



Article

Political Leadership and Power Redistribution

Yan Xuetong*

Yan Xuetong is Professor of International Relations at the Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University.

*Corresponding author. Email: yanxt@tsinghua.edu.cn.

Abstract

The theoretical puzzle that moral realism must crack is that of why a rising state is able to displace a dominating hegemon even though it is inferior to the latter in terms of economic base, technical invention, education system, military strength, and political system. Moral realism attributes political leadership to the rise or decline of great powers and categorizes political leadership, according to morality, as inactive, conservative, proactive, or aggressive types at national level, and as tyranny, hegemony, and humane authority at international level. Moral realism is a binary theory which suggests that a state's strength determine strategic interests while types of political leadership determine strategies for achieving those interests. According to moral realist theory it will be possible for China to change the international system in the 21 century if it practices the moral principles of fairness, justice, and civility both at home and abroad.

The shift of world power has been a durable topic in the theoretical study of international relations (IR). The most popular research on this issue is arguably that by Paul Kennedy who attribute imperial overstretch to the decline of a hegemon by arguing that the global obligations defined by policymakers are far greater than their country's strength to defend.¹ Unlike most research on why a hegemon declines, moral realist theory focuses on why and how a rising state is able to displace a dominating hegemon.² Its answer is that the rising

1 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 515.

2 In 2012, Zhang Feng, Research Fellow at Australian National University, coined the term 'moral realism' for an approach that combines the political determinism of Chinese traditional philosophy with modern realist theory of international relations. See Zhang Feng, 'The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2012), pp. 95–96.

state has a stronger political leadership than does the hegemon. During the process of developing this moral realist theory, the author faced several theoretical challenges, namely: can a realist theory stress the role of morality? Can a scientific and systemic theory treat political leadership as an independent variable? Are there clear linkages between types of political leadership and strategic preferences? Can political leadership connect analysis at both the unit and systemic levels? To answer these questions, this article will discuss the realist view of morality, realist corollaries of international politics, and the principles of moral realist theory.

Morality in Realist Theories

The Misunderstanding of Realism

Since Hans J. Morgenthau's invention of classical realist IR theory, many scholars have mistakenly assumed that realism denies any influence on the conduct of states of moral disciplines. Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton observe, 'It has proved particularly thorny in the realist tradition, not least because that tradition has so often been misunderstood as denying any connection between moral principles and the practical responsibilities of statecraft. At no realist has the charge been levelled more often than Morgenthau.'³ To make matters worse, the doctrine of realism is misunderstood not only by idealists, legalists, moralists, liberalists, and constructivists, but also by certain realist theorists.

In 2013, the author held a debate with John Mearsheimer, leading offensive realist scholar, who insisted, 'It is critically important that a real realist resists the seductions of any unrealistic consciences and never over-expand into other unfamiliar realms.'⁴ He added, 'Professor Yan Xuetong argues that China should employ new diplomatic strategies that make morality a priority. However, in my view, this will make China in greater danger. Trust me! I am coming from such a country, America. The US is the unique state in the world with the highest moral sense, but its priority of morality has trapped us in the quagmire of endless international conflicts and wars, and also made America more aggressive in others' eyes.'⁵

However, as Jannika Brostrom has noted, the classical realist works of Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and George Kennan all stress the relationship between morality and power.⁶ Here we review Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* to see how he discusses the function and effect of morality in international affairs. He says: 'A discussion of international morality must guard against the two extremes of either overrating the influence of ethics upon international politics and underestimating it by denying that statesmen and diplomats are moved by anything but

3 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 7th Edition, Kenneth W. Thompson and W. David Clinton, eds., (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), p. xxiii.

4 'A Dialogue between Yan Xuetong and Mearsheimer: Can China Rise Peacefully?', *iFeng Academia*, 29 September, 2013, <http://news.ifeng.com/exclusive/lecture/special/yanxuetong/#pageTop>.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Jannik Brostrom, 'Morality and the National Interest: Towards a "Moral Realist" Research Agenda', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 16 April, 2015, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557571.2015.1015488>.

considerations of material power.⁷ Among Morgenthau's six principles of political realism, two are about morality. The fourth principle underlines that political realism admits the great importance of moral political actions and asserts:

'Realism maintains that universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place. The individual may say for himself: "*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus* (Let justice be done, even if the world perish)", but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care.⁸ And the fifth principle reminds statesmen and scholars that: "Political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe."⁹

The above citations show that Morgenthau does not deny the role of morality in international politics, but criticizes the wrong and even harmful attempt at replacing international morality with that of a particular nation. In Mearsheimer's view, it is undeniable that international morality plays an important and positive role in international politics, but scholars must carefully distinguish between what is true international morality and what is not. He opposes one state waging war on another on the grounds of its particular moral values, or a state attempting to export its political values to the entire world as universal morality. It was from this point of view that he opposed America's initiation of a war for the sake of so-called human rights.¹⁰

In Mearsheimer's view, the author's suggestion that China's foreign policy is a cause for moral concern is dangerous. Although his argument sounds similar to Morgenthau's, he has in fact misunderstood Morgenthau's doctrine. What Morgenthau strongly criticized is the ambition to spread throughout the world a particular nation's moral values as universal moral law, rather than an action that is consistent with the moral norms widely accepted in international society. Morgenthau in fact expressed grave concern about declining universal international norms. Like Morgenthau, the author also emphasizes universal moral principles rather than uniquely Chinese morality. The moral principles that moral realists advocate, such as equality, fairness, democracy, justice, freedom, and civility, are neither national nor regional but universal.¹¹

Moral realists divide universal morality into the three categories of personal morality, state morality, and world morality. Personal morality, such as incorruptibility, faithful love, and honesty, and world morality, such as pacifism, *caritas*, and conservationism, are not the references that moral realists use to judge the morality of political leadership. Moral realists define the morality of political leadership as state morality, such as the duty to practice international norms, strategic credibility to allies, and the responsibility to protect people's interests.

Moreover, moral realists share the same opinion as Morgenthau on the practice of international moral principles, namely, that states should not export or spread moral values by force, but attract others through its own excellent examples. Morgenthau appreciates the views raised respectively by John Quincy Adams and Thomas Paine, that 'It was not for the

7 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 240.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

11 Yan Xuetong, 'New Values for New International Norms', *China International Studies*, Vol. 38, No.1 (2013), pp.15–28.

United States to impose its own principles of government upon the rest of mankind but rather to attract the rest of mankind through the example of the United States', and 'Those universal principles the United States had put into practice were not to be exported by fire and sword but presented to the rest of the world through successful example.'¹²

Morgenthau's idea is quite similar to the doctrine of *yishen zuoze* (leading by examples) in Chinese culture. Related to this doctrine in Chinese culture is the Confucian doctrine, '*Li wen lai xue, bu wen wang jiao*' (It is known that people initiatively come to learn rites from masters but it is never heard that masters initiatively go to educate others about rites.).¹³ The essence of this doctrine is antithetical to the Christian commitment to convert pagans through missionary work. In responding to Mearsheimer's critique, the author, based on the above two doctrines, explained why Chinese foreign policy will be neither warlike nor pose threats to others if it concerns morality.¹⁴ Early American thinkers were cognizant that there will be no risk of war due to morality-oriented foreign policy as long as no state spreads morality by force. Nevertheless, America's persistent and prolonged practice of waging war in the name of democracy has made certain American IR scholars confuse the implementation of universal morality with the export of democracy by force.¹⁵

The classical realists represented by Morgenthau have distinguished universal morality from national morality, but failed to clarify the relations between the practice of morality and comprehensive national strength, between moral actions and international leadership, and between leading powers' moral behaviour and the evolution of international norms. Thus there is great potential for the development of moral realist theory. Because international moral principles may vary throughout different ages, moral realists study both the moral values of different times and the political function of moral actions in different international systems.

The Impact of Moral Actions on National Strength and International Power

Moral realism is a branch of realism. When analysing state behaviour from the perspectives of international power, national strength, and national interest, therefore, it follows the traditional principle of realism. In addition, moral realism treats morality as an independent variable in policymaking. It is hence necessary to clarify the concepts of power, strength, interest, and morality, as well as the respective relationship between them, before demonstrating the logic of moral realist theory.

There are variant meanings of the word 'power' in modern English, which include control, authority, influence, ability, capability, might, and influence.¹⁶ In IR research that is published in English, therefore, the term 'power' does not distinguish between political control and physical might. The most typical case is the concept of 'balance of power', which although frequently used has no common definition among IR scholars. Morgenthau realized this problem and employed two expressions: power, and elements of power (referring to strength) to differentiate the two meanings of power as it is used in *Politics among*

12 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p. 266.

13 Cui Gaowei, ed., *Li ji* (*The Book of Rites*) (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), p.1.

14 'A Dialogue between Yan Xuetong and Mearsheimer'.

15 Andrew J. Bacevich, 'A Moral Foreign Policy? Get Serious', *New Republic*, 21 July, 2010, <https://newrepublic.com/article/76408/afghanistan-war-obama-bacevich>.

16 *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Massachusetts: G. & C Merriam Company, 1977), p. 902.

Nations.¹⁷ This differentiation, however, is still not clear, because the phrase ‘elements of power’ may also refer to ‘elements of strength’. More specifically, he defined the elements of power in that book as a combination constituted by geography, natural resources, raw materials, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the quality of government.¹⁸ But all these elaborations make little contribution to clarifying the difference between power and strength. Frankly speaking, Morgenthau makes vague use of the term ‘power’ in his book, whereby it alternately means control/influence and strength/capability, or in some cases carries both meanings.

Owing to that fatal flaw in definition, his discourse has two theoretical shortcomings. First, when defining national interests in terms of power he fails to distinguish whether power is a part of, or at the foundation of national interests. In other words, if power means control/influence on other states, it is a kind of national interest; if it refers to strength/capability, then it is resource-generating power.¹⁹ Relatedly, he does not make clear whether power is a goal or tool of diplomacy. As regards the former, power as control/influence refers to a target for statesmen and diplomats to achieve; while for the latter, it amounts to a method/approach to achieving the goal of control/influence. Since Morgenthau did not rigorously distinguish the nature of power from that of strength, therefore, he was unable to demonstrate the relationship between morality and power.

Fortunately power (*quanli*) and strength (*shili*) have distinctly different meanings in Chinese. *Quanli* refers to political control/influence, and *shili* to strength/capacity. For instance, the jurisdiction of the police is a kind of power, while the competitiveness of athletes is in strength’s domain. No one would mix them up. Chinese IR scholars might thus benefit from the semantic differences between the terms power and strength, as it might make the relationship between national interests and power and national interests and strength, as well as the relationship between morality and power and morality and strength, easier to understand. This is probably the linguistic reason why Chinese scholars invented moral realist theory.

Moral realists claim that power is the most pivotal constituent of national interest, and consequently the goal of states’ foreign policy. National interest is divided into four categories, namely, politics, security, economy, and culture. Notably, all four involve power. Specifically, the sovereignty of a state is a kind of political interest, the right of war falls within the ambit of security, the right of development is in the domain of economy, and religious belief is, in a broad sense, an interest of culture.²⁰ From the perspective of international politics, national interest consists of territorial sovereignty, maritime rights, the right to vote in international organizations, and the right to explore outer space. Moral realists clearly define power as the major part of national interest. They thus avoid the circular argument raised by Morgenthau, who firstly defined national interest based on power and then unavoidably employed power as national interest.

17 Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, p.122; *Ibid.*, pp.122–62.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Yan Xuetong, *Zhongguo guojia liyi fenxi (Analysis of Chinese National Interests)* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1996), pp. 47–50.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Moral realists believe that the strength of a state is the foundation that defines its national interest, and hence the tool through which to achieve its national interest. The term strength refers to both the material and non-material resources of a state. It is also divided into four categories: politics, military, economy, and culture. Notably, moral realists consider political strength as an operational element, and the other three as resources.²¹ National interest is defined by the comprehensive strength of a state, which is constituted by those four categories of elements.²² To give an illustration, the comprehensive strength of a hegemon determines its main interest as that of maintaining its dominant position in the world. By contrast, the growing strength of a rising state determines its core interest as gaining more international power. A regional or sub-regional power will focus on maintaining dominance in its own region rather than gaining world supremacy. For instance, after the Cold War ended, the United States, as sole world superpower, targeted global dominance through its unrivalled strength, while Russia, as a much weaker state than the Soviet Union, no longer contended for global hegemony. That is because world supremacy is no longer the national interest as defined by Russia's strength.

Defining national interest according to strength helps to clarify the upper and lower limits of national interest. Clear upper limits of national interest are helpful to avoid unrealistic ambitions, and would make statesmen or scholars agree on a common rational standard through which to measure state conduct. Take the George Walker Bush administration as an example. It set absolute security as a national target through which to eliminate all terrorists throughout the world in response to 9/11. Because this goal was far beyond American national strength, the Bush administration's counter-terrorist campaign resulted in increased rather than fewer terrorist threats. In fact, terrorism is now a fixed social phenomenon, like burglary or theft, which can never be eradicated from the world. The US may have the strength to reduce terrorist threats to the American homeland, but does not have the capability to eliminate terrorists from the entire world.

On another aspect of the issue, defining through strength the bottom line of national interests, would help to avoid the selfish and harmful unilateralism which blindly pursues its own interest but neglects the core interest of other states, ultimately leading to catastrophic conflicts. The Sino-Japanese contest over the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands in 2012 is a typical case. In 2012, the naval might of China was equal to Japan's; it would have been wise, therefore, for both sides to maintain the status quo of the Diaoyu Islands, on the principle of shelving disputes. Nevertheless, the Japanese government ignored the fact that Chinese naval capability determines China's basic interest over these islands, and that it therefore cannot tolerate Japan's nationalization of them. Japan's hard line on this issue forced China to announce its territorial sea baseline and air defence identification zone, as well as official maritime and air navigations.²³ Because Japan ignored the bottom line of China's interest as defined by China's strength, and mis-defined its own interests over the Diaoyu Islands due to its ambitions, Japan made an irrational decision which inevitably suffered defeat.

21 Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 100-02.

22 Yan, *Analysis of Chinese National Interests*, pp. 47-50.

23 'China Ships in Disputed Waters: Japan Coast Guard', *Press TV*, 2 August, 2013, <http://www.press.tv/detail/2013/08/02/316811/china-ships-in-disputed-waters-japan>.

Besides distinguishing between the nature of power and of strength, moral realists also clearly define morality in order to understand the relationship between moral actions and improving respectively a state's international power and strength. Historically, many principles and contents of international morality have changed over time, while some, such as maintaining terms with allies, giving diplomatic courtesy to state leaders, ensuring the personal safety of diplomatic envoys, and paying foreign debts, remain durable, unchanged, and widely accepted. Most of these enduring principles constitute basic morality, and are thus easier for international actors to follow and practice in different eras. Because most states practice lower-level moral codes more often than higher-level ones, the former have wider impact on state behaviour than the latter. Most states can maintain the terms of an alliance over a long period of time, but few can continuously provide economic aid to poorer countries.

Morality can shape power into two results. One result is international legitimacy of a state's power, which is improved or disproved by that state's actions, according to whether or not it goes against international morality, while that state's strength does not change. Palestine is a positive case for illustrating this kind of phenomenon. Palestine protested at Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory through settlement strategy. As the protest was in line with international norms, Palestine accordingly received both sympathy and assistance from the international community. This was evident in 77 resolutions in the UN from 1955 to 2013 condemning Israel.²⁴ Nevertheless, although Palestine's moral actions enhanced the legitimacy of its sovereign claim, they did nothing to improve the strength it needed to protect its territorial sovereignty. Consequently it is still vulnerable to Israel's expansion of Jewish settlements. Japan, in contrast, may serve as a negative example of the above ultimate result. Shinzō Abe has made formal visits to the Yasukuni Shrine, where World War II Class-A war criminals are enshrined, in his capacity as Japanese Prime Minister. His immoral actions have provoked international wrath from China, South Korea, and even America and Europe.²⁵ However, although the Abe Administration's immoral action has considerably damaged Japan's international image, Japanese strength remains the same, and its defence expenditure moreover increased by 3% in 2013.²⁶

In another situation, either observing or defying international moral principles will accordingly, and simultaneously, either improve or reduce both the legitimized international power and national strength of a state. The mechanism at work is that observing international moral principles enhances the capability of political mobilization both at home and abroad, which then transforms into a state's material strength. For instance, the US formed a strong multinational force to save Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's annexation of it, and punished the aggressor in January 1991.²⁷ America's decision conforms to the principles of territorial integrity backed up by the UN Charter. As a result, the US arranged a powerful

24 'UN Resolutions Targeting Israel and the Palestinians', *If Americans Knew*, <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/stats/un.html>.

25 Takashi Oshima, 'US Expresses Disappointment at Abe Visit to Yasukuni Shrine', *The Asahi Shimbun*, 27 December, 2013, http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201312270048.

26 Bill Sweetman, 'Japan Increases Defense Spending', *Aviationweek*, 17 December, 2013, http://www.aviationweek.com/Article.aspx?id=/article-xml/awx_12_17_2013_p0-648057.xml.

27 Wang Mingxiu, ed., *Shijie zhishi nianjia (World Knowledge Yearbook 1991-1992)* (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1992), p. 2.

combination of a total 34 nations. In contrast, the Saddam Hussein Regime of Iraq violated international law and consequently lost the support of the general public both at home and abroad. Though Iraqi national strength remained the same, the gap between Iraq and multinational forces considerably widened. This case suggests that even though the immoral actions of a state may not decrease its absolute strength, they may to a great extent weaken its relative strength.

International Authority versus International Dominance

Realists view survival as the sole priority of national interest, because if a state is destroyed, other interests cease to exist. That is why although many realists pay close attention to the security of states, they may ignore the role of norms. Moral realists also admit that security constitutes the primacy of national interest; nonetheless, it is only one component of national interest rather than the entirety. A rising state or a hegemon is often immune to ruination by other states, but faced with the conflicts ensuing from the distribution of international power. The hegemon is determined to defend its dominance, and the rising state attempts to increase its influence. In this contest, the practice of international moral principles plays a direct role in reinforcing their international power. Obeying basic international moral principles will help to promote their international strategic credit, which in turn plays a crucial role in obtaining, maintaining, and expanding their international influence.

Xunzi once said ‘Accordingly, one who uses the state to establish justice will be king; one who establishes trust will be a lord-protector; and one who establishes a record of expediency and opportunism will perish.’²⁸ Drawing on insights from Xunzi’s discourse, moral realists argue that it is necessary to establish a moral foundation for a state’s sustainable global dominance, while maintaining strategic credit is the minimum moral requirement of such foundation. The aim of practicing morality and improving strategic credit is to establish the international authority of a great power, because its leadership cannot be solid without authority. The international authority of a state is built upon other states’ voluntary acceptance of its leadership, rather than by force or coercion. Credit and trustworthiness are necessary conditions in all human social entities, regardless of their civilization, culture, political party, society, government, or non-governmental organizations, for establishing leadership or authority. Similarly, strategic credit in international society is a necessary condition for a great power’s establishment of its international authority and leadership.

Moral realists also distinguish the differences between *authority* and *power* when underlining the importance of international authority. Power refers to control or impact on others by coercive force, while authority means leadership that others willingly accept. The police and medical practitioners respectively represent power and authority in our daily life. Motorists follow a police officer’s orders because they are forced to by police judicial power, and patients take advice from physicians due to trust in their medical knowledge. The same applies in international politics. The US possesses special international power in its capacity as the world’s police based on its unmatched military force. The EU provides authoritative leadership in dealing with climate change, based on its achievements in reducing carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions. Therefore, a rising state is able to increase its

28 Yang Muzhi, ed., *Xunzi I*, trans. John Knoblock (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1999), p. 315.

international power by promoting material strength, but cannot establish international authority through that approach. It can attain international authority only by establishing strategic credibility through moral actions.

Because authority and power are different in nature, one state could enjoy higher international authority than the other even when both have the same level of international power. In some cases, a state's international authority may decline while its international power increases. For example, the US continuously improved its international power as sole superpower during the period between the end of the Cold War and the financial crisis of 2008. But its international authority suffered a dramatic decline after it launched the war in Iraq without UN authorization in 2003. In particular, the disproving of America's sorry excuse that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD) irreparably damaged America's international reputation and trustworthiness.²⁹

There are other cases that illustrate the relationship between immoral actions and a decline of international authority. During the Cold War the US globally promoted the idea that the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) was the cornerstone of world peace. In the late 1990s the Bill Clinton Administration considered opting out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to deploy the National Missile Defence (NMD) system. Fearing this action may severely impair the US's international strategic credit however, Clinton did not authorize the Pentagon's plan.³⁰ George W. Bush did not place the same value on international strategic credit as Clinton. He not only denounced the ABM Treaty soon after coming to power in 2001, but also lifted the US sanctions of 1998 on India's illegal nuclear tests.³¹ To make things worse, just two years later, America went back on its word by virtue of its nuclear cooperation with India, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).³² Bush's policies thus damaged American international strategic credit and showed the US not to be trustworthy as regards arms control.

The 2008 financial crisis exposed to the world the Wall Street fraud. The Standard & Poor's Financial Services LLC accordingly reduced the US's credit rating from AAA to AA+ in 2011.³³ The same year, President Obama abandoned Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, former President of Egypt and long-term ally of America, in the Middle East amid the Arab

- 29 Marjorie Cohn, 'Iraq: A War of Aggression. No WMDs, No Connection to Al Qaeda', *Global Research*, 19 March, 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/iraq-a-war-of-aggression-no-wmds-no-connection-to-al-qaeda/5327548>.
- 30 James M. Lindsay, Maurice R. Greenberg, James M. Goldgeier, 'By Focusing Now, Clinton Can Renegotiate ABM Treaty', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April, 2000, <http://www.cfr.org/world/focusing-now-clinton-can-renegotiate-abm-treaty/p6347>.
- 31 The White House, 'U.S. Withdrawal From the ABM Treaty: President Bush's Remarks and US Diplomatic Notes', *Arms Control Association*, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_01-02/docjanfeb02; 'US Lifts India and Pakistan Sanctions', *BBC News*, 23 September, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1558860.stm>.
- 32 Jim VandeHei and Dafna Linzer, 'U.S., India Reach Deal on Nuclear Cooperation', *The Washington Post*, 3 March, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/03/02/AR2006030200183.html>.
- 33 'Angry Geithner Once Warned S&P about US Downgrade: Filing', *Business News*, 22 January, 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/Business/Business-News/2014/01/22/Angry-Geithner-Once-Warned-SaP-About-US-Downgrade>.

Spring revolutionary wave.³⁴ All these treacheries largely vitiated America's reputation among its allies, and even staggered Israel's belief in Washington's strategic credit.³⁵ Currently the US's international strategic credit is lower than that during the Gulf War and in the late 1990s.

Corollaries of Moral Realism

As a branch of realism, moral realist theory follows the fundamental assumptions of realism. As a scientific IR theory, it must be built upon mutually related assumptions and contain no contradicting logics. This section will discuss the moral realist corollaries derived from the variables of morality, interests, strength, power, and authority, as previously discussed, and realist assumptions. These corollaries will serve as the foundation of moral realism.

Corollary 1: Interest pursuit is the primary dynamic of state actions as well as of the evolution of international norms.

Realism assumes that human nature is selfish, thus that states controlled by human beings are driven by interests. Based on this assumption and the fact that adults' social behaviour is different from that of babies due to their adaptation to social norms, moral realists have developed two corollaries.

- (i) The pursuit of interest is the primary but not sole dynamic of state actions.
- (ii) The state's pursuit of interest is also the engine driving the evolution of international norms.

Moral realists agree that interest pursuit has primary impact on state actions, but also emphasize the importance of societal perceptions in policymaking. Xunzi once clearly distinguished *Xing* (性, inborn nature) from *Wei* (伪, acquired nature or perceptions). He said: 'As a general rule, "inborn nature" embraces what is spontaneous from Nature, what cannot be learned, and what requires no application to master What must be learned before a man can do it and what he must apply himself to before he can master it yet is found in man is properly called "acquired nature".'³⁶ The interest pursuit is a human inborn nature, and generates the same influence on every decision-maker because it is a common instinct of all human beings. Nevertheless, policymakers have different societal perceptions, or acquired nature, according to Xunzi, due to the differences in their lives, including education, and such perceptions may make them adopt different strategies to deal with similar problems. For instance, the liberal Clinton Administration and neo-conservative Bush Administration adopted different policies towards international arms control and nuclear proliferation.

More specifically, the impact of perceptions is mainly embodied in two aspects of policymaking: One is their influence on policymakers' ranking of national interests, namely, giving priority to what national interests are in a given situation. The other is their impact

34 Deborah Amos, 'Arab Leaders Feel US Abandoned Egypt's Mubarak', *NPR*, 09 February, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/09/133614346/Egypt-Arab-Leaders>.

35 Herb Keion, 'Israeli Critics Open Up on US "Abandonment" of Mubarak', *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 January, 2011, <http://www.jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Israeli-critics-open-up-on-US-abandonment-of-Mubarak>.

36 Yang Muzhi ed., *Xunzi II*, trans. John Knoblock (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2010), p. 745.

on policymakers' preferences as regards what kind of strategy will achieve those interests. The national interests are objective and their existence is not determined by people's perceptions. Nevertheless, policymakers' social perceptions affect their consideration of what interest is more important than others, and what strategy is most appropriate for obtaining that kind of interest. This point distinguishes moral realism from constructivism, in terms of the character of national interests. Moral realism argues that national interests are objective, while constructivism believes that national interest is subjectively constructed by people's social perceptions.³⁷

According to moral realism, the pursuit of interest is also the driving force of the establishment and evolution of international norms.³⁸ Military force and international norms are two fundamental means jointly used to maintain a sustainable international order. Neither is sufficient alone to reach that goal. For instance, a dominant power will regard maintaining the existing international order it has established as primacy of national interest. In order to keep that international order as long as possible the dominant state must establish a set of international norms for other countries to follow. These norms play the role of stabilizing the international order and reducing its maintenance costs. Although international norms also constrain the actions of the dominant state, that state will nevertheless benefit from the order more than any other country. These norms will provide it with strategic advantages that far outweigh any disadvantages, and when they generate more cost than benefit, the dominant state will revise them accordingly. International norms thus evolve. For instance, after the 2008 global financial crisis, the US proposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) to replace the World Trade Organization (WTO), in order to maintain its dominant position in formulating new world trade regulations.

Corollary 2: The zero-sum nature of power brings about structural conflicts between a rising state and a dominant state, as well as systemic pressure on the rising state.

Based on the belief that power rests on the relationship between superior and inferior actors, all realists assume that power competition is a zero-sum game,³⁹ which means that one's gain of power must entail the loss of another's. Therefore moral realism develops two corollaries.

- (i) Structural conflicts are inevitable between the rising state and the dominant state because both are in pursuit of world-leading power.
- (ii) A rising state must be faced with the dilemma of rise, namely, the expansion of its international influence will bring about more strategic pressure from both the dominant state and those that have conflicting interests with it.

The structural conflicts between a rising state and a dominant state derive from the re-distribution of power between them. This contention is inevitable because it emerges naturally, along with the process of narrowing the strength gap, as well as the transition of international leadership from a dominant country to a rising state.⁴⁰ The world is an enclosed system which determines the sum of international power as one, and that it is distributed

37 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 233–38.

38 Yan Xuetong and Yang Yuan, *Gouji guanxi fenxi (The Analysis of International Relations)* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2013), p. 287.

39 Yan and Yang, *The Analysis of International Relations*, pp. 107–08.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

among all states according to the relative strength of each. The distribution of world-leading power is mainly arranged according to the international structure of the strength of major states. Consequently, rising states attempt to seize more international power, while the dominant state refuses to share its leading power with rising states, even as its relative strength declines. Thus the dominant state often stresses the importance of maintaining the existing international order, while rising states advocate establishing a new order. The nature of this kind of conflict, therefore, is the struggle either to maintain or change the existing international strength structure. The Anglo-German naval arms race from 1898 to 1912 serves as a good case to illustrate the concept of structural conflicts.

The dilemma of rise refers to a situation where a rising state strategically confronts increasing international pressure or negative responses from other states that come as a result of the rapid growth of its comprehensive strength.⁴¹ This corollary resembles *Newton's Third Law of Motions*, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Similarly, the rapid growth of a rising state will impose strong impact on other states, which will inevitably result either in such states' desperate resistance or confrontation. The dilemma of rise accords with the principle whereby national interests are defined by national strength, as previously discussed. The growth of strength will expand a rising state's overseas interests, which must fall into conflict with others' interests and hence generate security threats. Meanwhile, this corollary also follows the assumption of the zero-sum nature of power. The more overseas interests a rising state acquires, the more conflicts with other states it must face. A case demonstrating this logic is the emergence in international public opinion of 'China's Responsibility' after the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, which intensified after 2010 when China's GDP replaced Japan as the second largest economy in the world.⁴²

Corollary 3: Improvements and declines of states' political leadership lead to changes in comprehensive national strength between states.

All realists assume that uneven development of national comprehensive strength between states is a law of nature.⁴³ In this world, natural growth can never be even—a law that also governs the growth of states' strength. Along with the uneven growth of each state's comprehensive strength, the strength structure between them will gradually change in favour of those growing faster than others and hence lead to the shift of world power from dominant states to rising states. Based on the uneven development assumption, moral realism develops two corollaries:

- (i) Political leadership of a state determines the growth and decline of that state's comprehensive strength.
- (ii) Differences in political leadership of dominant or rising states determine changes in the international configuration.

41 Sun Xuefeng, *Zhongguo jueqi kunjing: lilun sikao yu zhanlue xuanze (Dilemma of China's Rise: Theoretical Reflections and Strategic Choices)*(Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), p. 24.

42 Jin Canrong, 'Cong "Zhongguo weixie lun" dao "Zhongguo zeren lun": Zhongguo ruhe yingdui' ('From "China Threat Theory" to "China Responsibility Theory": How China Can Deal with It'), *Xinhua*, 23 August, 2010, <http://finance.qq.com/a/20100823/004394.htm>.

43 Yan and Yang, *The Analysis of International Relations*, pp. 110–13.

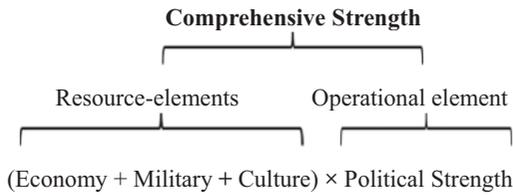


Fig. 1. Relations between State's Strength Elements.

Moral realism is a theory of political determinism and attributes political leadership to the growth, stagnation, or decline of a state's comprehensive strength, which is composed of four categories of strength elements, namely, politics, military, economy, and culture (see Figure 1). Among the four, political strength is operational and the other three are resources that can play a role in international politics only when they are exploited by political elements, mainly governments.

Political strength is composed of ideology, strategy, political will, political system, governmental institution and so on, but all relate to governments run by politicians. Therefore, moral realism regards political leadership as the key element of political strength. As an operational element, political strength is more essential than resource elements to state comprehensive strength, because a stronger political leadership is able to accelerate the growth of economic, military, and cultural strength as well as enlarge the utility of these resources' strength. A strong leadership is able to win both domestic and foreign support, which improves a state's strength and international power. Unless we regard political leadership as the core element of a state's comprehensive strength we can never explain the law of uneven development of states' strength. Both political leadership and culture are soft strengths, but the former plays the active role and the latter only a passive role. Thus moral realists regard political leadership as the foundation on which resource strengths play their roles, like Guanzi's idea that, 'If a state is huge but the achievements of its government are insignificant, the state will become insignificant. If a state is small but the achievements of its government are significant, the state will become significant.'⁴⁴

Both the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the US's decline after the George Walker Bush administration launched the Iraqi War in 2003 support the idea that political leadership is more important than the resource elements of a state's comprehensive strength. When the Soviet government announced its demise it still had a much stronger military, economy, and cultural purchase than most countries. Its collapse was due to the reduction to zero of its political leadership, whereby all resource elements of strength stopped functioning. Bush's decision to start the Iraqi War without UN authorization undermined the authority of American leadership both domestically and internationally. Although the strength of the American economy and military kept growing from 2003 to 2006, its comprehensive strength went into a relative decline.

According to moral realism, great powers' types of political leadership play a role in changing international configurations. International configurations are composed of the international structure of great powers' strength and their strategic relations with other

44 Yang Muzhi, ed., *Guanzi II*, trans. Zhai Jiangyue (Guilin: Guanxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2005), p. 595. Guanzi (719-645 BCE) once served as Prime Minister for Duke Huan of Qi.

countries. Thus, changes in international configurations are caused not only by the rise and fall of their material strength, but also influenced by increases and decreases in their alliances.⁴⁵ For example, the transformation of the international configuration from bipolar during the Cold War to unipolar in the Post-Cold War era was driven by the enlarged strength disparity between Russia and the US, and also by the disintegration of the Warsaw Treaty Organization whereby Russia lost its allies. The Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are cases that show respectively the negative and positive aspects of how alliance leaders' different levels of morality, or at least strategic credit, affect the durability and reliability of alliances. Leading powers with high strategic credit are able to both establish and expand unbreakable alliances, and vice versa. Xi Que (郤缺), a Jin minister of the Spring-Autumn Period, demonstrated the relations between strategic credit and the validity of alliances. He says: 'How can a ruler demonstrate his authority if he does not suppress mutinying states? How can a ruler demonstrate his benevolence if he does not show mercy to those coming over to pledge allegiance? How can a ruler prove his morality without demonstration of his authority and benevolence? Without morality, how can he be the head of an alliance?'⁴⁶

Corollaries 4: Under the anarchical international system all states engage in self-help for their own security, but adopt different strategies to pursue security.

Realism assumes that states can rely on no one but themselves for security due to the absence of organizations in the anarchical international society legally monopolizing military force. According to this 'self-help' doctrine, the security of all states rests upon their military superiority over others. The security dilemma thus becomes inevitable.⁴⁷ Based on this assumption, and the fact that different types of states perform different functions, moral realism revises two corollaries respectively from structural realism and offensive realism.

- (i) Different types of dominant states advocate different international norms.
- (ii) Different types of states adopt different security strategies for survival.

Moral realism has a different view on the functions of states from Waltz, who asserts that there is no functional differentiation among states. For the sake of theoretical concision, Waltz black-boxes states and ignores their different functions in the international society by saying: 'The functions of states are similar, and distinctions among them arise principally from their varied capabilities. National politics consists of differentiated units performing specified functions. International politics consists of like units duplicating one another's activities.'⁴⁸ Differing from Waltz, moral realism argues that ignorance of the relations between the categories of state and their different functions weakens the explanatory power of realist theory. Take America, Japan and the Vatican as examples. The US not only protects its own security but also that of its allies; Japan protects no other states' security and even partially entrusts its security to the US; and the Vatican fully entrusts its security to Italy.

45 Yan and Yang, *The Analysis of International Relations*, pp. 44–45.

46 Hong Liangji, *Chunqiu zuozhuan gu* (Explanation of The Master Zuo's Spring and Autumn Annals)(Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), p. 367.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 31–33, 137–39.

48 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2004), p. 79.

Moral realism argues that it is necessary to distinguish categories of states in order to understand why the change of world leading power may lead to the change of international norms, and even of the international system. Their transitions are driven by the changing types of dominant states. Xunzi categorizes dominant states into three types, namely, *Wang* (王, true king or humane authority), *Ba* (霸, hegemon), and *Qiang* (強, tyrant).⁴⁹ Following Xunzi's categories, moral realism regards European colonial powers before WWII as tyrannies, and the US and Soviet Union, the two superpowers during the Cold War, as hegemons. In those two periods the dominant states were different in character, thus they established different international norms before and after WWII. For instance, annexation was a common norm in the former period and became prohibited in the latter one. As the Charter of the United Nations asserts 'All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.'⁵⁰

Differing from offensive realism, moral realists assert that different types of states will adopt different security strategies. Offensive realists argue that all great powers have to employ offensive strategy to maintain their dominant positions in the anarchical international system. Mearsheimer argues: 'Offensive realists, on the other hand, believe that status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs. A state's ultimate goal is to be the hegemon in the system.'⁵¹ This statement implies that problems caused by the same reason can only be dealt with through the same strategy. Suspicious of this logic, moral realists believe there is more than one strategy through which a great power can obtain or maintain its dominance, just as doctors may use either Chinese herbal medicine or modern medical treatment to cure the same disease. Moral realists agree that offensive strategies are popularly adopted by great powers in our history, but are not the only availability. In any given age the leading power will be faced with an international system, international norms, and military technology different from those of the previous age. It has more chance of improving its power through a newly invented strategy than by copying the existing ones. For example, the European powers competed for hegemony by conquering colonies outside Europe before World War I, while Germany, Italy, and Japan did so by annexing their neighbours after World War I. After World War II, the US and the Soviet Union contended for hegemony by proxy war.

Inter-state society is an anarchical system wherein weak and small states cannot survive through their own limited military capability. They therefore often entrust their security to a great power or a military organization.⁵² This strategy weakens their sovereignty but improves their security, thus even certain rich states, such as Japan and some European NATO members, have adopted this strategy. When the Abe administration advocated

49 Yang ed., *Xunzi I*, pp. 315–23.

50 Article 2 in 'Chapter I: Purposes and Principles', *The Charter of the United Nations*, <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-i/index.html>.

51 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), p. 21.

52 Sun Xuefeng, 'Rethinking East Asian Regional Order and China's Rise', *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 14, No.1 (2013), pp. 9–30.

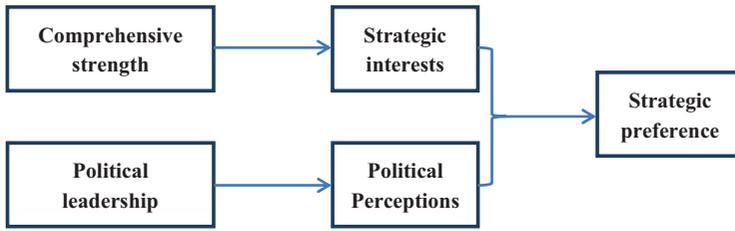


Fig. 2. The Theoretical Framework of Moral Realism.

normalizing Japan, this policy was perceived as an attempt to regain full responsibility for Japan's national security, namely the right of war.⁵³

To believe that moral realism regards all use of military force as immoral action would be a misconception. On the contrary, moral realism suggests that absolute non-use of military forces is an immoral principle. In the anarchical international system, small states usually do not have enough military capability to protect their national security and have to rely on great powers' protection. When a dominant power adopts absolute non-use of military forces, therefore, it is no different from not undertaking the responsibility to maintain international security and justice. Consequently, in the eyes of other states this kind of leading power has neither morality nor strategic credibility.

The Theoretical Framework of Moral Realism

The shift of the centre of the world has occurred several times over the past five centuries, and power transition is one of the most important subjects in IR studies. Moral realism attempts to explain the reason why, under certain conditions, a rising state can win in a competition against the dominant state which is the stronger of the two and has more powerful material strength. What is happening in this century is that China is reducing its power disparity with the US, which is regarded as much better than China in many respects, including political system, ideology, technology, education, economy, and military. Moral realists try to develop a new paradigm to explain this phenomenon by attributing political leadership to the transition of world power from a dominant state to a rising state. The following sections will discuss the relations among types of political leadership, international strategic credibility, international norms, and the international order.

Types of Political Leadership and Strategic Preferences

During the Cold War, political scientists carried out many studies on types of political leadership and their impact on policymaking. Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg said: 'In the provision or the destruction of such "political goods" as peace, order, stability, and non-material security, the actions of Africa's rulers and other leaders have been more important than anything else.'⁵⁴ The scope of application of their view is beyond Africa or developing countries, and could be true of every country. Drawing insights from their

53 Samir Tata, 'Japan's Quest for A New Normal—Analysis', *Eurasia Review*, 6 May, 2013, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/16052014-japans-quest-new-normal-analysis>.

54 Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, *Personal Rule in Black Africa: Prince, Autocrat, Prophet, Tyrant* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 3.

opinion, moral realism suggests that a rising state wins the strategic competition against a dominant power mainly because its political leadership is of a different type and also stronger than that of its rival.

Moral realism suggests that foreign strategy is determined by two factors: objective strategic interests, and subjective perceptions. The former depends on a state's comprehensive strength; the latter on the type of its political leadership (see Figure 2). Because political leadership is a part of political strength, moral realism defines the strength as a quiescent condition, namely, the level of national strength will not change as soon as the type of political leadership does. As long as the state's strength is stable, the strategic interest of that state can be defined objectively. Meanwhile, moral realism defines political leadership as a dynamic state, namely the type of a given state may change while the level of national strength remains the same. Thus, different types of political leadership will prefer different foreign strategies on the condition of similar strength. In terms of foreign policymaking, strategic decisions are made by a leading group of policymakers rather than just the supreme leader. Nevertheless, in most cases the supreme leader represents the type of leading body of policymaking. Moral realism hence judges the type of a given political leadership by the policymaking of a state leader, rather than by his personality or individuality.

Figure 2 shows that moral realism is a binary theory, with comprehensive strength and political leadership as the two independent variables. Each is divided into four classes in order to define a given state's strategic interests and perceptions.

States could be categorized into four classes in accordance with their comprehensive strength, namely, dominant states, rising states, regional states, and small states. (i) A dominant state refers to a country with dominant influence in any independent inter-state system that is not necessarily global system. For instance, the tributary system in East Asia has existed for more than 2000 years without substantial contact with other parts of the world, due to backward transportation technology. It is thus reasonable to regard Ancient East Asia as an independent inter-state system. During the Spring and Autumn period of ancient China five hegemonies successively established themselves, each of whom obtained dominant positions in that system in different periods.⁵⁵ (ii) A rising state refers to a state whose comprehensive strength expands so dramatically that it narrows the strength gap with the dominant state and seizes some power from that dominant state. The Soviet Union of the 1950s and contemporary China are typical rising states. (iii) A regional state refers to a state capable of dominating affairs in a region or sub-region where it locks in an independent inter-state system, although still under the influence of dominant states at the whole system level. Today, Germany and Brazil are deemed as regional powers, and India and South Africa as sub-regional powers. (iv) Small states are too weak to exert any influence at either the global or regional level.

It is important to note that all the above categories are based on the relative strength, rather than absolute strength, of states. For example, Canada and Australia are generally equal in terms of strength, but the former lacks regional influence compared with the latter due to their different geopolitical status. Canada is a small state because it is a weak

55 The Five Hegemons refers to the powerful rulers of Chinese states of the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history (770 to 476 BCE). The hegemonies mobilized the remnants of the Zhou Empire, according to shared mutual political and martial interests. The five hegemonies were Duke Huan of Qi (齐桓公), Duke Wen of Jin (晋文公), King Zhuang of Chu (楚庄王), King Helu of Wu (吴王阖闾), and King Goujian of Yue (越王勾践).

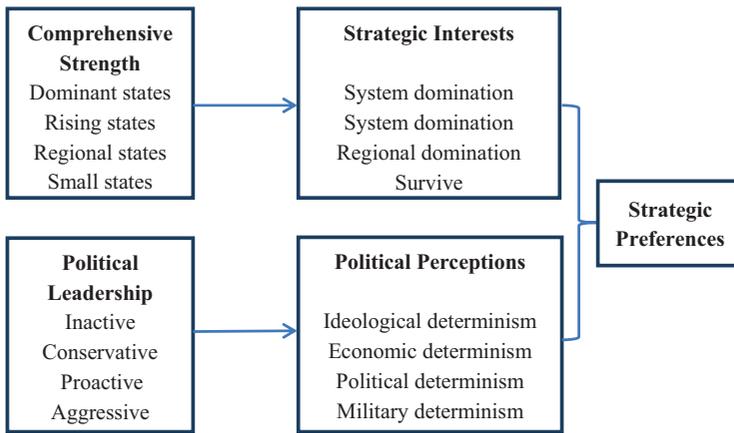


Fig. 3. Relations between Strategic Preferences and the Categories of Comprehensive Strength, Strategic Interests, Political Leadership, and Political Perceptions.

neighbour of the US, the sole superpower, while Australia is a regional power in Oceania because its strength is greater than that of all of its neighbours in the continent of Oceania.

Based on the above categories of state strength, both dominant and rising states will define their top strategic interest as the dominant influence within an independent inter-state system; regional powers only keep a watchful eye on the dominance in their particular region; and small states just pay attention to their own survival interests.

Political leadership could be categorized into four types: inactive, conservative, proactive, and aggressive. (i) Inactive leadership refers to policymakers with no ambitions to expand their national interests. Policymakers of this type are disciples of governance-by-non-interference philosophy, and practice the art of ‘governing by doing nothing that goes against nature’. (ii) Conservative leadership refers to the kind of policymakers that advocate maintaining the current status quo, and who are satisfied with the achievements of their predecessors. As disciples of economic determinism, they count economic benefits as the supreme national interest, and view economic strength as the foundation of comprehensive strength. (iii) Proactive leadership refers to policymakers that devote themselves to the work of enhancing the status of their country. They are disciples of political determinism, and believe in the philosophy of human effort as the decisive factor. They attribute the rise and fall of states to national political leadership rather than anything else. (iv) Aggressive leadership refers to policymakers who are disciples of military determinism, and who prefer to achieve strategic goals through military might, including aggressive wars.

Figure 3 illustrates the values of the four key variables in moral realist theory. Because each of the strategic and political perceptions has four values, there are totally 16 strategic preferences based on the combinations of interests and political perceptions. The four types of leadership can be applied to explain the relationship between the strategy preferences and leadership types of states at all levels of national strength. There is a common phenomenon whereby the alternation of political leaders of a state may dramatically change that state’s foreign strategy while the strength of that state remains the same. However, moral realist theory is developed mainly to explain why a rising state can replace a hegemon. Thus the following section will focus only on the strategic preferences of rising states with

different political leaderships. Although all rising states must face the rise dilemma, different types of rising states will favour different strategies to overcome such straits.

Type I: Inactive Leadership

Inactive leaders of a rising state prefer the foreign strategy of avoiding the rise dilemma. Avoiding danger is instinctive to all animals, including human beings. It is natural for most political leaders to avoid the problems that accompany rise. For example, on the one hand, it is almost impossible for China to be peacefully united with Taiwan, but on the other, there would be a danger of war between China and the US if China were to unite with Taiwan through military force. Faced with this dilemma, inactive leaders will transfer the policy of uniting Taiwan to that of protecting peace and benefits. This policy avoids the danger of war across the Taiwan Strait by abandoning the goal of national unification.

In the case of power transition, inactive leaders of rising states are often unable to resist the dramatically increasing external pressure mainly derived from structural conflicts between themselves and dominant states. As long as rising states lower their strategic goals they can substantially reduce tension with dominant states. In most cases, it is highly possible that inactive leaders of a rising state will suspend or terminate the goal of rise. There are two obvious advantages to the inactive approach: first, this choice requires lesser leadership capability; second, it can easily be proved effective by rapidly reducing contention with dominant states. In China, most of those who support the strategy of avoiding conflicts are disciples of Laozi's philosophy of governing by non-interference as expounded in his masterpiece *Tao Te Ching*.⁵⁶

Type II: Conservative Leadership

The conservative leaders of a rising state often adopt a foreign strategy that focuses on economic and trade cooperation. Following the doctrine of economic determinism, they define economy as the foundation of a state's comprehensive strength, and economic interest as its primary national interest. Believing the essence of rise dilemma is caused by economic conflicts between rising states and hegemony, such leaders prefer to reduce external pressure through the economic cooperation approach.

Although the strategy of economic cooperation cannot reduce external pressure as effectively as that of avoiding conflicts, including the risk of war, it can temporarily ease tensions between rising states and hegemony. This effectiveness is employed to back up conservative leaders' wisdom and the correctness of their economic cooperation policy. Nowadays in China, leaders who favour the strategy of 'yi jing cu zheng' (Improving political relations by enlarging economic cooperation) are usually followers of economic determinism.⁵⁷

56 Wang Hongxu, 'Xin Zhongguo waijiao de jiazhi quxiang yu zhanlue xuanze' ('The PRC's Diplomatic Value and Strategic Decision'), *Guji guanxi xueyuan xuebao* (*The Journal of University of International Relations*), No. 6 (2011), p. 11.

57 Xie Xuren, 'Fazhan huli gongying de ZhongMei jingji hezuo guanxi' ('Developing Mutual Benefit and Win-win Economic Cooperation between China and America'), Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, http://www.mof.gov.cn/zhengwuxinxi/caizhengxinwen/201005/t20100523_319021.html.

Type III: Proactive Leadership

The proactive leaders of a rising state favour alliance strategies that establish a good neighbourhood supportive of the rise of their country. They commit themselves to increasing their states' international power according to the growth of their comprehensive strength. This type of strategy will inevitably intensify the structural conflicts between rising states and hegemons, as the latter will necessarily step up containment of the former. Faced with the growing strategic containment that hegemons impose, the proactive leaders of rising states will seek allies, especially political support and security cooperation from their surrounding countries, in order to break the containment of hegemons.

The strategy of making alliances with neighbours runs the risk of war against hegemons, and is often adopted by political leaders able to offer strong political leadership through proactive thinking. In contemporary China, adopting the alliance strategy requires of policymakers an even stronger mind and a greater political will than would be the case for other countries, because the idea of making alliances has been demonized as Cold War mentality.⁵⁸ Nowadays, Chinese scholars who advocate resuming the alliance strategy are realists, and argue that China cannot reach the goal of national rejuvenation without substantial international support. They point out that China lacks staunch strategic supporters in international society, and that for China to gain international support, no other strategy is more effective than making alliances.⁵⁹

Type IV: Aggressive Leadership

The aggressive leaders of rising states favour the policy of military expansion. Reaping benefits through violence and aggression is a human instinct, because using violence has the advantage of achieving goals directly and quickly. The aggressive leaders of a rising state often adopt the opportunistic policy of initiating military attacks against small or secondary states, including the allies of hegemons. Their strategy can result in major wars resulting from the escalation of war between a rising state and one that is an ally of the hegemon.

As military expansion strategy carries a high risk of failure, aggressive leaders must be immune to the instinctive human fear of war. In contemporary China, certain people advocate the military expansion strategy to achieve China's national rejuvenation, arguing that military expansion and invoking the aggressive wars historically waged by the western powers is the only feasible approach to seizing international dominant power.⁶⁰

- 58 He Tiantian, 'Yin Zhuo: junshi jituanhua you lengzhan siwei, jiemeng bu fuhe ZhongE liyi' (Yi Zhuo: The Military Alliance is a Cold War Mentality and does not Serve the Interests of China and Russia), *iFeng News*, 19 May, 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/a/20140519/40363851_0.shtml; 'ZhongE bugao junshi tongmeng yuanyin fuza, Gangmei cheng cengyou cantong jiaoxun' ('China and Russia Reject Alliance due to Complex Reason and Hong Kong's Media Claim that it is because of Historical Lessons'), 22 April, 2014, <http://mil.sohu.com/20140422/n398629853.shtml>.
- 59 Wu Xu, 'Zhongguo ying fangqi bujiemeng zhengce' ('China Should Abandon the Non-alignment Policy'), *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* (*China News Weekly*), 10 January, 2012; Yan Xuetong, 'The Shift of the World Centre and its Impact on the Change of the International System', *East Asia: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2013), p. 232.
- 60 Zhao Pi, 'Guanyu xin junshi biange ruogan wenti de zhanlue sikao' ('Strategic Thinking on Several Military Reforms'), *Zhanlue yanjiu* (*Strategic Studies*), No. 2 (2013), p.11.

The above analysis matches four *idealtypus* of strategies (inactive, conservative, proactive, and aggressive) with four *idealtypus* of leadership of rising states. In fact, there are various transitional types of strategy preferences, political leaderships, and states among those *idealtypus* that are measured by national strength. Readers can accordingly predict the change in strategy preferences.

Guanzi said: ‘When your own state is well governed but the sovereigns of neighbouring states are unworthy, it will be a great advantage for establishing a great power.’⁶¹ He asserts that the correctness of one player’s strategic decision will not determine the final ends of a game with multiple players. Williamson Murray defines strategy as ‘a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate’.⁶² Based on the insightful ideas of Guanzi and Murray, moral realists argue that the proactive leaders’ strategy preference has a better chance than others of achieving the goal of rise, rather than suggesting that the proactive strategy will win the competition against hegemons. Therefore, the next section will discuss the relationship between types of international leadership that rising states provide, and the changes they make to the international configuration and norms, on the premise that the strategy adopted by rising states successfully increases their strategic credibility in an international system.

International Leadership and Strategic Credibility

Moral realism defines a rising state’s core of political morality as its responsible benevolent governance at state level and high strategic credibility at inter-state level. The type of international leadership a rising state offers determines whether or not it values its international strategic credibility. Among the above four types of leadership, inactive and aggressive leaders do not value international strategic credibility; and conservative leaders prefer to maintain credibility at a low cost. By contrast, proactive leaders would regard international strategic credibility as a national interest as well as a strategic instrument for enlarging international power. Moral realist theory argues that the strategic credibility of a rising state has dramatic impact on changes in the international configuration, evolution of international norms, and redistribution of power in a new international order.

High international strategic credibility helps a rising state change the existing international configuration. As an operational element of comprehensive strength, political strength enacts the role of multiplier of resource strength efficiency.⁶³ As a part of political strength, international strategic credibility plays a role in increasing political strength. It thus becomes possible for a rising state with high strategic credibility to reduce the strength disparity with the dominant state even when its material strength is inferior to that of the hegemon. Through improving its strategic credibility, a rising state is able to gain more allies and wider international political support. Having more allies means more available material resources for the rising state’s use when dealing with international difficulties, and also implies reduced availability of international resources to dominant states. This process will gradually change the strength structure between rising states and dominant states. When the camp headed by a rising state overwhelms that led by a hegemon in terms of

61 Yang, ed. *Guanzi II*, pp. 585, 587.

62 Williamson Murray, Macgregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 1.

63 Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought Modern Chinese Power*, pp. 101–02.

strength, the hegemon will have no other choice but to relinquish its leading position to the rising state. This is why moral realists view the number of allies as a key index of international strategic credibility and political popularity. The main approach whereby a major state establishes international strategic credibility is that of providing security protection for secondary or small states through alliances with them. After the Cold War, the US improved its strategic credibility by maintaining a large number of allies, and expanding NATO. However, its strategic credibility sank after the Arab Spring movements of 2011, when the Obama Administration forsook traditional American allies in the Middle East.⁶⁴

The high international strategic credibility of a rising state also contributes to its reform or creation of international norms. It is widely agreed that leading states play the key role in establishing new international norms. Most IR scholars believe that rewards and punishments are the two major approaches through which leading states can establish new norms. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan carried out research on how the US used its material capability to establish new norms by rewarding or punishing states that respectively obeyed or violated new norms.⁶⁵ Moral realism agrees on the role of rewards and punishments in establishing new norms, but suggests that leading by example is more important than these two approaches. The morality of a rising state is mainly based on practicing what it preaches and promises, namely, to set itself as an example to other states in international society.⁶⁶ The moral practices of a rising state are consistent with approaches through which to strengthen its international strategic credibility. Therefore, adhering to the content of one's signed international treaties is regarded as a moral action, and the actor is deemed as a creditable state. In contrast, pursuing double standard in terms of practicing international norms is criticized as immoral and the actor is treated as a disreputable state.

The high international strategic credibility of a rising state contributes to its establishment of a new international order through redistribution of international power. The change in strength structure between major powers lays the foundation for power redistribution, while the high international strategic credibility of a rising state also has strong impact on the redistribution. When a rising state has a large group of allies it is able to mobilize international support for its blueprint for a new international order, and vice versa. Take the US as an example. After World War I, the US government initiated the idea of establishing the League of Nations, but the American Congress rejected the Treaty of Versailles and refused to join the League.⁶⁷ Poor strategic credibility thus made it impossible for the world to accept the American plan of a League of Nations. By contrast, America abandoned its Isolationism after World War II and provided military backing for its allies before, during, and after World War II. These actions raised America's strategic credibility to a high level, and so strengthened American international leadership.

64 Ivan Dinev Ivanov, *Transforming NATO: New Allies, Missions, and Capabilities* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 201–13; Deborah Amos, 'Arab Leaders Feel US Abandoned Egypt's Mubarak', *NPR*, 9 February, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/09/133614346/Egypt-Arab-Leaders>.

65 G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan, 'Socialization and Hegemonic Power', *International Organization*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1990), pp. 290–92.

66 Yan Xuetong, 'International Leadership and Norm Evolution', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol.4, No. 3 (2011), pp. 241–43.

67 Wang Shengzu, *Guoji guanxi shi (The History of International Relations)*, Vol. 4 (1917–1929) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1995), p. 100.

Consequently, most nations endorsed America's initiative of establishing the United Nations after World War II: 153 representatives from 50 countries signed the United Nations Charter in June 1946.⁶⁸ If the American Congress had refused to join the UN, America's plan to establish the UN would not have achieved the acquiescence of such an overwhelming majority of states.

Retaining high strategic credibility is more important for a leading state's maintenance of an existing international order than it is for establishing a new one. Generally speaking, it is possible for a rising state to establish a new international order exclusively through its material strength, but it cannot durably maintain that order through material strength alone. The durability of an international order is based on the condition that most states adhere to international norms, and the extent to which those states stick to these norms depends on the leading state's credibility as regards obeying the norms that it advocates. There is thus a positive correlation between the leading state's strategic credibility and the durability of the international order it established.

In the first section, the author made the distinction between international power and international authority. Moral realism believes that the international authority of a leading state is established on the basis of its high strategic credibility rather than on that of power. It can thus enjoy high international authority only by retaining high strategic credibility. Moral realism regards the international authority of a leading state as the foundation of its dominant position and of the durability of the international order under its leadership. Accordingly, moral realism categorizes international leadership under humane authority, hegemony, and tyranny, according to the level of a leading state's strategic credibility. This idea is inspired by Xunzi who says: 'The True King tries to win men; the lord-protector to acquire allies; the powerful to capture land.'⁶⁹

A state of humane authority is an inter-state leading power that practices moral principles and maintains high international strategic credibility, normally maintaining the international order in three ways: (i) making itself a good example to other states of moral practice according to international norms; (ii) promoting the internalization of particular international norms by rewarding the states that obey these norms; (iii) punishing the states that violate international norms.⁷⁰ Thus the international order established and led by the state of humane authority is continuously strengthened. The Western Zhou Dynasty in ancient China is generally acknowledged as a model of long-lasting and stable maintenance of inter-state order.

Compared to a state of humane authority, a state of tyranny is a dominant power without strategic credit as regards adhering to inter-state norms. Its immoral actions undermine the moral principles that other states practice while strengthening the jungle law of anarchical societies. Because states of tyranny that are in a dominant position take the lead in undermining inter-state norms, small or weak states will follow the leading states' suit and moral norms thus perish rather than being expanded. As a result, the order headed by a tyrannical state is inevitably unstable and often in turmoil.⁷¹ For example, the Qin Dynasty, the first Chinese Empire, created an inter-state order through its leadership in 221 BCE, but

68 Wang Shengzu, *Guoji guanxi shi (The History of International Relations)*, Vol. 6 (1939–1945) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1995), p. 519.

69 Yang, ed., *Xunzi I*, p. 221.

70 Yan, 'International Leadership and Norm Evolution', pp. 241, 244, 245.

71 *Ibid.* p. 244.

it only lasted for 14 years. It is thus the case that Chinese historians most often cite to illustrate the insufficiency of material strength in maintaining international order.

States of hegemony are a kind of leading power somewhere between those of humane authority and tyranny, in terms of strategic credibility or moral actions. Such a state usually pursues double standard principles in inter-state affairs, namely, keeping strategic credits within its alliance while adopting a policy to deal with non-allies according to jungle law. This contributes to maintaining the solidarity and stability of the alliance headed by a hegemonic state, but undermines stability as regards the entire interstate system. Thus the inter-state order dominated by a hegemonic state is relatively more peaceful than that dominated by a tyrannical state, but much less so than in an order led by a state of humane authority.⁷² The State of Qi was a hegemon in the Spring and Autumn Period, and in 651 BCE organized the largest alliance ever with seven states. The State of Qi, under the rule of Duke Huan, was a case demonstrating the actions and strategies preferred by hegemonic leadership.⁷³

It is necessary to clarify that moral realism never argues that moral actions, including retaining high strategic credibility, play an unconditional role in shaping the international configuration or order, but rather suggests that a reliable national security capability and material strength are the necessary conditions for moral actions to work effectively. In other words, the moral actions of major states play a positive role in achieving their national interests, but weak states may not obtain the same result by following the actions of strong states. Rising states refers to countries with fast-growing national strength which define as their strategic interests obtaining international leadership and creating a new international order. Small or weak states have neither the necessary national strength nor interest for world leadership or world order. Without the basis of strong comprehensive strength, secondary or small states' morality can contribute little to enlarging their strategic interests. Meanwhile, secondary or small states give first priority to their survival rather than to international power and order. They thus lack the motivation to improve their strategic credibility. The fact that the non-alliance principle is mainly adopted by secondary and small states illustrates that they place a lesser value on international strategic credibility than do rising and dominant states.

Drawing on insights from history, moral realism regards the characteristics of international leadership demonstrated by rising or dominant states as an independent variable through which to analyse how they change international systems. An international system is constituted of three key elements: actors (mainly states), an international configuration, and international norms. Changes in any two or three of these elements will transform the system as a whole from one type to another.⁷⁴ During the process of a rising state's replacement of a dominant state as a new international leading power, the international

72 *Ibid.* p. 245.

73 In 651 BCE, State of Qi organized a meeting at Kuiqiu (葵丘) with the representatives of the State of Lu(鲁), the State of Song(宋), the State of Zheng(郑) and the State of Wei(魏), and in the presence of a royal representative from Zhou, whose king had the highest judicial authority. The members of this alliance agreed never to attack one another, and to assist one another in the event of being attacked. The Duke of Qi thus became the overlord over those weaker states.

74 Yan. 'The Shift of the World Centre and its Impact on the Change of the International System', pp. 228–30.



Fig. 4. Different Types of Political Leaders and Changes in International Systems.

configuration often changes from one type to another. After, or even before the rising power establishes its international leadership, it would promote new international norms. Owing to the fact that, in most cases, changes in international leadership type affect the transfer of the international configuration and the evolution of norms, the types of international systems change.

Figure 4 illustrates the relations between the types of political leadership of rising states and the possible changes in international systems. The character of political leadership determines a rising state's strategy preference, but that strategy may have two different results—defeat or success. If the rising state successfully changes the international configuration by catching up with the dominant state in terms of strength, or even surpassing it, it will have the chance to offer a new leadership to international society and to reform or create international norms. As long as rising states bring about changes in both international configurations and international norms, the character of the international system will change accordingly. For instance, the US and the Soviet Union became superpowers by winning World War II, and as a consequence also became world leaders who developed a set of double standard hegemonic norms that maintained the post-war order for about four decades. These norms were not perfect but much more positive and moral than those before World War II.

Conclusion

Unlike other schools of IR realist theory that study the shift of power from the perspective of how to maintain the hegemon's dominant position, moral realist theory concentrates on the question of why a rising state can replace the dominant power and create a new international leadership.

As a branch of realist theory, moral realism explores the logics and mechanisms of power transition on the basis of realist fundamental assumptions by bringing back two key independent variables—political leadership and international strategic credibility. The former is of greater importance because it determines a rising state's strategy preference, which

has strong impact on the growth of its strength and the influence of its international power. Moral realism admits that material strength is the undisputed foundation on which a rising state can improve its international status, but stresses the significance of political leadership, as the operational element of national comprehensive strength, in redistribution of international power among major states. More precisely, a strong political leadership with high international strategic credibility can promote a rising state's capability of international political mobilization and hence facilitate changes in the international configuration. By changing the strength structure between major states, a rising state will have the chance to establish its leadership over the whole international system. Based on that leadership, it can perform new international norms and create an international system of a new character.

China's resurgence as a superpower will have the largest impact on international politics of the 21st century, and may change the current international configuration, shift the world power centre from across the Atlantic region to across the Pacific region, and shape a new world order. Nevertheless, it is still difficult for moral realists to predict what kind of international leadership China will offer to the world. China insists on the non-alliance principle, which is quite different from America's strategy to consolidate its world leadership. According to moral realist theory, non-alliance policy undermines China's international strategic credibility and hinders China from mobilizing international support for its national rejuvenation. Without sufficient international support it will be very difficult for China to push forward new international norms. There will hence be little chance of a change in character of the current international system. Moral realists not only think it absolutely necessary for China to make alliances with as many states as possible, but also believe it important for China to practice the ideology of fairness, justice, and civility, both at home and abroad, for the sake of its own strategic interests as well as those of the world.

However, moral realism is still in its infancy, and pending further development. For instance, much work is needed to deepen our knowledge about the difference between national leadership and international leadership. It is certain that political leadership in domestic society and international society has both similarities and differences. Thus more research is required on the similarities and differences as regards formation of political leadership, categories, functions, roles, efficiency and so on. Moral realists have been frustrated by the inconsistency of the categories of political leadership at national and international levels. International strategic credibility could be another important issue needing further research. For international strategic credibility to play a positive role in shaping a better international environment for a rising power requires clearly defined conditions. The last but not least research issue this article suggests is to develop positivist quantitative methods to measure the capability and real effect of political leadership. All these efforts will help to understand the respective correlations between types of political leadership and foreign strategy preferences, redistribution of international power, changes in international norms, and so avoid the vicious circle of arguments and theorization.