The Im/Possibility of Building Indigenous Theories in a Hegemonic Discipline: The Case of Japanese International Relations

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A growing number of Asian scholars have been engaging in indigenous theory-building that seeks to gain wider recognition for their local experiences and intellectual traditions in an international relations discipline that is still dominated by Western theories and methods. After examining recent attempts to develop a distinctive Japanese approach to world politics, I argue that such attempts should proceed with great caution, for their epistemological underpinnings remain Eurocentric. A close look at the Japanese conceptions of international society indicates that they reproduce, rather than challenge, a normative hierarchy embedded in the English school between the creators of Westphalian norms and those at the receiving end. To take seriously the agency role of non-Western ideas in gearing the discipline in a truly international, less hegemonic direction, Japanese IR should recognize the plural origins and constitutional structures of international society and learn from social science and humanities communities in Asia and beyond. Keywords: Japanese international relations, international society, English school, Eurocentrism, non-Western international relations theory.

In his 1969 review of the development of international relations (IR) theory, Hedley Bull wrote that available theories and approaches have been “overwhelmingly Western, predominately Anglo-American,” as a result of which they may have increasing difficulty in offering an adequate understanding of world politics that is becoming “more and more non-Western” (Bull 1995, 208). Forty years on, research on the state of the field finds that few non-Western conceptual contributions have been accepted as legitimate ways of thinking about the world, and that the core/noncore relationship within the discipline has been particularly understudied (Tickner and Wæver 2009). The rise of Asia and other “emerging worlds” notwithstanding, IR remains a
“hegemonic discipline” (Smith 2002), its theory toolbox having changed very little.

This article is written against the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction with the domination of Western theories and methods in IR and a corresponding interest in looking for alternatives from outside the United States and Europe (Chan, Mandaville, and Bleiker 2001; Dunn and Shaw 2001; Acharya and Buzan 2007; Bilgin 2008; Shani 2008; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Shilliam 2010; Acharya 2011). I examine whether researchers in Japan have advanced an indigenous theory. If not, can the discipline be reoriented in a more international, less hegemonic direction? The case of Japan is illustrative for our purpose here, not least because its rich and self-conscious culture should be able to serve as a potentially valuable source for IR theorizing. Moreover, the country hosts one of the largest academic IR communities in Asia. I do not attempt to assess fully the state of the IR field in Japan, which has been done elsewhere (Inoguchi 2009; Nihon Kokusai Seiji Gakkai 2009; Yamamoto 2011); instead, I focus on a nascent literature written by those scholars who try, explicitly or otherwise, to develop indigenous theories and concepts.2

While existing surveys of IR studies outside the West have contributed to understanding the political and socioeconomic environments of various countries and how those environments condition scholarly activities there, relatively little attention has been paid to the nexus of established theories in the Western core and indigenous theory-building in the non-Western periphery.3 To fill the void, this article looks at the role of the English school in molding epistemological perspectives of the critical IR scholarship in Japan and the way scholars there rethink concepts in non-core contexts. Despite its well-known Eurocentric perspective, the English school’s success as an established alternative to mainstream IR theories has made the English school itself a role model for many IR communities in East Asia that are trying to create original theoretical approaches.4 Indeed, a Chinese scholar involved in the would-be “Chinese school” goes so far as to assert that “China can probably learn more from the English school than from American IR theory” because the former is “more open to