domestic institutions and systems, or as an effect of the structure and functioning of the world capitalist system.

There is no doubt that the substantive component can make a difference. There are numerous facts out there, but the observer can only select some of them for her observation. At the turn of the century, there was a renewed debate in IR concerning the Hoffmann argument that IR is an American social science. In the 2001 book *International Relations – Still an American Social Science*, edited by Crawford and Jarvis, many authors recognize the dominance of the American IR in the

<sup>4</sup> As Hall and Ames have argued, a major difference of the Chinese modality of thinking from that of Westerners is that correlativity is a characteristic feature of the former while causality, the latter. Nisbett expresses something similar. See Hall and Ames 1995; Nisbett 2003.

discipline and at the same time they also largely agree that IR with a national identity exists.<sup>5</sup> For example, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia – scholars in these countries may raise different questions and take different approaches to international relations. The variations across countries are seen as a function of variations of the countries in question in terms of their international status, developmental levels, and other relevant factors. Canada may be interested more in the status and behavior of a medium-sized country while the United States tends to take itself as the leading player at the core of world politics and raises more questions about the entire international system and world order.<sup>6</sup> Continental European countries may also differ from the United Kingdom in their study of international relations.<sup>7</sup> It seems the debate reflected in this edited volume is more at the substantive level, which tells that the observer selects what to observe according to the material basis she, as well as her territory-based country, rests on. Scholars in the United States, for example, tend to study how a rising power may challenge the US hegemony and to argue that hegemony is good for stability. It is true, but even here the metaphysical component works in the background. Why, for example, does the observer select some facts and pay no attention to other facts?

One of the most important reasons why the theory of the natural sciences differs from that of the social sciences is that their hard cores are differently constituted, especially concerning the metaphysical component. The hard core of natural theories is more or less similar everywhere and the metaphysical component is, justifiably, neglected or taken for granted, because the same matter has the same properties, impartially defined and objectively conditioned. Iron is iron, no matter whether it is in Europe, Africa, or Asia. Even if there is a metaphysical part, it seems negligible. The social sciences, however, are human in the first place, and humans are in turn social and cultural beings. Theories of the social sciences therefore are unavoidably related to cultures and societies where humans are located and go through their everyday practices. It is such human conditions that provide social and cultural beings with their understanding and interpretation of the ego-alter interaction, the intersubjectivity, the interpersonal relationship, and the social world around them. These are ontological and epistemological, constituting shared knowledge and views about the world. It has fundamental impacts

<sup>5</sup> The exception is Tony Porter (Crawford and Jarvis 2001, 131–147), whose article, “Can There Be National Perspectives on Inter(national) Relations?,” argues that nationality is an insignificant determinant of the study of IR. See Porter 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Nossal 2001, 167–186.

<sup>7</sup> Griffiths and O’Callaghan 2001, 187–201; Groom and Mandaville 2001, 151–165.

on the formation of the hard core of a theory, which is made and “fabricated” by thinking humans living in culture and society. Since the hard core is so important to theory formation, and since the cultural and social beings in the dual capacity of a social theorist and a member of a community are so important to the formation of the hard core, we need to discuss in more detail how the hard core of a social theory is related to human beings in social and cultural communities.

By a similar logic, the reason that a social theory may differ fundamentally from another is that their metaphysical components differ. Alexander Wendt, for example, has discussed two levels of questions: the first-order and second-order questions. He defines the second-order questions as those of social theory, concerning the fundamental assumptions of social inquiry, such as ontology and epistemology, and it is therefore in some sense comparable to my definition of the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core here. The first-order questions concern issues in specific domains, for example, a social theory focusing on the family, or on the international system. He believes that one theory differs from another mainly in that the second-order theorizing is different and argues that his constructivism differs from Waltz’s neorealism in that their ways of second-order, ontological theorizing are different. Waltz’s is materialist and individualist while Wendt’s is idealist and holist.<sup>8</sup> According to Wendt, the ontological and epistemological elements define a theory. Ole Wæver has provided another example. He argues that neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism reached a “neo-neo” synthesis during the 1980s because, using Kuhn’s words, they were no longer incommensurable and their fundamental assumptions were converging – both sharing a rationalistic research program and a conception of science.<sup>9</sup> Wæver holds that neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism underwent a redefining in the 1980s toward an “anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism.”<sup>10</sup> As a result they have become increasingly compatible.

It is correct if we take what Wæver means by using the term “anti-metaphysical” as a tenacious insistence by the mainstream on the material and scientific. However, I would argue that the neo-neo synthesis would be inevitable even though they seem to deal with different substantive issues in international relations, one with the international structure defined in terms of power distribution and the other, international institutions as the primary mover for cooperation beyond hegemony.<sup>11</sup> It is so because the metaphysical component of their

<sup>8</sup> Wendt 1999, 5–6. <sup>9</sup> Wæver 1996, 162–163. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>11</sup> Waltz 1979; Keohane 1984.

theoretical hard core is the same in the first place, best reflected by the monist worldview. Keohane himself agrees that neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism share a rationalistic research program. Being rationalistic is indeed the metaphysical component of their theoretical hard core, which brings the two theories together and defines them both as “rationalistic theories.”<sup>12</sup> What I want to stress here is that the two mainstream theories share a worldview in a fundamental way, for they both see the world as composed of rationalistic individuals or actors, busy with seeking self-interest and constrained only by capabilities or contracts. It is this shared worldview that leads to the inevitable convergence of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism.

The monist view takes theory as ahistorical and a-spatial, universally applicable anywhere and anytime. The General Principle of Gravitation is true no matter whether it is in the United States or Europe or Russia or China, so that spacecraft anywhere need to overcome that gravity of the earth. (In fact, it is now well known that this great principle is not universally applicable in terms of time and space. In this sense, the pluralist view is promising even in the natural sciences.) The pluralist view, on the contrary, takes seriously the roles of space and time, geography and history, and culture and practice when the formation and development of social theory are under discussion. If culture has important impacts on social theory formation, and if the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core is the product of the long practice of a cultural community, then culture does matter, most conspicuously during the initial stage of theory construction. A social theorist is born, brought up, and living in a particular geo-cultural space and during a specific historical period. She has learned the language and lived the practical knowledge. The cultural community has provided her with a menu of thinking and doing, and she can hardly think and do something outside this menu, just as an international theorist who has lived in the tradition of the Westphalian international system can theorize neatly and rigorously about anarchy and balance of power, but cannot think and theorize about the ordering principle of the Chinese Tribute system or the Japanese Tokugawa system, where anarchy and balance of power seem to have had much less relevance.

In short, culture shapes the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core and nurtures the nucleus of a social theory when it begins its life.

<sup>12</sup> Keohane 1989a, 171, 173.

### **Background, Practice, and Cultural Communities**

Then a question is how this metaphysical component is shaped. My answer is that it is shaped and structured primarily by the background knowledge of a cultural community. To justify this answer, we need first to discuss three key concepts, background knowledge, communities of practice, and cultural communities, to see how they are related to one another and how they express the close relationship between culture and the metaphysical component of a theoretical hard core.

Background knowledge is a key term for the understanding of the metaphysical component. Many philosophers have discussed it and those of pragmatism and practice philosophy have placed a particular emphasis on it. John Searle's concept of "Background" is perhaps most typical and illustrative in this respect. He discusses in detail what Background means, as he says:

I have argued for what I call the thesis of the Background: Intentional states function only given a set of background capabilities that do not themselves consist in intentional phenomena. Thus, for example, beliefs, desires, and rules only determine conditions of satisfaction – truth conditions for beliefs, fulfillment conditions for desires, etc. – given a set of capacities that do not themselves consist in intentional phenomena. I have thus defined the concept of the Background as the set of nonintentional or preintentional capacities that enable intentional states of function.<sup>13</sup>

For Searle, Background is so important that it provides a context without which there would be no intentional states of function or no meaning for a word that seems to have no lexical ambiguity. In other words, Background constitutes the interpreting schemes. He has further described its functions, which, *inter alia*, are: enabling linguistic interpretation to take place, enabling perceptual interpretation to take place, structuring consciousness, and disposing an actor to certain sorts of behavior.<sup>14</sup> His discussion on the two important interpretive functions of Background is particularly enlightening. The first is the linguistic interpretation. "We don't interpret a sentence at the level of bare semantic content; interpretation rises to the level of our Background abilities." It is the background knowledge that draws the boundaries of our interpretation. With background knowledge, we "immediately and effortlessly interpret" the meaning of words in a sentence.<sup>15</sup> Then the function of perceptual interpretation tells us that with background we are able to see something as a certain sort of thing because we bring the background to bear on the raw perceptual stimulus, as Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit figure

<sup>13</sup> Searle 1995, 129. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 132–137. <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

may show.<sup>16</sup> By the same logic, we are able to provide some social event with a certain sort of meaning because we put it, often unconsciously, against our background repertoire, which enables us to interpret the event “immediately and effortlessly.” A Chinese joke that makes every Chinese laugh may receive no ready response from a British audience, and vice versa, for they do not share the tacit knowledge that constitutes their frame of reference and do not understand the implications that derive from a particular culture.

Background knowledge lies behind the process of cognitive inclusion and exclusion, or the menu for choice of ideas. As Haugaard argues, we do not simply observe the world out there as objective reality.

we observe it by imposing our hypothesis upon it, which essentially constitutes categories of inclusion and exclusion. While Kant considers these categories as *a priori* and, somehow, transcendentally true, sociology and anthropology have taught us that these categories are multiple and variable. They constitute what Foucault terms a historical *a priori* . . . , which is a local tacit knowledge of thought particular to a period. I would argue that this is also what Kuhn . . . means by a paradigm. We interpret the world through categories of thought which constitute a [*sic*] historical (varied across time) and anthropological (across space) categories of meaning which entails local modes of inclusion and exclusion. Our knowledge of structuration practices is directly related to this knowledge. These broad categories of meaning, inclusion and exclusion, exist largely in our minds as *habitus* in Bourdieu’s terminology . . . , or what Giddens . . . calls *practical consciousness* knowledge and Foucault terms an episteme . . . , system of thought or historical *a priori*.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever it may be termed, it is the tacit, practical, and background knowledge that enables people to take things for granted and to take some of the meanings for granted. In IR, it is perhaps the international practice approach scholars that have foregrounded the background. Wendt has discussed two types of knowledge, i.e., “explanatory knowledge” and “practical knowledge,” the former being about why things happen and the latter about what to do. But he understands them as merely different attitudes toward time, for explanatory knowledge is backward-looking while practical knowledge is forward-looking. Despite this, he argues that practitioners need practical knowledge because they need to know what to do.<sup>18</sup> His misinterpretation is that they are merely understood as two kinds of knowledge, focusing on different temporal spaces respectively. The 2002 special issue of the *Millennium* discusses the practice turn and the pragmatic agenda of IR and the background is again brought up as associated with practice.<sup>19</sup> Scholars of the practice approach in IR have

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. <sup>17</sup> Haugaard 2012, 42. <sup>18</sup> Wendt 2001.

<sup>19</sup> *Millennium* (2002) 31 (3).

provided a systematic discussion on background knowledge and pointed out the inseparable connection between background knowledge and communities of practice. Vincent Pouliot distinguishes between representational knowledge and practical knowledge, arguing that contemporary social theories have a strong “representational bias” and are therefore unable to account for nonrepresentational practices. It is rooted “in the evolution of Western thinking since the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution,” and dismisses “local knowledge that makes sense in particular contexts” in favor of generalizable and abstract precepts.<sup>20</sup> Mainstream IR theories, as well as their respective logics such as the logic of consequences by rationalistic theory and the logic of appropriateness by constructivist theory, all reflect this representational bias. Following later Wittgenstein, Toulmin, Searle, and Bourdieu, Pouliot defines practical knowledge as tacit, inarticulate, contextual, local, experiential, and intuitional. It is in contrast to representational knowledge that is conscious, verbalizable, universal, intentional, rational, and abstract.<sup>21</sup> He stresses the important function of practical knowledge as the mover of action and points out that what people do in fact does not derive from representational knowledge, but from local, inarticulate, and practical knowledge. In *International Practices* edited by Emanuel Adler and Pouliot, they begin to use the term “background knowledge,” to refer to the “stock of unspoken know-how, learnt in and through practice, and from which deliberate and intentional action becomes possible.”<sup>22</sup> Such a definition goes well with Searle’s concept of Background.

Background knowledge, understood as such, has significant implications for social theorizing, as well as for social action. That it comes from practice indicates the continuity of knowledge with the world, constituting a strong argument opposing the Cartesian dualism of thing-thought dichotomy, that it is nonintentional, inarticulate, and nonrepresentational means that it is experiential and even habitual,<sup>23</sup> and that it is knowledge growing out of everyday practices in particular communities provides legitimacy for the type of indigenously developed knowledge to stand as knowledge, reasonable and legitimate. These characteristic features of background knowledge at least inspire social theorizing in three respects. First, it is local. By definition, background knowledge comes from agents’ experiences in a particular setting and crystalizes through practical engagement with all aspects of life. Unlike representational knowledge that comes from a transcendental, rational mind above practice and over time and space, it is knowledge evolving in a bottom-up way. Second, it is inarticulate and unconscious. When an agent begins to

<sup>20</sup> Pouliot 2008, 260. <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 271. <sup>22</sup> Adler and Pouliot 2011, 16. <sup>23</sup> Hopf 2010.

acquire background knowledge, a learning process starts. But it is not like classroom learning; rather it is an unconscious process in which the agent learns in and through doing. Only getting it this way is the agent able to respond to a raw stimulus from the outside world “immediately and effortlessly.” Third, it is plural and inclusive in terms of such fundamental questions as ontology and epistemology. In the editorial note of the special issue of the *Millennium* the editors say, “Instead of IR’s fixation with absolute and exclusive ontological solutions, pragmatism encourages a multi-perspective style of inquiry that privileges practice and benefits from the complementarity, rather than opposition to, of different understandings of world politics.”<sup>24</sup> Background knowledge is bound to be in the plural, for there are many communities of practice whose worldviews may not and cannot be the same. In this sense it is also inclusive, because its life lies in the exchange and dialogue among these communities rather than in its isolation. That one type of background knowledge is superior to another is a mere myth.

The return of background knowledge to the study of international relations is a recent phenomenon and aims to set the agenda for the international practice approach. One of the most important contributions it has made is that it relates background knowledge with communities of practice: A community of practice rests on background knowledge for its existence and socially meaningful patterns of action. As Adler says: “Practices are knowledge-constituted, meaningful patterns of socially organized activity embedded in communities, routines and organizations that structure experience.”<sup>25</sup> Communities of practice are the social collectivity that develops, shares, stores, and maintains such knowledge, and in turn it is constituted and shaped by such knowledge. Epistemic communities, transnational advocacy networks, and critical communities, which IR scholars have studied before, are subsets of communities of practice.

For Adler and Pouliot, thus, background knowledge shapes a community of practice, which they defined as “a configuration of a domain of knowledge that constitutes like-mindedness, a community of people that ‘creates the social fabric of learning,’ and a shared practice that embodies ‘the knowledge the community develops, shares, and maintains.’”<sup>26</sup> In an earlier study, Adler in discussing a community of practice, has emphasized such features as a community of people, shared practice, and “a repertoire of communal resources, such as routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, symbols, and discourse,”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Editors of *Millennium* 2002 (31) 3: iii. <sup>25</sup> Adler 2008, 198.

<sup>26</sup> Adler and Pouliot 2011, 17. <sup>27</sup> Adler 2005, 15.

in which the members of such a community are “informally and contextually bound.”<sup>28</sup> In the study of international relations, communities of practice are specifically defined as transnational, including communities of diplomats, of traders, of environmentalists, and of human rights activists. They are networks across national borders, as well as epistemic communities of like-minded people. Examples are given in such areas as diplomacy, deterrence, global climate change, humanitarianism (the Red Cross), and international law – very specific, issue-related areas where practitioners across national borders get together and work as a group with a distinct collective identity and a similar way of doing things.

It is clear that such communities of practice are important in today’s international relations, for they rest not on the uniform representational knowledge that has dominated the social sciences for years and stresses background knowledge that both derives from and constitutes practice. The key concept is no doubt practice. As Adler and Pouliot define, “Practices are competent performances. More precisely, practices are socially meaningful patterns of action which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.”<sup>29</sup> Such an approach to social studies in general and IR in particular is indeed innovative. It is a worldview, for it looks at the world not as a billiard table or an institutional entity, but as networks of communities in practical areas. “Think about the world neither as an assemblage of states nor as divided by borders and lines of national identification, but as transnational communities of practice, based on what people actually *do* rather than on where they happen to live.”<sup>30</sup> Following such a worldview, analysts should change their perspectives about the world around them, rethink roles played by state and non-state actors, and take a fresh look at important aspects of international life, such as global and regional governance.

Even though areas such as security and environment are extremely important and practitioners from different nations may develop shared knowledge and become like-minded people over time and through practice, the definition of practice by Adler and Pouliot seems to limit a community of practice to merely transnational issue-related areas, as Adler has stated that background knowledge cements constellations of agents across borders.<sup>31</sup> Members of a community of practice, though from different nation-states, can have similar views and positions on

<sup>28</sup> Adler and Greve 2008, 196. <sup>29</sup> Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, emphasis in original. <sup>31</sup> Adler 2005, quoted in Pouliot 2008, 259.

a particular issue area, whether it is human rights, environmental protection, climate change, or deterrence. However, if we go back to the concept of background knowledge, we may find communities of practice, bounded by shared, tacit, and even take-it-for-granted knowledge, may include much more than mere specific issues in international relations. Pouliot is quite correct in pointing out the most important dimensions of Bourdieu's definition of *habitus*, which has influenced him very much in developing the logic of practicality, as "a system of durable, transposable dispositions, which integrate past experiences and functions at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciation, and action, making possible the accomplishment of infinitely differentiated tasks."<sup>32</sup> It is historical, relational, and dispositional. However, he has immediately exemplified it by using the term "diplomatic habitus," which is "a set of regular traits which dispose its bearers to act in a certain way,"<sup>33</sup> thus drawing a clear border line for the concept of communities of practice and limiting Bourdieu's definition to a more technical, specific, and issue-related level. It is justifiable, for any analysis needs to delineate its boundaries and it looks different but also fairly neat if the world is composed of communities of practice rather than nation-states. It is indeed a new worldview, but the fact is that the concept of communities of practice is broader than it is defined and applied by international practice approach scholars, and a redefinition may widen the horizon for academic exploration and provide yet another new view to look at the world.

It is relevant here to draw on Barry Buzan's discussion of the concepts of "*gemeinschaft*" and "*gesellschaft*." The former refers more to a civilizational community, more natural and with a strong sense of "we-ness," while the latter is more functional, an association, which may not have pre-existing cultural bonds, may be formed by regular and intense interaction, and may be qualified in a functional sense as a society.<sup>34</sup> Communities of practice, defined by Adler and Pouliot, seem to be more like what Buzan terms "*gesellschaft*," whose members may not have prior identity and tight cultural bonds. They have gathered together to perform competently as members of a transnational grouping in various issue areas. Following Buzan's discussion, a *gemeinschaft* rests much more on traditions, cultures, civilizations, and therefore constitutes a much more coherent and steady community than the more functional *gesellschaft*. While the latter is more explicit and direct in terms of the behavior of its members, the former has a much deeper and more fundamental influence on the mindset of the people who have complete immersion in it.

<sup>32</sup> Pouliot 2008, 272.    <sup>33</sup> Quoted in Pouliot 2008, 272.    <sup>34</sup> Buzan 1993.

The prototype of communities of practice is a cultural community. It is more in the sense of *gemeinschaft* defined by cultures and traditions, by shared identities and worldviews. IR analysts often shy away from the involvement of culture in their studies, not only because it hardly fits into the neat rigor required by the positivist standards for “scientific theorizing,” but also, perhaps, because of their fear of being accused of cultural relativism. Culture is no panacea, but no one can avoid the concept of culture in discussing “communities.” If members of a social group are historically bounded and share inarticulate knowledge that makes their action meaningful and enables them to interpret action by others, then it is no other than a cultural community. Culture is naturally related thus to a community. As Richard A. Shweder says:

What do I mean by “culture”? I mean community-specific ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient. To be “cultural,” those ideas about truth, goodness, beauty, and efficiency must be socially inherited and customary; and they must actually be constitutive of different ways of life.<sup>35</sup>

The diplomatic community of practice, an example often used by international practice approach scholars, is a group of diplomats from different countries who share the same diplomatic culture.<sup>36</sup> It is not “diplomacy” as a specific and functional area that makes the community. It is, rather the “diplomatic culture” that makes it. In fact Adler once said, “I also suggest that one should judge civilizations not for what they ‘are’ but for what they ‘do.’ That is, we should conceive of civilizations as dynamic, loosely integrated, pluralistic, and heterogenic *communities of practice* whose boundaries extend as far as their practices.”<sup>37</sup> However it seems that he does not realize or does not want to point out that a cultural community is the prototypical form of communities of practice, historically formed and culturally tied together. When he is discussing the case of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, he says: “By culture, I mean neither what Huntington meant in ‘The Clash of Civilizations’ nor a romantic view of the Mediterranean cultural attributes – olives, wine, sunshine, and gorgeous beaches. Rather I have in mind the development of a relatively new type of preventive diplomatic practice that depends for its success on the political and social engineering of a Mediterranean ‘we-feeling’ or collective social identity.”<sup>38</sup> It is clear that such a community of practice is first of all more issue related. By definition it is more functional

<sup>35</sup> Shweder 2000, 163.

<sup>36</sup> Pouliot 2016. In this book, Pouliot takes again his favorite example, the international diplomatic community, as one of practice and studies creatively how hierarchy is formed in this community through practice.

<sup>37</sup> Adler 2010, 68, emphasis in original. <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 228–229.

than fundamental. For me, a community of practice may be one in a particular issue area, but its prototype and primary form is a cultural community, for background knowledge is most deeply embedded and habitually patterned behavior is most readily founded in a cultural community. Culturally nurtured background knowledge is thicker, steadier, and more natural than any technically formed background knowledge in a specific issue area.

Perhaps we can categorize communities of practice into three different types by a culturally relevant standard. The first is the macro-level community of practice, referring to civilizational communities of practice. In today's world, we talk about Western and non-Western cultures, and inside the non-Western sphere there are also many different cultures, such as the Chinese and Indian ones, as is the case within the Western cultural spheres. These civilizationally bound communities are macro-level cultural communities. Peter Katzenstein's study of civilizations in world politics, the ambitious three-volume work he has edited, seems to focus on the following civilizations: American, European, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian.<sup>39</sup> Samuel Huntington's study includes seven civilizations with potential tendency for conflict.<sup>40</sup> Feng et al. believe that there are five "cultural spheres" in the world, including the Chinese, the Christian, the Orthodox, the Moslem, and the Indian and the Chinese cultural sphere contains roughly China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan.<sup>41</sup> The second is the intermediate-level of communities of practice, referring to such communities within a civilizational community of practice. It may also be called a subcultural community. Examples include communities based upon gender, socioeconomic classes, and religious and ethnic groupings. Such social groups exist within one civilizational community of practice, but have distinct experiences and ways of life of their own. Women feel about war differently from men and workers experience differently from capitalists. They practice in different ways and their worldviews may differ accordingly. The third is the micro-level category, referring to the issue-related community of practice. It is more functionally oriented. Such communities develop their issue-related culture through their everyday work as practitioners, and diplomats, human rights activists, and environmental protectionists belong to this category. The community of practice within the research agenda of international practice approach scholars goes mostly to the third type and functions mainly at the micro-level and with specific issues. All the three levels of communities are communities of practice because they all rest on

<sup>39</sup> Katzenstein 2010a; 2012a; 2012b. <sup>40</sup> Huntington 1996.

<sup>41</sup> Feng, He and Zhou 2005, 495.

background knowledge. In other words, they are defined by culture, culture as the most conspicuous background, as ways of life, as shared knowledge for perception and disposition, and as schemes of understanding, interpreting, and giving meaning to social events.

Cultural communities are communities of practice and culture is therefore defined in terms of shared background knowledge. Culture refers to the way of life of a people who share a lot in terms of behaviors, values, beliefs, and perspectives without consciously knowing them. The worldviews, the attitudes, and the schemes for understanding and interpreting embodied in the metaphysical component of a theoretical hard core to fulfill its function as an ideational and intellectual construct are exactly the contents of background knowledge that have been formed over time and based upon the practice of a collectivity.<sup>42</sup> Culture thus defined means that a cultural community is a group of people bound by background knowledge and culture's significance lies in the fact that no community can be formed without culture. It is the most conspicuous yardstick to distinguish one group of people from another, the most reliable sources to create "we-ness," including the "we-feeling," "we-thinking," and "we-doing," and the most durable maker and marker of collective identity. Culture shapes the character, the personality, and the identity of a community. A community is called such because it has a shared cultural heritage and orientation. In other words, culture is the invisible bond that ties people into a community. Following David Hall and Roger Ames, who say in their discussion of the Confucian tradition, "'Confucianism' is a community, a society, and a living experience,"<sup>43</sup> we perhaps can also argue that Confucianism is a culture. It exactly reflects what background knowledge is and does.

I do not mean here to overstress the uniqueness of any particular culture. In fact, there is much in common across cultures. Chinese, for example, share a lot with Americans, as well as Americans with Japanese, even culturally. However, there are also distinctive ways of life especially among civilization-based cultures. Even for scholars of the international practice approach, communities of practice are treated as communities because they have already developed a culture by which its members have a similar mindset on the particular issues they deal with, whether it is human rights, deterrence, or environmental protection. Patrick Morgan's study of the practice of deterrence, for example, has showed in fact how a culture of deterrence is developed over years of practice and how it influences in this process the thinking and doing of the practitioners in this field.<sup>44</sup> This is perhaps why Adler uses the term "culture in action" to

<sup>42</sup> Qin 2013. <sup>43</sup> Hall and Ames 1987, 24. <sup>44</sup> Morgan 2011, 139–173.

describe a community of practice and stresses the significance of doing.<sup>45</sup> But culture is not only culture in action, it is also culture *for* action. In other words, culture defined in terms of background knowledge is in practice and on practice, reflecting what the community members do and disposing them for certain behavior and action. For the study of communities of practice, therefore, culture is a must.

### **Culture and the Metaphysical Component**

The significance of culture, defined in terms of background knowledge, for social theorizing lies in the fact that culture cultivates and shapes the metaphysical component of the hard core, which is by definition the understanding and interpreting schema embedded in a social theory. Culture is both mental and material. The definition of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is perhaps the most comprehensive, taking culture as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a group. Culture encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs. In the academic circles, definitions of culture tend to lean more toward the non-material and knowledge dimensions. Edward Tylor, for example, defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”<sup>46</sup> Wendt defines culture as common and collective knowledge, the former concerning actors’ beliefs about each other’s rationality, strategies, preferences, and beliefs, as well as about states of the external world, or “intersubjective understanding;”<sup>47</sup> and the latter concerning the knowledge structure held by groups which generate macro-level patterns in individual behavior over time.<sup>48</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston lists some of the definitions as the following: Glenn et al. define it as “the total knowledge existing within a society;” Wildavsky calls culture those codes enabling individuals to make much out of the little, like grand theories, paradigms, programs, from whose premises many consequences applicable to a wide variety of circumstances may be deduced; Keesing suggests that cultures are systems of cognition that relate people and communities to their ecology or environment in an evolutionary, symbolic relationship; Geertz holds that culture is a “system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitude towards life;” and Schein and Barnes believe that

<sup>45</sup> Adler 2010, 68. <sup>46</sup> Taylor 1871. <sup>47</sup> Wendt 1999, 160. <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 161.

culture is about unconscious and hidden standard operating procedures, scripts, and easy behavior . . . routine, largely unexplained options followed by most people most of the time.”<sup>49</sup> Then Johnston summarizes culture, more in the sense of political science, as shared decision rules, standard operating procedures, and decision routines, something that is learned, evolutionary, and dynamic. It is thus clear that scholarly definitions of culture are more knowledge-related and ideationally oriented.<sup>50</sup>

No matter how diversified the definition of culture is, therefore, the common core indicates that culture is shared knowledge about the way of life of a society and the way of thinking and doing of its members. It indicates worldviews and visions. As David Blaney and Naeem Inayatullah say:

“Culture” suggests human activity and creative capacities; the human capacity to construct, live and aesthetically express a form of life; human action to embrace and practise as well as critique and reform the “values and visions” of an inherited form of life. To use a different language, human beings live in the world according to a certain “vision” or “cultural representation.” This “vision” sustains cultural life, constituting a way of life’s specific identity in relation to the larger cosmos – its particular conception of what it means to be a human community in the world.<sup>51</sup>

Culture is thus by definition a most distinctive feature of human society, and ideas, worldviews, and attitudes are all factors that reflect a particular culture. It reflects at the macro-level common worldviews, collective attitudes, and communal behavioral codes, relating to how actors observe, experience, and engage with others and the outside world. In this sense, shared background knowledge is a most appropriate term as well as the most distinct feature of a culture, including not only a particular type of “preventive diplomatic practice,” but also all aspects of life, such as the Mediterranean way of enjoying olives, wine, and sunshine. Using the concept of “Background” as Searle has defined, we can say that a cultural community is a group of people holding shared background knowledge and being like-minded in their way of thinking and doing at the macro-level. A most natural and representative form of communities of practice, therefore, is a cultural community.

The relevance of a cultural community as the prototype of communities of practice lies in the fact that the members of a cultural community in the first place share local and experiential knowledge, which comes before representational knowledge is formed, taught, and imposed, and continues as representational knowledge accumulates. Local and experiential knowledge is decentralized, bottom-up, and thus tends to be

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Johnston 1995, 33. See also Shweder and LeVine 1984.

<sup>50</sup> Johnston 1995, 35. <sup>51</sup> Blaney and Inayatullah 1998, 64.

heterogeneous. It relates agents and the world out there from the very beginning. This view goes against what Patrick Jackson has called “the Enlightenment dream,” or “dualism,” which views the social world as an “objective” existence and this objective world can be readily and radically separated from those who observe it. The separation of the world and knowledge of the world, of the facts and the observer of the facts, and of things and thoughts, constitutes the basic assumption of this Cartesian dichotomy. On the other hand it is what Wang Yangming terms “unity of knowledge and practice,” which indicates a process of mutual inclusiveness and makes the two inseparable from each other, or it is also what Jackson names “monism,”<sup>52</sup> which “maintains a fundamental continuity of knowledge with the world and therefore does not give rise to an account of knowledge practices that aims at accurately reflecting the world’s essential dispositional character.”<sup>53</sup> It emphasizes the value orientations of the researcher and creative understanding and interpretation of the observer.

It is noteworthy that Jackson further interprets the Weberian “objectivity” and “scientific monism,” as shedding light on social theorizing. In the first place Weber has denied the positivist sense of objectivity as he has argued:

There is no “objective” scientific analysis of cultural life – or, put perhaps somewhat more narrowly but certainly not essentially different from our purpose – of “a social phenomenon” independent of special and “one-sided” points of view, according to which, – explicitly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously – they are selected, analyzed, and representationally organized as an object of research.<sup>54</sup>

Thus Weber has negated the view that we can accurately reflect the world out there and stressed that “We are *cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude towards the world and lend it significance.”<sup>55</sup> Weber has also pointed out that scientific research is more conditioned by researchers’ “knowledge *interest* as it arises from the specific cultural significance that we attribute pertaining to the process in an individual case.”<sup>56</sup> In all this discussion, the significance of culture to the value orientations of the researcher is explicitly expressed. As Jackson has commented, “the social sciences are productive of the world, beholden not to some existing set of objects or their

<sup>52</sup> Here the word “monism” used by Jackson is not the same as “monism” used in Chapter 1. “Monism” here is in contrast with “dualism,” while in Chapter 1 “monism” is the opposite of “pluralism.” The same word is used but expresses different meanings. I want to make this point clear to avoid confusion.

<sup>53</sup> Jackson 2008, 133. <sup>54</sup> Weber 1999, quoted in Jackson 2008, 146.

<sup>55</sup> Weber 1949, 81, emphasis in original; quoted in Ruggie 1999, 216.

<sup>56</sup> Weber 1999, emphasis in original; quoted in Jackson 2008, 147.

essential dispositional properties but rather to the cultural values that orient the investigation from the beginning.”<sup>57</sup> Clifford Geertz has once reiterated Weber’s emphasis on significance and meaning, saying that: “Believing, with Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take . . . the analysis of [those webs] to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”<sup>58</sup> We may understand that Weber’s “scientific monism,” as Jackson has named it, makes three fundamental assumptions. First, the world and knowledge of the world cannot be separated; second, there is no absolute “objectivity” in social life, and the so-called “objectivity” is in fact socially and culturally constructed; third, knowledge about the social world is culturally oriented, for the meaning of social action is given by humans in a particular cultural setting.

Now we may come back to the formation of the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core. As an ideational construct, it is essentially about understanding and interpreting, processing “facts” perceived by the substantive component. It is in this way that the metaphysical component is related to culture via background knowledge, for it is informed primarily from the background knowledge of a cultural community. There is not only a continuity of knowledge with the world out there, but also a continuity of a theorist with the culture she is embedded in, for she shares the background knowledge and constructs the metaphysical component of her theoretical hard core consciously or unconsciously with the internalized and inarticulate knowledge of the cultural community of which she is a member. She is first of all a cultural being and naturally takes a culturally oriented perspective, from which she lends significance to a social event or “fact.” Rationality, I believe, composes the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core for much of social theory in various fields, including IR, because it is an intellectual construct born and brought up in the Western culture and has constituted a key element of the background knowledge therein, developed, refined, and enriched by repeated intellectual efforts especially since the Enlightenment. It is basically impossible that such an idea would have been originally produced in the Chinese culture despite the fact that the Chinese civilization has an unbroken history of thousands of years, for it is of less significance within the structure of the background knowledge of the Chinese culture and therefore it seems to be off their menu for choice and for representation.

<sup>57</sup> Jackson 2008, 147. <sup>58</sup> Geertz 1973, 5.

The metaphysical component is thus nurtured by background knowledge. The primary assumption here is that a theorist lives in a particular society and cultural community and there is an ideational as well as a practical continuity between her and the community of which she is a member. Fundamentally, a theorist carries out the practice and shares the background knowledge therein. Such knowledge provides the menu or context for her thinking and disposes her toward a certain mode of intellectual practice, which in turn helps her construct a social theory, starting from the formation of the theoretical hard core. Her imagination and intellectual activity can go as far as her practices and practical knowledge carry her, but she is hardly able to theorize about things outside the confines of the menu, unless she has experiences of two or more than two cultural communities.

Following Searle's logic, therefore, for a social theorist, the intentional state is to theorize on the social, and what matters are the nonintentional or preintentional capacities. These capacities enable her intentional state to function so that she may start to construct a social theory. Furthermore, these capacities come from her background knowledge that has been formed through years of living in a particular community of practice. The theorist, consciously or perhaps more often than not unconsciously, will turn to her background knowledge for inspiration and interpretation. She is not a transcendental super mind. If we believe that background knowledge informs the metaphysical part of the hard core of a social theory, and if we agree that background knowledge is in the plural form, that is, background knowledges, then it is reasonable to argue that the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core may well vary across communities of practice, forming different views about the world around. For a long time in IR, however, the metaphysical component has not even been thought of and background knowledge has been largely neglected. The assumption that the mainstream IR theory is universally applicable has dominated the research programs through a deep level of internalization by theoretical practitioners both inside and outside the West.

There are several dimensions through which we can understand how background knowledge informs the metaphysical component. First, the metaphysical component shares the temporo-spatial dimension of the background knowledge. The theorist is able to theorize mainly within the temporo-spatial confines for the background knowledge of her cultural community. Past experience and history work actively here. As Bourdieu has pointed out, the *habitus* is a product of history and produces individual and collective practices in accordance with the schemes generated by history. "It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and

action, tend to guarantee the ‘correctness’ of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.”<sup>59</sup> Western mainstream theorists of IR have had a ready reference, i.e. the Westphalian international system, which is in their history and has existed in the region where they have practiced, and from which their theoretical concepts have been put forward, including some key concepts of international studies – sovereignty, anarchy, and balance of power, as I have mentioned. But it is almost impossible for them to conceptualize about other international systems that have existed in history outside the West. Dependency theory was developed first by theorists of International Political Economy (IPE) in Latin America, whose experiences in their national economies disposed them to the argument that the global capitalist structure was the root cause of the underdevelopment of third world countries.<sup>60</sup> It is also true of feminist IR theory, a key argument of which is that women in war have experiences different from those of men.<sup>61</sup> An interesting fact is that many theorists of the feminist IR theory are female.<sup>62</sup> Most likely, it is not a mere coincidence.

Second, the metaphysical component contains the philosophical tradition of a cultural community. “Philosophical” here means fundamental questions of ontology and epistemology, reflected by more specific worldviews, perspectives, and ways of thinking and doing, which, as cultural sediments, constitute the background knowledge of a community and are shared by the metaphysical component of a social theory. It is particularly related to mental and intellectual activities, to the faculty of thinking about the self and the universe, about the material and spiritual, and so on. William James has related philosophy especially to thinking, saying that “Philosophy is the unusually stubborn attempt to think clearly.”<sup>63</sup> A theorist shares the worldviews embodied in the background knowledge and the ways of thinking therein, which constitute her menu or context. For example, Hall and Ames have argued that there are two modes of thought, a transcendental one and an immanent one, the former being the Western tradition while the latter the Confucian tradition. The first mode believes that there are transcendental principles that exist eternally, immutably, and immaterially, providing an explanation for everything else in the universe. Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover and Plato’s Cosmos

<sup>59</sup> Bourdieu 1990, 347–348.

<sup>60</sup> See Frank 1967; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Caporaso 1978.

<sup>61</sup> Goldstein 2001; Sylvester 1994.

<sup>62</sup> As Joshua S. Goldstein says: “Fortunately, other political scientists in those years – almost all of them women – were not so timid in developing feminist scholarship on war.” Goldstein 2001, xiii.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Hall and Ames 1987, 29.

reflect this mode of thought. On the other hand, Confucianism believes that there are no such principles above humans and societies. A Confucian Cosmos, on the contrary, is a universe of correlativity, which stresses the interdependence and interconnection of all events, thus precluding any dualistic and transcendental language. The polar terms of *yin* and *yang*, for example, are complementarily related to each other, forming an organic whole and requiring each other for life and articulation. For a social theorist, such philosophical assumptions are always with her as background, which inform her worldviews, attitudes, and perspectives. It is hard for a social theorist with transcendental dualism as background to construct a social theory with the immanent worldview as her underlying presumption, and vice versa.<sup>64</sup> In other words, either transcendentalism or immanentalism is very likely to inform the metaphysical component of a theoretical hard core, rationality from the former and relationality from the latter, which may not be noticed or realized because they are deeply embedded in their respective traditional cultures and philosophies, or their background knowledge.

Third, the metaphysical component argument embraces pluralism in social theory construction. It is generally acknowledged that we are living today in a multicultural world. Background knowledge therefore varies across cultural communities. Katzenstein has pointed out that civilizations exist in the plural in the world and that civilizations are also pluralistic internally because there are many traditions and vigorous debates and disagreements.<sup>65</sup> If a cultural community is a prototype of communities of practice and if background knowledge is the key to defining such communities, then communities of practice exist in the plural, and so does background knowledge, elements of which may overlap and can also differ. In fact, an important yardstick to distinguish two different communities of practice is the difference in their background knowledge: different systems of durable, transposable dispositions in Bourdieu's words, and different nonintentional and preintentional capacities that enable intentional states of function, by Searle's definition. In today's world, for example, there are various cultural communities. At the macro-level, there are civilization-based communities, such as the Western world, the Islamic world, and the Confucian world. It is reasonable to say that they have their respective sets of background knowledge, and it is perhaps also reasonable to say that the diversity of culture and background provides rich resources for innovative social theory. In IR, for example, the practice and performance in the Westphalian international system differs significantly from the practice and performance of the

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 11–25.    <sup>65</sup> Katzenstein 2010a, 1.

Chinese Tribute international system. IR theories with a theoretical hard core cultivated by the Westphalian practices may not explain and interpret well phenomena in the Tribute system. Then at the intermediate and micro-levels there are numerous communities of practice, based upon their respective cultures, such as women's rights groups, environmental protectionists, and diplomats. The plural and pluralistic nature of such practices and experiences makes a pluralistic approach to social theory and social theorizing not only possible, but also inevitable.<sup>66</sup> Their respective background knowledge may nurture various theoretical hard cores. Even in IR, the background knowledge of a socioeconomic community of practice may lead to theories like dependency theory and that of a gender-based community of practice may result in a feminist theory of war. A theorist who is highly familiar with different international systems may provide a theory based on an in-depth comparison, questioning many key concepts, such as the "balance of power," which are familiar only in one international system but alien to other international systems.

### **Conclusion**

Social theory depends on the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core for its life and identity, which is the vital part informed by the background knowledge of a cultural community. Social theory therefore, bears its cultural birthmark because the theorist who constructs it lives the culture and is embedded in the background knowledge therein. No matter what reality is observed and perceived through the substantive component, it goes through this metaphysical component for understanding and interpretation. A theorist cannot theorize about something that is completely outside her background knowledge. If we fail to recognize the importance of culture as background knowledge in the development of social theory, then we would tend to take locally constructed theory as universally applicable.

The significance of the practice turn in the social sciences in general and in IR in particular lies in legitimizing creative social theorization. It realizes the importance of local and practical knowledge, which, though tacit, inarticulate, experiential, and even intuitional, sustains a community and defines the practice of the community. It tells, in terms of knowledge production, that social theory, as an explicit form of knowledge, starts from the local and the inarticulate. By definition, local knowledge is featured by its diversity and plurality. If we argue that the metaphysical component is informed by the practical knowledge of a certain cultural

<sup>66</sup> Qin 2011.

community, it must be in the plural because the world, as well as the international relations world, is composed of a multiple of cultures and cultural communities. This kind of understanding of theory construction goes with the pluralist approach discussed in the previous chapter, but with an emphasis on culture defined in terms of background knowledge.

In theory, the diversity of cultural communities in today's world should encourage original social theories to emerge and to grow. In reality, it is extremely difficult for a social theory to grow out of cultures other than the West. It is not surprising, as the non-Western world is a latecomer in terms of social theory development and as the monist approach is still dominantly influential in and beyond the West. In IR, for example, the theory that was initiated in the non-Western world and accepted by the Western academic community of IR is perhaps the dependency theory. It attracted attention around the 1970s in the United States, where chapters about dependence theory appeared in popular IR textbooks. But its influence was short-lived and the theory faded in the 1980s.<sup>67</sup> Somewhat a cousin of dependency theory, world system theory was not initiated in the non-Western world. In standard IR textbooks, there is literally no other IR theory that was born in non-Western cultural communities.

The potential for non-Western IR theory is great, especially as more non-Western nations have joined the grand trend of globalization. Civilizations and cultures of various kinds may prove rich nutriment for social theory construction. If we take the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core as shaped by culture, then a serious exploration of cultural resources for theory may encourage more theoretical innovation. This is the topic for discussion in the next chapter.

<sup>67</sup> Blaney and Tickner 2013, 7–9.

### 3 Culture and Theoretical Innovation

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Social theory contains a theoretical hard core, the metaphysical component of which defines the theory itself. In this sense, theoretical innovation is closely related to the metaphysical component. What is understood as incommensurability is in the final analysis indicated by the incommensurability of such components. Since the metaphysical component is informed and nurtured by culture, and since a social theory always bears its cultural birthmark during its life cycle, theoretical innovation tends to lie with the metaphysical component. We live in a multicultural world, which is composed of various cultural communities of practice, defined in terms of shared background knowledge. Such a world should provide rich resources for the prosperity of social theory development and innovation if the shackles of discursive domination were to be destroyed from the minds of people across the world and pluralism established to open more channels for meaningful dialogue to encourage theoretical innovation.

#### **The Metaphysical Component, Incommensurability, and Theoretical Innovation**

Now a question seems to be highly relevant: How does culture inspire and promote innovation of social theory? There are numerous works on social theory and theoretical innovation, and the concept of the theoretical “hard core” was also invented long ago and has been extensively discussed. However, few people have ever dissected it and related the metaphysical component to the construction of new theories. In the social sciences, inter- or intra-paradigm debates have been unfolded, but none of them have directly explored the composition of the theoretical hard core as an important source for incommensurability and therefore for theoretical innovation.

I argue that innovation of the metaphysical component enables innovation of social theory. A social theory is innovative because it has in its hard

core a distinct metaphysical component which defines this theory and which is incommensurable with that of another social theory. Incommensurability used here refers, very much in the meaning given by Thomas Kuhn, to the fact that theories have different conceptual frameworks, belief systems, and interpretive mechanisms, based largely on different worldviews. As Kuhn has pointed out, theories are incommensurable because theorists of competing paradigms have different ideas, use different vocabularies and conceptual frameworks, and see the world in different ways due to their training and prior experience.<sup>1</sup> Michael Polanyi in his *Personal Knowledge* also argues that theorists from different backgrounds can have logical gaps between belief systems, thinking differently, speaking a different language, and living in a different world.<sup>2</sup> The factors mentioned by Kuhn and Polanyi are exactly those embedded in the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core. These factors are effective in producing different theories. By this logic, theoretical incommensurability may well be caused by the difference in the metaphysical components that define social theories.

Thus, if we use incommensurability as a yardstick to evaluate whether a social theory is innovative, a highly potential resource for such innovation is culture defined in terms of background knowledge, which nurtures and shapes the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the two components of the hard core are related and complementary. Once an event occurs in the real world, the substantive component is the first to be activated and presents the event as a certain thing to be figured out. Then it goes through the metaphysical component as a puzzle to be processed, understood and interpreted, and given a meaning that leads to the decision for its solution. A social theory functions well if the two components work complementarily together. When we say that a theory is original and innovative, it may mean two things. First, the question that activates the substantive component of the hard core is new, not having been observed or systematically discussed previously. Many IR theories fall into this category. Power transition theory, for example, observed a phenomenon that had not been theorized about before and put forward an interesting question: What is to happen when the challenger is catching up in terms of capabilities with the hegemon in the international system? A new theory then was developed, providing an answer to the question by arguing that the probability of war between the two giants is the greatest and the system is most unstable during such a period.<sup>3</sup> It is no doubt an important theoretical innovation, changing a static international power structure

<sup>1</sup> Kuhn 1962. <sup>2</sup> Polanyi 1998. <sup>3</sup> Oganski and Kugler 1980.

into a dynamic power shift and still exerting much influence in today's study of international politics. However, it is an innovation at the substantive level, without innovative change of the ontological and epistemological assumptions of rationalistic IR theory in general. If we compare power transition theory with structural realism, they are akin to each other, akin especially in terms of their view of the international relations world, where material power dominates. Theories of this type belong to innovation within the range of "normal science" and have little to do with theoretical incommensurability.

Second, a new theory exists if the metaphysical component of its theoretical hard core differs from those of the established theories. In other words, it has a different worldview, a different interpretive mechanism, and a different perspective toward fundamental aspects of social life. Poverty in developing countries, for example, has been understood either as the result of bad domestic political and economic management or as the result of an unfair international economic structure and division of labor, leading to two incommensurable theories of political economy: the development theory and the dependency theory.<sup>4</sup> For the former, "Europe's past might be Asia's future" (and the future of Africa and Latin America, too) if Asia should follow suit,<sup>5</sup> and for the latter a revolutionary change of the structure of the international political-economic system is the solution, at least in theory. The fact out there is the same, but the understanding and interpretation of the problem through the metaphysical component differ. This is why the development theory and the dependency theory are incommensurable indeed: Their worlds are far apart. Another recent example is perhaps the international practice theory, which sees the world as composed of communities of practice rather than nation-states, thus fundamentally changing the global political landscape and distinguishing the theory from the mainstream.<sup>6</sup> It is of course possible for both the components to work creatively, but the second part, or the metaphysical component, is often more significant, for it is, because of its power in terms of understanding and interpretation, the soul and identity of a social theory. If there is indeed incommensurability between social theories, it is first of all because their metaphysical hard cores are not commensurable.

It is important to point out that theories dealing with different issues or problems at the substantive level may have a similar or identical metaphysical component at a deeper level. In this case, theories that appear different at first eventually converge and form

<sup>4</sup> See respectively Rostow 1966; Cardoso and Faletto 1979.

<sup>5</sup> Friedberg 1993/1994, quoted in Kang 2007, xi. <sup>6</sup> Adler and Pouliot 2011.

a commensurable synthesis. The opposite is also true: Even if the real world problem is the same, theories with different metaphysical components will provide different understanding and interpretation of the problem and represent it with different meanings, as the development theory and the dependency theory have shown. In other words, incommensurability of the metaphysical components leads to incommensurability of social theories.

In IR, this is not uncommon. The eventual convergence of mainstream IR theories in the United States, it seems to me, is the result of the shared metaphysical component of their theoretical hard core: structural realism and neoliberal institutionalism first and rationalistic theory and Wendtian constructivism later. Since I will discuss this most interesting phenomenon later on, suffice it to say here that the more they move toward grand theories, the more apparent their shared metaphysical component becomes, and the more they tend to converge with one another. The three mainstream American IR theories discuss different aspects in the life of international relations: power, institutions, and culture, and there is no doubt that these are indeed important aspects of international politics. Their innovation lies in that each of them singles out and focuses on one aspect which the other theories have not paid much attention to. But some fundamental questions, such as how the international relations world is perceived and whether international relations is fundamentally human or non-human, are very much taken as a given, a definite and invariable given from the deeply embedded background knowledge they all rely on.

If we seek theoretical innovation by encouraging efforts of excavating and exploring the diverse cultural resources, especially those civilization-based cultures which are conspicuously different such as the Western, the Chinese, and the Indian, then we will indeed open new horizons for social theory in general and IR in particular, for hidden in these cultures are meaningful ideas that are yet to be systemized.

### **Culture as Resources for Theoretical Innovation**

The incommensurability at the deeper level lies in that theories differ in their metaphysical components, their fundamental worldviews which are embedded most readily in culture defined in terms of background knowledge. Mansbach and Vasquez have correctly pointed out: "A paradigm contains within it a fundamental view of the world, and its assumptions act as lenses through which that world is perceived. 'Facts' rarely speak for themselves and make sense only when interpreted in the light of the

basic assumptions of a paradigm.”<sup>7</sup> The fundamental view of the world is most readily provided by culture and the embedded background knowledge. A late Chinese philosopher, Liang Shuming, also says that the fundamental difference between the Eastern and Western cultures lies in the difference in their ways of thinking, or their philosophies, which tend to dispose people of the former to understand and interpret the same issues differently from people of the latter.<sup>8</sup>

In this respect, an interesting discussion by William Callahan on specific IR theories sheds light on theoretical innovation. He compares the American IR theory, the English School, and IR theory with Chinese characteristics. In his article entitled “Nationalizing international theory: the emergence of the English School and IR theory with Chinese characteristics,” he uses the concept of “big ideas” as a standard to differentiate IR theories, arguing that any IR theory with a national label must have a big idea, which is, for the American mainstream, “democratic peace,” for the English School, “international society,” and for the Chinese, “the *Datong*, or universal great harmony.”<sup>9</sup>

Callahan’s discussion of the big idea is related to a somewhat critical question: How to deal with intellectual and discursive domination in IR? What he wants to point out is that the English School and IR theory with Chinese characteristics both aim to resist and overthrow the American discursive hegemony in IR theory. Whether these theoretical efforts have such an ambition is arguable and theorists who work for such innovation are very much likely to wish to create some new theories to add to the intellectual treasure of IR theory, rather than to replace or displace competing theories such as the American mainstream. It is, however, important to notice that he has revealed an interesting fact: A big idea defines a big theory.<sup>10</sup> For him, the quality of the theoretical hard core is decisively ideational. This big idea is not only the soul of a theory shared by theorists, but also comes from the shared knowledge by members of a community including theorists and practitioners alike.<sup>11</sup> In other words, when a question is brought up and enters the knowledge system of an agent, it also enters a menu for interpretation and representation, relying more on the inarticulate background knowledge of the community of which the agent is a member. In 2003 the United States launched a war against Iraq, for the Americans firmly believed and repeatedly stated that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, which could easily proliferate to terrorist groups. Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State, held hearings

<sup>7</sup> Mansbach and Vasquez 1981, 71, quoted in Wæver 1996, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Liang Shuming’s view is discussed by Feng Youlan in his autobiography. Feng 2004, 164.

<sup>9</sup> Callahan 2002. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. <sup>11</sup> Callahan 2004.

in all sincerity at the United Nations Security Council. Even though the investigation team did not find any such weapons in Iraq, the United States believed that the Iraqis had hidden or destroyed the weapons. Why did such things happen? It is the big idea of liberal rationalism that played a crucial role. The United States believed that the Saddam government was an anti-democratic, anti-peace regime and would do whatever it could. Thus, when the issue of Iraq came up, the solution by the United States was war, a solution based firmly on the big idea of liberal rationalism. It was, to a considerable extent, the background knowledge that provided Americans with a ready answer to the Iraqi issue and disposed them to military action against Iraq.

Unfortunately, Callahan has not gone further to explore why the American, English, and Chinese tend to have and can have different big ideas and why such big ideas are related to a country, a nation, or a particular geographical locale. If we should not stop where he stops, then we would go further to see why they have such big ideas, different and distinct. I argue that the big idea comes from the culture in which these scholars are immersed and it is in fact more related to the culture where a nation or a country is embedded rather than to a particular geographical location or nation-state *per se*.<sup>12</sup> A nation-state is largely a politically constructed entity, while a culture is a naturally growing process. The seemingly national label is thus a mere coincidence because of the overlap of the names of some nation-states and the cultures where they are embedded, such as American or Chinese or Indian. That a big idea comes from culture is of great importance for theoretical innovation. It does not come from the present, and neither does it simply represent what is present by rational reasoning. They are embedded in the cultural sediments and come from the practical knowledge of a certain community over long years. They are neither from purely rational reasoning nor from lofty ideal inspiration. They are the ideational product of a particular culture and constitute a perspective based on the world they perceive from their own angle. In terms of social theory, therefore, a big idea is related closely to the metaphysical component, which, as a perspective and worldview, works on the questions presented by the substantive component of the theoretical hard core. In other words, big ideas identified by Callahan in IR are the specification and reflection of a particular

<sup>12</sup> I agree with Shweder that one of the things culture is certainly not about is the so-called national character. The metaphysical component is nurtured and shaped by culture rather than a nation-state. It is labelled with the name of a nation-state simply because there is a high degree of overlap between the nation-state and the cultural community, usually a civilization-based cultural community, such as the Indian, Chinese, and Japanese. See Shweder 2000, 163.

worldview on phenomena in the international system or world politics. Theories differ in that their ideational parts, or the metaphysical components, differ. If this logic stands, it is reasonable to say that culture provides valuable, natural, and rich resources for construction of new social theories.<sup>13</sup>

Phenomena from the real social world are processed and represented by the agent through her ways of thinking. Different ways of thinking lead to different understanding, interpretation, and judgment. A rational solution in one processing system may not be rational in another, and a common practice in the former may not even exist in the menu of possible solutions in the latter. The processing mechanism is highly related to culture. In a social theory, it is functioned by the metaphysical component of the hard core. It is exactly this component that makes theory not just a mere instrument for certain conscious purposes as Robert Cox has stated,<sup>14</sup> but also as a reflection of a culture with firmly imprinted marks of history and practice of the cultural community. A social theory, no matter whether it is to understand or to change the social world, or to make normative judgment, or to provide solutions, reveals through the metaphysical component the worldview of a social grouping, the way of thinking of a cultural collectivity, and the practical knowledge of a human community. Thus, the metaphysical component defines a theory and makes it distinct from other theories.

This is why we say that social theory always has its cultural birthmark. It is in the first place produced in a particular cultural setting and the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core is made in a particular community of discourse and practice. In this sense, culture makes social theory. A cultural community has shared practice, knowledge, and ways of thinking and doing. These are the sediments over long history and are embedded in the ways of thinking and doing of the cultural community. Different cultures are likely to shape different metaphysical components of the theoretical hard core and thus give birth to different social theories. The multi-civilizational and multicultural feature of the world tends to produce various social theories.<sup>15</sup> Such a pluralist view should encourage more theories to emerge.

By definition, the monist view opposes the idea that culture matters in theory building, for cultural sediments cannot have real impacts because theory is universal across time and space, civilizations and cultures.

<sup>13</sup> Ikenberry argues that every country has its own theoretical orientations, preoccupations, and debates. He characterizes American IR tradition as “liberalism in a realist world,” arguing that the fact that liberalist America lives in the realist international system helps construct the lasting liberal-realist debate. Ikenberry 2009a.

<sup>14</sup> Cox 1986. <sup>15</sup> Katzenstein 2010a and 2010b.

Robert Crawford has provided a vivid summary of the monist view, which he believes is the attitude that dominates the mainstream conception of IR:

The consensus to date is that IR is “international” only in subject matter and name, and pretty much a North Atlantic, disproportionately Anglo-American, preoccupation. This anomaly has generated occasional curiosity but generally failed to excite concern. National representation, it might be supposed, ought to play no role in assessing the health or viability of any scientific enterprise. At no point in the human struggle against disease, for example, do we feel compelled to ask whether our epidemiologists are from Bulgaria, Finland, or Tanzania. Why ought our equally pressing, and related, concerns with war, peace, dislocation, famine, wealth, poverty, genocide, environmental degradation, and so on, require the least bit of attention to nationality? Nationality, culture, location, and the myriad other constitutive elements of individual and group identities offer no prophylactic assurance against AIDS, no hedge against hyperinflation, and no shelter for radioactive fallout.<sup>16</sup>

What Crawford says reflects the fundamental assumption of monism. If we should take IR as physics or biology, it would not bear any cultural imprints and can only have one form, rigorously scientific and perfectly universal.<sup>17</sup> IR, however, is a social science directly related to human affairs, thus inseparable from human practice – their ways of thinking and doing. The process of theorizing in IR, therefore, is unavoidably mediated by normative values based on the practical knowledge of a cultural community where it is unfolding. The reason why “big questions” or “big ideas” for theories with national labels are different across nations lies in that the background knowledge of various cultural communities differs. When scholars of the mainstream American IR theory promote the hard positivist approach as universal, they seldom ask “whether the mainstream concept of IR is itself a reflection of values, attitudes, and predispositions forged in the cauldron of particular historical, cultural, and national experiences and circumstances ...”<sup>18</sup> The result of such promotion, if successful (and indeed quite successful so far), could create a discursive and intellectual hegemony in theory building, taking the particular as the universal, deeming all the other particulars as alien heresies, especially those in

<sup>16</sup> Crawford 2001, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Even this is arguable, for medical science also has a cultural background to rely upon. The traditional Chinese medicine, for example, sees a patient and her disease differently from the Western medicine. See Ou 2005. Lou Yulie also argues that traditional Chinese medicine sees a human being as a whole system of which all parts are related. Such relations can be felt only when one is alive. Dissection as it is in the Western medicine will not do because when one is dead, such relations no longer exist. See Lou 2016, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Crawford 2001, 2.

other cultural communities, and homogenizing, marginalizing, or dismissing “alter” theories by the dominant standards. As a result it creates a domain of discursive domination where the phenomena observed are global, but theories for their explanation and interpretation are local ones claimed to be universal. It is a self-closed system, which could lead only to intellectual decay and thus prevent academic pursuit from moving forward to prosperity. Simply put, it kills innovation.

To prevent such a system from being an insurmountable obstacle, it is necessary to put the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core within a cultural context, for the component itself is cultural in nature. Furthermore, to discuss culture, it is important to discuss the fundamental assumptions embedded in a culture defined in terms of shared background knowledge and bearing ontological and epistemological significance. A worldview, for example, is an overall understanding and interpretation of the world, natural and social. It is also a view of the world by members of a particular cultural community, both as common and collective knowledge, rather than by all the people under the sun. Worldviews are therefore related to culture in the first place. An agrarian culture, for example, usually sees human and nature as of one rather than one being the subject and the other object, for their fate seems to be tied together. It is universally acknowledged that our world is composed of multiple civilizations and cultures. Samuel Huntington’s well-known theory of the “clash of civilizations” first of all recognizes the fact that there are many civilizations in the world. Only after making this basic assumption does he begin to discuss the properties of each civilization and the inevitable clash among them.<sup>19</sup> While scholars in any country who study civilizations cannot deny this fact, monists in IR seem to ignore it completely and therefore the concept of “worldviews” is seldom seen in their discussion. They take it for granted that there should be only one correct “worldview,” and turn a blind eye to various worldviews and perspectives that exist in other cultural communities. Even less can they realize that inarticulate and tacit knowledge as background – worldviews and ways of thinking and doing, for example – are so important for the building of social theory.

A cultural community, in terms of language, history, and practice, has something in common with and something different from other cultural communities. A hunting cultural community may understand and interpret the world around it very differently from an agrarian community or a commercial community. It is thus not reasonable to say that there is only

<sup>19</sup> Huntington 1996.

one set of standards which has the sole authority to qualify or disqualify a theory and that there is therefore only one way to see the world, to build theory, and to produce knowledge. Criticizing realism, Ashley once said: "Neorealist theory is theory of, by, and for positivists. It secures instantaneous recognition, . . . because it merely projects onto the place of explicit theory certain metatheoretical commitments that have long been implicit in the habits of positivist method. It tells us what, hidden in our method, we have known all along."<sup>20</sup> What Ashley has emphasized is the perspective, the mindset, and the habitual way of thinking which are embedded in and reflected by positivism. It is for this reason, *inter alia*, Ashley has criticized realism for its poverty. In fact, American mainstream theories have a similar tendency because they have been so used to employing only one set of standards, based on their background knowledge, to theorize about phenomena in different cultures, against the colorfulness and richness of which the theories pale and show their poverty.

Ashley's criticism also points to the fact that the metaphysical matters. Positivism is not only a method, but also, perhaps more significantly, a worldview, deeply embedded in American culture and internalized to the extent that when the mainstream theories of realism, liberalism, and constructivism were being developed, those who were constructing them did not even realize it as a problem, let alone its weaknesses. If we should view the world as a causal totality, then whatever effort we make in theory building would focus on finding the causal mechanisms, and treat factors as independent and dependent variables so that causes and effects could be clearly identified. It is the appropriate approach because it is rational. By definition, furthermore, independent and dependent variables should not be correlated and a particularly emphasized dichotomy is thus firmly established in the worldview. Taking a different worldview, we could see the world as a relational complexity, and then make efforts to find how these relations work and are managed. The world is then not a collection of dichotomous sets, but a correlative whole and an immanent process, a perspective or a way of thinking different from the view that sees a lonely world of causality. The fact that I raise this issue here is not to judge which worldview is better because they are very likely to be complementary, but to point out that different ways of thinking are reflected in different cultures, for example, the Western culture and the Chinese culture, or the Western culture and the Indian culture. The assumption from it is that we may have different theories if we take such worldviews seriously and conceptualize them for the purpose of theory building and innovation.

<sup>20</sup> Ashley 1986, 280.

Recognition of the significance of culture for social theory building opens more channels for knowledge production and theoretical innovation. Different cultures nurture different worldviews, which in turn may shape the metaphysical component and give birth to different social theories. Kuhn argues in his discussion on the structure of scientific revolution that the excitement produced by the clash of two scientific cultures with a fundamental difference is much greater than that produced by two scientific cultures that are less different.<sup>21</sup> It is not only true of scientific cultures, but also true of civilizational cultures in general. Take the Chinese culture as an example, for it seems quite distant from Western culture. In a speech he made at a conference held by Columbia University in 1922, Feng Youlan, a well-known late Chinese philosopher, provides an answer to the question why there is no science in China from the perspective of traditional Chinese philosophy, saying that it is not because of the material conditions such as geography, climate, and economy, but because Chinese do not need science in their value system or their culture.<sup>22</sup> He argues that human beings seek goodness, which for Westerners lies mostly in nature, external to human beings, but for Chinese lies inside the human mind or the inner self of the human being.<sup>23</sup> It is a bold hypothesis. As Feng holds, Westerners, by their knowledge and way of thinking, believe that to know and control the material world is the most important work, while the Chinese, by their knowledge and way of thinking, to know and to control one's own heart/mind or inner self is the most important thing. He uses two concepts to summarize the Enlightenment tradition and the usefulness of science – certainty and power, “Descartes said that it is for certainty; Bacon said that it is for power,” certainty about the outside world and power over this world out there. He continues:

The Chinese philosophies . . . had no need for scientific certainty, because it was themselves that they wished to know; so in the same way they had no need for the power of science, because it was themselves that they wished to conquer. To them the content of wisdom is not intellectual knowledge and its function is not to increase external goods.<sup>24</sup>

Westerners tend to think about the outside world. “They first try to know it, and after getting acquainted with it, they try to conquer it. So they are bound to have science both for certainty and for power.”<sup>25</sup> His argument itself is perhaps arguable, but what is inspiring in his discussion about the two cultures is that Chinese and Westerners differ in terms of their perception of the world and their conception of the

<sup>21</sup> Kuhn 1962. <sup>22</sup> Feng 1991, 572. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 594. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 595.

human and nature. The Chinese way of thinking and doing is more about their heart, their mind, and their inner self.<sup>26</sup> Feng says that modern Europe is trying to know, conquer, and control nature, while the Chinese have been trying to know themselves and sought a peaceful mind.<sup>27</sup> For such a people who place more emphasis on knowing and controlling the inner self, they may produce many rules for cultivating the self, but principles of science and objective laws about nature would not even be thought about, and therefore are not listed in their menu for choice. Certainty, one of the most important principles of rationalism, cannot even enter into the mind of a Chinese, and thus loses its significance in the traditional Chinese culture. Feng argues: "I cannot refrain from saying that the West is extension, the East is intension, and that the West emphasizes what we have, the East emphasizes what we are."<sup>28</sup> The Chinese culture in the final analysis focuses on the inner self and therefore introspection or the control, cultivation, and purification of one's own "heart/mind" has become a principle and precondition for good social order and harmonious social relations. What Feng has discussed is why Chinese are backward in the development of science and technology, but at a deeper level he implies that ways of thinking and doing are philosophically and metaphysically implanted in culture and that members of different cultural communities may have different views about the world, ego and alter, and the material and the social.

My argument that different cultures may produce different social theories by cultivating the metaphysical components of the theoretical hard core is not meant to replace one type of theory with another and to displace one type of discursive and intellectual hegemony with another. Western culture has made great achievements and given birth to great thoughts. Rationality, which is a most important concept developed in Western culture, has inspired and informed so many great theories. What I intend to do is simply to refer to a fact that cultures provide rich resources for social theorizing and can help lead to the prosperity of the discipline of IR. If we should follow only one set of standards and all researchers, or at least most of them, are testing to prove either how correct or how wrong a theory is, then "activit[y] commensurate with international relations theorizing may be noted, but is defined in terms of its consumption, replication, and imitation of what counts as theoretical activity elsewhere."<sup>29</sup> Even worse, it is defined not only by American mainstream IR scholars, but also by those who are carrying out such

<sup>26</sup> In the Chinese language, there is no dichotomous distinction between the mind and the heart. A single word, *xin*, is used for both. It both feels and thinks.

<sup>27</sup> Feng 1991, 592. <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 595. <sup>29</sup> Crawford 2001, 2.

activities elsewhere, consciously and unconsciously, through their belief in monism or their blind following of the monistic principles. The result is that their intellectual soil would be sterile, leaving so much treasure of thoughts wasted. On the other hand, if we should encourage theories growing out of different cultural backgrounds and see how they compete, debate, and perhaps complement one another, we would have a better intellectual inhabitancy. Let me again quote Feng, who says after pointing out that difference between the Western and the Chinese:

The question as to how to reconcile these two [the Chinese and the Western] so that humanity can be happy both in body and in mind is at present difficult to answer. Anyway the Chinese conception of life may be mistaken. If mankind shall afterwards become wiser and wiser, and think they need peace and happiness in their mind, they may turn their attention to, and gain something from, the Chinese wisdom. If they shall not think so, the mind energy of the Chinese people of four thousand years will yet not have been spent in vain. The failure itself may warn our children to stop searching for something in the barren land of human mind. This is one of China's contributions to mankind.<sup>30</sup>

### **Social Theory: From Particularity to Bounded Universality**

If we argue that social theory, especially its metaphysical component, is shaped by culture, the question of universality is unavoidable. Should we aim to create universal social theory or locally applicable theory? It seems to be an easy question, for a theorist, no matter whether she wants to develop meta-theory or medium-range theory, she expects it to be widely or even universally applicable. Some theorists have gone so far as to wish that their theory would not only be universally applicable, but also stand as *the* theory in their respective disciplines.

To this question, monism is likely to provide an affirmative answer. In Chapter 1, we discussed in some detail the monist and pluralist views for theory building. If we should take the monist view, all theories, no matter whether they are of the natural or social world, would be the same, universally applicable and geo-culturally insensitive. There is then only one set of standards, one form of theory, and one orientation for intellectual and scholarly pursuit. If a theorist does not aim to create universally applicable and universally verifiable theory, her work would be hopeless in the first place. The pluralist view, on the contrary, holds that the social world differs essentially from the natural world and therefore social theory is by definition and necessity different from natural theory. Such

<sup>30</sup> Feng 1991, 595.

difference exists in a society among different social groups, such as men and women, the elite and the grassroots, and the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The difference also exists across civilization-based cultural communities, whose background knowledge cannot be identical. Otherwise, it would not be necessary to ask the question: “Why is there no non-Western International Relations theory?” In this line of reasoning, social theories bear the birthmarks of their respective cultures.

While the monist view denies completely this cultural birthmark by its belief in the perfect universality of any theory, the pluralist view tends to recognize the cultural origin of social theory. Theorizing with concepts from different histories, cultures, and backgrounds is welcome because it enriches IR knowledge as a whole. However, the argument that social theory originates from a particular geo-cultural setting may well lead to suspicion that such theory is able to gain universality at all. Furthermore, it may even cause worries about cultural parochialism and exceptionalism. Peter Katzenstein has emphatically pointed out that no culture or civilization should think itself as exceptional, neither the American nor the Chinese.<sup>31</sup> In proposing the Global IR project, Amitav Acharya expresses a similar point of view. While admitting that national and regional schools of IR can broaden and enrich IR, he is strongly opposed to cultural exceptionalism, which he defines as “the tendency to present the characteristics of one’s own group (society, state, or civilization) as homogeneous, unique, and superior to those of others.”<sup>32</sup> He then focuses on the importance of going beyond particularity, saying:

My test for national or regional “schools” of IR is that they must offer concepts and approaches that explain IR not only in that particular country or region, but also beyond. In other words, they must be applicable, at least to some degree, to the world at large. For example, the English School and the Copenhagen School, despite their biases and limitations, has offered concepts such as “international society,” or “securitization,” respectively, which have genuinely broader application beyond the UK or Europe and are used by scholars in other parts of the world . . . To be credible, a Chinese School of IR must offer concepts and explanations that have relevance beyond China or East Asia, rather than simply capture China’s behavior or the East Asian international system.<sup>33</sup>

Such worries are quite understandable and justifiable. An overemphasis on local characteristics may well go to the other extreme: Social theory is and can only be locally applicable. Furthermore cultural parochialism and exceptionalism deny the commonalities of humanity and may lead to disastrous results in both academic pursuit and human life as well. While great caution should be exercised against such extreme

<sup>31</sup> Katzenstein 2010b. <sup>32</sup> Acharya 2014, 5. <sup>33</sup> Acharya 2014, 5, fn.10.

narrow-mindedness and excessive parochialism, it is also necessary to realize that neither thorough universalism nor complete particularism is conducive to social theory building.

I argue that perfect universality is impossible. The noble dream for seeking such universality has already been smashed even in the natural sciences with the falsification of the Newtonian theories in different temporo-spatial fields and the rising of the theory of relativity and quantum physics. In fact, what Popper's principle of falsification through critical experiments tells us quite explicitly is that the aspiration for perfect universality is infeasible and unachievable.<sup>34</sup> For Popper, if a theory fails to be falsifiable, it is not scientific. Perfect universality has ever been an impossible mission especially for social theory, which is born in a particular cultural setting and whose bias is even greater than theories of the natural sciences. Since the background knowledge that defines one cultural community may differ from that of other cultural communities, perspectives and attitudes based on such knowledge, which shape social theory, are not likely to be the same. It is therefore easier to see the social theory born in one culture to be falsified in another.

To indicate the indelible cultural birthmark of social theory, I have made three interrelated arguments. First, social theory is defined by the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core and incommensurable metaphysical components lead to theoretical incommensurability. Second, the metaphysical component is nurtured by culture defined in terms of background knowledge and reflected by worldviews, attitudes, and ways of thinking and doing. Third, culture provides rich resources for theoretical innovation because different cultures are more likely to produce different metaphysical components. It is reasonable to say, paraphrasing Kuhn's judgment, that the greater difference one culture has with another, the greater chance there is for theoretical innovation, innovation more fundamental and more revolutionary. In this sense, all social theories are local in the first place, born of the background knowledge of a cultural community. A social theory originates in a particular cultural setting and has its birthmark during its whole life cycle. No social theory can expect to wash off its cultural birthmark completely and no social theory can reach the ideal state of perfect universality. Starting culturally is not only a possible but also an innovative way for the development of social theory.

It is noteworthy that Acharya's passage cited above stresses "concepts" and "approaches," such as "international society" of the English School and "securitization/desecuritization" of the Copenhagen School.<sup>35</sup> While

<sup>34</sup> Popper 1959.

<sup>35</sup> For the concept of "securitization," see Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998.

the success of the English School or the Copenhagen School may well depend on its broader application than in Europe, it should be realized first of all that the key concepts that form the theoretical hard core are produced in the particular locale and with a particular *habitus*. Before becoming more mature schools of thoughts, they each started with a key concept without which they could not have become influential theories. Moreover, the two strands, i.e. the English School and the Copenhagen School, are still within the Western civilizational and cultural domain. If concepts and approaches should develop in a distant cultural and civilizational realm and if theorizing this way should succeed, then the locally stimulated innovation would be more conspicuous and meaningful.

Thus, while I agree with Acharya on his notion of a qualified social theory, that is, a theory applicable beyond its origin, I need to point out further here that a social theory is first of all to have local application. The metaphysical component is the product of the shared and practical knowledge of a particular cultural community and therefore in the first place depends on culture, exists because of culture, and lives with culture. It is a worldview and a way of thinking, carrying with it the meaning and value of the “we-ness,” presented also for the “other” to know and interpret. Furthermore, the substantive component is more likely to receive signals that touch on the local nerves. As Kim Richard Nossal has noted, a conspicuous feature of the IR discipline is “America at the center,” and hegemonic stability theory is “the ‘theory’ that has been invented by American scholars to ‘account’ for American leadership . . . ”<sup>36</sup> His survey of widely used IR textbooks leads to his conclusion that IR “remains a deeply ‘American’ enterprise, having changed little since Hoffmann was writing in the late 1970s,” because these textbooks “portray the world to their readers from a uniquely *American* point of view: they are reviewed by Americans; the sources they cite are American; the examples are American; the theory is American; the experience is American; the focus is American; . . . ”<sup>37</sup> Nossal’s criticism is sharp, but in fact he reveals a fact: It is natural that a social theory functions first of all to spontaneously respond to the local, reflecting local concerns and providing explanation and meaning for local facts. That is why it has what Acharya calls “biases and limitations.” Since no theory is developed by the almighty and absolutely rational mind, biases and limitations are only natural, for the menu for the theorist to choose from is always limited by time and space, and by the practical knowledge of the culture she lives in. American mainstream

<sup>36</sup> Nossal 2001, 172–173.    <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

IR theories, the English School, the Copenhagen School, dependency theory, feminist IR theory, etc., all have such biases and limitations, for none of them did not come from a particular cultural setting in the very beginning. To some extent, the biases and limitations are what necessarily go with the forming process of a theoretical hard core, especially its metaphysical component. It is the different biases and limitations that may well lead to theoretical innovation.

Robert Cox's discussion on social theory again sheds light here.<sup>38</sup> He has put forward three interrelated arguments. First, theory starts with a certain perspective; second, the perspective is related to a problematic; and third, the problematic comes from specific problems and issues in particular time and space.<sup>39</sup> Along this line, we can infer that a social theory cannot stand without a particular temporo-spatial site to start and sustain, and the perspective that a social theory starts with can be a view of a certain socioeconomic class and thus the theory can be a standpoint theory "*for someone and for some purpose.*"<sup>40</sup> Although Cox still focuses on modern Western societies and socioeconomic classes and argues that their perspectives are the most important for theory building in such societies, he, as a leading thinker of the critical theory, enlightens us at a deeper level on the question of how theory is constructed. Since the initial perspective and the problematic come from some socioeconomic classes, they come from some cultural or subcultural communities which, as we have discussed, may have different initial perspectives and problematics once an issue arises in the real world. The English School, for example, seems to have started its debate with the American mainstream over methodological differences, but in fact, it is their initial perspective and the problematic that differed from their American counterparts and shaped the debate, with the American mainstream stressing the international system and the English School focusing on international society. It is not the methodological difference that has made the English School. It is the initial perspective of international society that has enabled the English School to develop a theory of its own. In addition, methodology, such as positivism or reflectivism, is in fact a worldview, too. This initial perspective, as I understand it, is close in meaning to the metaphysical component. As a theory is maturing, it may go beyond this initial perspective, but without it no theory can even get started. Realism and liberalism as theories of IR explicitly show their initial perspective, which goes back to the rationalistic worldview born out of the Enlightenment, and dependency theory has a clear initial perspective from practice in less developed peripheral economies which constitute

<sup>38</sup> Cox 1986, 207–208. <sup>39</sup> Ibid. <sup>40</sup> Cox 1986, 207, emphasis in original.

a sharp contrast to the development theory of comparative politics in the United States. Each initial perspective is related to a problematic, which Cox has explained as the initial dialogue between the maker of a social theory and the real world she tries to understand and interpret. It is a problem sensed by a human agency. It is conditioned by history and activated by present phenomena.<sup>41</sup> A social theory starts with this problematic and is constructed in the beginning by it.<sup>42</sup>

A social theory thus should first of all provide meaning and explanation for the particularity of which it is born. Without being able to do this, it cannot even come into being. For example, balance of power is a key concept of realism, classical realism and neorealism alike. This concept grew out of the European history and experience, rested firmly on the Westphalian international system, and has become an important element of the background knowledge there.<sup>43</sup> Using Cox's reasoning, the conceptualization of "balance of power" should have started with an initial perspective of the theorists who invented it, and become a problematic when its makers were carrying out a dialogue with the European international relations world around them, where specific issues were arising. Specifically and perhaps simplistically, the issue was individual sovereign states fighting against one another, the problematic was how to maintain systemic order in such a struggle for power, and the initial perspective was the rationalistic calculation that a balance, as that in the world of physics, would result in a most stable state. Thus the balance of power theory was first of all a response to the particular European international relations with sovereign states competing with and against one another. The solution it offered was to establish and keep a balance so that the probability of war could be reduced and order among nations better maintained.

Now it seems that the concept of balance of power has gone beyond its birthplace of Europe and has a very broad application. As Waltz has said: "If there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it," and it is a "theory that is generally accepted."<sup>44</sup> During the Cold War years, the US-USSR relationship was explained as a bipolar balance and the US-USSR-China relationship was seen as a triangular matrix to maintain an overall balance in the international system. But as people have explored in a much broader way histories of international relations and as the Westphalian international system has no longer been considered as the only international

<sup>41</sup> Cox's words are as follows: A problematic is a "historically conditioned awareness of problems and issues." Cox 1986, 207.

<sup>42</sup> Cox 1986. <sup>43</sup> Gulick 1967. <sup>44</sup> Waltz 1979, 117.

system that ever existed, the balance of power theory seems also to be questioned. When Edward Vose Guick discusses balance of power, he outlines four assumptions upon which balance of power rests: a state system, a clearly defined territory, relative homogeneity such as Europe, and rationality.<sup>45</sup> He, more as a historian than as a political scientist, thus draws a boundary for the application of the concept.

One type of criticism is that this theory does not explain order and disorder outside the Westphalian system. A comparative study by Victoria Tin-bor Hui has shown that balance of power can only account for one type of the sovereignty-based, individually oriented international system and cannot explain other types of international systems such as the Chinese international system. It compares China's Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656–221 BC) and Europe in the early modern period (AD 1495–1815) and finds that these two periods under discussion resembled each other with largely independent states fighting against each other. The outcomes, however, were totally different, the former becoming a unified empire under one ruler while the latter the international system of sovereign states balancing one another. "If the balance of power prevailed in international politics and the constitutional state triumphed in state-society relations, then why did the opposite outcomes occur in China? Is it because China was destined to have authoritarian rule under a unified empire as taught in standard Chinese history books? Alternatively, is it possible that the European trajectory was far more contingent than is presumed by the European perspective?"<sup>46</sup> In fact, she raises the question in the very beginning of her book: "Why is it that political scientists and Europeanists take for granted checks and balances in European politics, while Chinese and sinologists fail to take for granted a coercive universal empire in China?"<sup>47</sup> It may also be put as: "Why is it that political scientists and Europeanists do not take for granted a coercive universal empire in European politics, while Chinese and sinologists refuse to take for granted checks and balances in China?" It is not a play of words. It reflects the different perspectives and world-views of theorists as cultural beings who are geo-culturally confined.

The balance of power theory's limitation or lack of perfect universality is also reflected in another study by David Kang, who has found that balance of power theory did not apply in East Asia's Tribute international system. According to balance of power theory, state actors together would prevent a rising power from becoming the dominator of the system and use all means possible, including a resort to force, to stop the rising power from growing overwhelmingly predominant. The underlying assumption

<sup>45</sup> Guick 1967, 3–29.    <sup>46</sup> Hui 2005, 1.    <sup>47</sup> Ibid.

is definitely that balance brings about systemic stability and prevents major-power war. But in East Asia, from 1300 to 1900 AD, countries in the region did not balance China; rather they accommodated it. It seems to have contradicted “much conventional international relations theory.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, this lack of balance of power did not lead to disorder and war, for East Asia was characterized by its “comparative peacefulness” with many fewer wars than Europe during the same period of time.<sup>49</sup> His explanation is that “this accommodation of China is due to a specific constellation of interests and beliefs – a particular mix of identities and the absence of fear.”<sup>50</sup> His answer is perhaps arguable and even highly controversial, but the observation he has made that the balance of power concept fails to explain the 600-year East Asian reality is inspiring. As he has pointed out, balance of power processes occurred in many other international systems, but “in the East Asia international system such processes barely registered in historical evidence. If balance of power theory is misleading in the other cases, in this case it is profoundly and fundamentally wrong.”<sup>51</sup>

Balance of power theory, even though it was not applicable to the East Asian international system where such balance was not found and therefore no theory of balance of power was ever developed, continues to be a theory of importance. It is thus argued that even if a social theory does not go much beyond its origin, it is still of value and cannot be simply dismissed as not qualified as a theory. I do not mean to deny that a social theory should go beyond its origin and gain broader application; I simply want to clarify one important aspect: Any social theory is born locally and starts from understanding, explaining, and interpreting the local. As Cox has argued: “The more sophisticated a theory is, the more it reflects upon and transcends its own perspective; but the initial perspective is always contained within a theory and is relevant to its explication.”<sup>52</sup> If I should understand Cox’s initial perspective as similar to my metaphysical component, I would like to rephrase Cox’s words and argue that a social theory is culturally bound at its origin and is always traceable to a culturally conditioned awareness of certain problems and issues. At the same time, it also tries to transcend the particularity of its cultural origin in order to gain more universality with general propositions or laws.<sup>53</sup> But, it is not the necessary condition for the recognition of a social theory.

I believe, with Acharya, that social theory can realize some degree of transcendence and gain more validity than as first constructed. Stopping

<sup>48</sup> Kang 2007, 4. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 36–41. <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 23–24. <sup>52</sup> Cox 1986, 207.  
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

with cultural parochialism is to retard social theorizing and even bring it to a premature end. What I argue, therefore, is, paraphrasing Herbert Simon, “bounded universality.” By bounded universality, I mean a social theory initiated in a geo-cultural setting can gain higher levels of application beyond the locality of its origin, even though it can never reach the state of perfect universality. At the same time, we need also to recognize the commonality of humankind, and thus a social theory needs to go beyond its birth place and gain more universal application to realize its own evolution. Both Acharya and Cox would agree, for they recognize the permanent bias and limitations of a social theory. For such transcendence, there are two approaches. One, and perhaps the most efficient, is power driven. In other words, if a social theory, especially the metaphysical component of its theoretical hard core, is promoted by a prevailing civilizational-cultural community, perhaps in the reduced form of a powerful nation-state, it may spread quickly and the underlying assumptions are accepted, consciously or unconsciously, and willingly or unwillingly. It is reminiscent of Foucault’s discussion of knowledge, discourse, and power.<sup>54</sup> But what I want to argue here is that once a big idea is promoted by a powerful community like a so-called advance civilizational community or a strong nation-state, then social theories containing and reflecting the idea or the concept may go with the flag. It may not be a purposeful process, as Cox believes, but it is historically true, for a big power carries its practice all over the world and its ideas go with it around the world. Development of IR theories has witnessed such a process and the Acharya-Buzan project has shown that the American mainstream IR theory has maintained a dominant position in many other parts of the world.<sup>55</sup> It is a fact, but it is not the appropriate approach for social theory to gain universality, for it is imposing, with a strong sense of violence and even tyranny.

The second approach is through ideational exchange or cultural dialogue. An idea, a significant concept, or a theoretical hard core, born of a particular cultural community, is not easily understood by members of another cultural community, especially when the two communities are far apart physically and mentally. A study by Bleiker, discussing the cultural dimension of IR theory, compares the assumptions of neorealism and the philosophical views of Confucianism and finds that there are fundamental differences concerning ontological positions, understanding of reason, and perceptions of conflict and war. Thus Bleiker has commented on neorealism, “an ethnocentric theory may be able to account for one (systemic) source of conflict within a predominantly ethnocentric

<sup>54</sup> See Foucault 1972; 1991.   <sup>55</sup> Acharya and Buzan 2007.

international system. Even in this narrow area, structural realism can only continue to be relevant as long as the international system is anarchical and culturally dominated by Western (realist) values.”<sup>56</sup> Differences in terms of ontology and epistemology, and in worldviews, constitute a formidable obstacle indeed to successful cultural and civilizational dialogue, but it is not impossible to overcome such obstacles. Kofi Annan’s promotion of inter-civilizational dialogue through the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) provided a good and encouraging effort in this respect, but the realization of “many cultures, one humanity” still has a long way to go.

Therefore, I propose that the ability to provide understanding, interpretation, and explanation of local events and actions is the primary and minimum qualification of a social theory, while attainment of a broader application and a certain degree of universality, or bounded universality, is an aspiration and goal. At the same time, it should be understood that perfect universality is impossible. A theory is first of all produced in a particular culture, its meaning is understood and interpreted by other cultures, and then it aims to acquire “cross-cultural” or “inter-cultural” meanings. Gradually it may gain a higher level of universality and be applicable in more cultural communities. This requires a high level of communicative action, which not only enables cross-cultural understanding, but also has important impact on the renewal of cultural and background knowledge.<sup>57</sup> In the very beginning, no theory starts from a universal null, and in the end, no theory can remove completely its cultural birthmark. For this reason, I suggest that we need to go deep into a particular culture defined in terms of background knowledge and explore its fundamental assumptions about universe, life, and ways of thinking and doing. Then we need to crystalize them into a key concept or idea that constitutes the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core, from which a systematic and coherent theory is to be unfolding and growing.

### **Conclusion**

The metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core, nourished by the culture where the theorist lives, is a key factor in theoretical innovation. Since cultural resources are rich and diverse, development of new social theories is ever promising and, moreover, should be prosperous as more cultural communities are joining the increasingly globalized world.

<sup>56</sup> Bleiker 1998, 109. <sup>57</sup> Habermas 1984.

Recent years have already seen much effort to develop IR theories by non-Western scholars and the Global International Relations (GIR) project encourages such effort.

However, the dominance of Western IR theory continues to be conspicuous. The findings from the 2014 Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) Project's worldwide faculty survey, which covers thirty-two countries, including more than ten non-Western academic IR communities, have shown clearly that IR is still a Western/American dominated discipline.<sup>58</sup> A most interesting point is that within this hierarchical structure of IR academic communities over the world, there is a division of labor wherein scholars in the West are responsible for theory production while the non-West supplies raw data for theory testing.<sup>59</sup> It may imply that the more non-Western scholars do in IR with this division of labor, the more they reinforce the domination of Western IR theory and the less they are able to develop theories by exploring their own cultural resources. There are many factors at work that makes this division of labor possible. In the 2007 Acharya-Buzan project, "Why is there no non-Western IR theory?" scholars from non-Western nations identified some of the most important factors: the Western/American disciplinary domination itself; non-Western IR communities as latecomers in theory construction; lack of institutional support, etc. Looking back, I feel that the project missed one important factor, that is, how to explore cultural resources for conceptualization and theorization. The present division of labor within the IR hierarchy will change if and only if non-Western IR scholars are culturally conscious to take nutrition from their own cultures defined in terms of background knowledge. If IR is to overcome Western dominance, it must offer concepts and theories that are derived from societies and cultures other than the West. A conspicuous problem is perhaps that non-Western scholars tend to use and test Western IR theories and seldom turn back to their own culture for inspiration, even though they feel that the Western domination should not be the normal state of art for the discipline.<sup>60</sup>

The discussion of the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core points to a possible orientation – to explore deeply and carefully the cultural resources so that an initial idea, which will turn to become the metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core, may come in shape and develop gradually into a more mature theory through the process of nucleation. It is not to replace the existing IR theories, but to develop a theoretical concept from a non-Western culture that has been off the

<sup>58</sup> Maliniak et al. 2014. <sup>59</sup> Wemheruer-Vogelaar et al. 2016, 18–19.

<sup>60</sup> Maliniak et al. 2014.

menu of Western IR theorists. The result is theoretical innovation as well as enrichment of the existing IR knowledge. In fact, the development of Western IR theories provides a telling example as to how social theory is constructed. The repeated exploration of the cultural resources, the continual refinement of concepts and conceptual frameworks, and the persistent effort to theorize and re-theorize – this long and tortuous process indicates, for example, how “rationality” has finally become a key element of the metaphysical component for many Western social theories. We will continue this discussion critically in the next chapter.