

## *Original Paper*

# Study on the Moral Realism Theory and Its Enlightenment

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### ***Abstract***

*Moral realism theory takes political leadership as the core variable, which differs from the traditional realism theory. Moral realism theory aims to analyze the motivation and logic of rising state replacing dominant state in international system. This paper uses documentary analysis to introduce and analyze this theory, which provides an innovative perspective for analyzing the current strength comparison between China and the United States and its impact on international relations in the future, while also helping to understand the diversified development of realism theory in international relations.*

### ***Keywords***

*International Relations Theory, Moral Realism Theory, Morality, Political Leadership*

## **1. Background of Moral Realism Theory**

Moral realism is an important achievement of realism theory in international relations in recent years. Yan Xuetong, a Chinese scholar of realism theory, is the main supporter of moral realism theory. Since 2005, Yan has published multiple works about moral realism. In his view, moral realism is the combination of western realism paradigm and the political ideology and practice of the Pre-Qin period in China.

Moral realism theory is based on two backgrounds. On the one hand, moral realism is based on traditional realism and analyze international relations from perspective of morality, aiming to enrich the theoretical camp of realism theory in international relations; on the other hand, moral realism takes the World Power Transition in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as realistic background, aiming to analyze the current relationship between the major powers of China and the US and its impacts on the future of international relations.

### ***1.1 Academic Background***

Moral realism is based on traditional realism paradigm. Traditional realism paradigm includes classical realism and structural realism. Since the end of World War II, classical realism theory has dominated

the agenda of international relations research. Hans Morgenthau, a leading figure of classical realism theory, mentioned that the core of IR lies in “Power Politics” in his masterpiece *Inter Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* published in 1948. International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim. (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 13) As can be seen, classical realism regards “Power Politics” as the core concept. The concept of Power refers to the unity of nation interests, goals and means for interests. Since the late 1960s, structural realism theory has developed on the basis of classical realism. Kenneth Waltz, the leading figure of structural realism theory, put forward the concept of “International System” in his works including *Man, the State, and War* published in 1959 and *Theory of International Politics* published in 1979. The cores of structural realism lie in: (1) the anarchic nature of the International System is the essence of IR; (2) the International System is the fundamental motivation of state behavior; (3) the fundamental nation interest is security, and power is the means for achieving nation interests and goals. (Xing, 2011, p. 44)

According to the Table, the difference between two theories above is: the former emphasizes national unit variable; the latter uses international system as a fundamental factor to national behavior.

Table 1. Differences between Classical Realism and Structural Realism

/	Classical Realism	Structural Realism
Core Viewpoints	Human selfishness; people aim to pursue unlimited power.	The anarchic nature of the International System.
Research level	Nation Unit	System Level
Research Perspective	Power Politics	International System

(The table made by author)

Since the end of Cold War, however, the interpretation of international political phenomena by traditional realism has become somewhat pale and powerless. On the one hand, the international situation since the Post Cold War Era is vastly different from the early stages after the end of World War II. With the continuous development of economic globalization, the degree of interdependence between states has deepened; the emergence of nuclear weapons brought about “Terrifying Nuclear Balance”. The instinctive fear of nuclear weapons by humans greatly reduces the possibility of war, especially between major powers. Cooperation between states outweighs conflict. On the other hand, structural realism didn’t accurately predict the collapse of the bipolar system during the Cold War. This theory was therefore questioned, for it can’t explain why different diplomatic choices and behaviors occur under the influence of the same systemic factors. This shows system level factor as structural realism mentioned is not the only variable determining a state’s external strategic orientation.

In this condition, Norrin Ripsman proposed neoclassical realism theory in 1998. This theory aims to

explain the fundamental motivations behind foreign policy choices of states. Most neoclassical realists, including Ripsman, believe that the combination of Waltz's system level and Morgenthau's national unit level can more accurately predict the diplomatic strategic orientation and the development trend of the international system. Based on this, neoclassical realists propose a theoretical model that combines international and domestic variables to analyze a country's foreign policy. (Ripsman, 2013, p. 18) According to neoclassical realism, there are two reasons for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the influence of international system led to decline in the Soviet Union's capabilities; on the other hand, the domestic political factors are relative. In short, more and more realist scholars are adopting this theoretical analysis.

Moral realism theory is an innovation of traditional realism. The greatest innovation of moral realism lies in analyzing international relation from the perspective of morality rather than Power Politics. Starting from the assumption that human nature is evil, moral realism believes that state behavior includes both factors of power and morality.

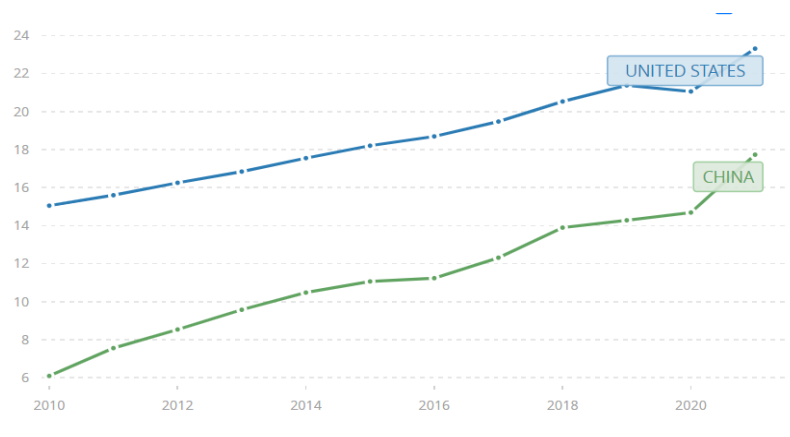
On the one hand, the concept of morality in moral realism originates from the political ideology of the Pre-Qin period in ancient China. Chinese political thinkers in Pre-Qin revolved around the topic of "whether the main means of maintaining international order were morality or violence (power in morality)". Han Feizi thought that morality only plays a role in maintaining order between states under specific conditions, and in general, it must be maintained through violence rather than morality; Guanzi, Laozi, Conducius, Xunzi and Mencius, on the other hand, believed that morality was a necessary condition for maintaining order among nations, but didn't rule out the use of violence to maintain order; Mozi regarded morality as sufficiency to maintain order among nations because morality itself excluded violence. As can be seen, although most Pre-Qin thinkers didn't take identifying morality as their core means, they didn't exclude the existence of morality. Morality still has its specific function which can't be replaced by violent means.

On the other hand, the western realist paradigm, as a theoretical cluster, has not made a clear and consistent analysis of the existence of morality. Since the era of Machiavelli, the political concept of "valuing power over morality" has dominated the realism paradigm. Morgenthau, however, discussed the role of International Morality. "...power is a crude and unreliable method of limiting the aspirations for power on the international scene...something that is in harmony with the demands of reason, morality, and justice. The substance, of which the ideologies of international politics are but the reflection, is to be found in the normative orders of ethics, mores, and law." (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 169) As can be seen, Morgenthau believed that state behavior reflects both power and moral factors. In the 1960s, the "Quantitative Analysis Method" brought about by the Behaviorist Revolution influenced the attitude of the realism paradigm towards morality. John Mearsheimer is the leading figure of offensive realism theory. He firmly denies morality in IR theory. Yan doesn't agree with Mi's view. In short, moral realism absorbed the role of morality in the international order from Chinese Pre-Qin political thinkers, while inheriting the emphasis of classical realism on morality.

### 1.2 Realistic Background

The most important issue of moral realism aim to analyze is the potential mechanisms of rising state replacing dominant state in the context of World Power Transition, which is an eternal topic in international politics. "...the outbreak of major hostilities is connected to changes in the power structure of the international order...the significant differences in the distribution of international power are rooted in the different capacities of member states to utilize their own human and material resources." (Organski, 1968, p. 20) In other words, due to the imbalance in economic, military, and demographic developments between states, the position of different states in the international power structure will undergo decisive changes, with the original dominant power status declining and the later rising power status rings, and obtaining the dominate power status.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, World Power Transition is manifested in the strength comparison between the two world powers, China and the US. On the one hand, due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the US's attention to Europe, especially to the Western European region, has decreased. With the continuous prosperity and growth of emerging economies in East Asia, the focus of US diplomatic strategy is gradually shifting eastward. Since the George W. Bush administration, the US has declared itself an important member of "East Asian country". In 2008, Barack Obama proposed the "Return to Asia Pacific" strategy. In 2019, Donald Trump proposed the "Indo-Pacific Strategy". In 2020, the current President of the US, Joe Biden, is actively expanding contacts between the US and countries in the Indo-Pacific region. In the economy, the US and Indo-Pacific countries were actively forming "Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF)"; in terms of military, security, the US established "AUKUS" with the United Kingdom and Australia. The US and the UK have pledged to provide nuclear submarines to Australia. In addition, India's position in US strategy is constantly improving. In short, one of the reasons for the continuous eastward shift of the US strategy is China's rise. In 2010, China's GDP surpassed Japan, becoming the world's second largest economy after the US.



**Figure 1. Trend of Gross Domestic Product Growth in China and the US (2010-2020)**

(Data Sources from : <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2021&locations=US-CN&start=200>)

0)

According to data from the World Bank, around 2010, the total GDP of the US was twice that of China; by 2020, this proportion had dropped to about less than double. This shows that China's economy capability is growing faster than the US, and the total GDP of China and the US is showing a decreasing trend. In addition, China's strength and influence in the fields of technology, military strength, and culture are also constantly narrowing the gap with the US. This also shows that comprehensive capabilities of China and the US is constantly increasing.

Regarding the analysis of relative decline of dominant state, Paul Kennedy mentioned the famous theory of "Military Overstretch". "The decline of major power from economic perspective, great powers ascendancy correlate strongly to available resources and economic durability. Military overstretch and a concomitant relative decline are the consistent threats facing powers whose ambitions and security requirements are greater than their resource base can provide for." (Paul, 1987, p. 438) Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations of the US, rejects the notion of American decline. "...the biggest threat to the decline in leadership of the US is not from abroad but from within...it is necessary for the US to place emphasis on domestic investment and politics reform to maintain the hegemonic position in the international affairs." (Richard, 2014, p. 6) John Measheimer believed that China's growing power will likely bring it into conflict with the US. As far as most scholars of IR concerned, the phenomenon of center transfer between major powers due to changes in power comparison often leads to wars. This is because rising states are dissatisfied with the current situation and often change their relative power distribution through war, thereby changing the existing international scene.

Yan Xuetong, however, explains how the World Power Transition achieves a peaceful transition of power. In 2014, Yan explained this phenomenon in his article *The International Relations Theory of Moral Realism*. "In the international system of realistic power politics, adhering to moral principles and valuing the construction of domestic political leadership will contribute to the transfer of power in the world center." What's more, most scholars analyze from the perspective of dominant power, rather than the perspective of rising power. As a matter of fact, the phenomenon of world power transfer is not determined solely by the dominant state, but rather manifests as an interactive process of rising power and decline power. Throughout history, the rise and fall of states in the international system have been the same all the time.

The theoretical research of moral realism continues to develop with the improvement of China's international status. The development of theoretical research on global international relations has shown a "uneven" characteristic. The Theories of International Relations of Realism, Neo-liberalism and Constructivism are all "America Paradigms", that essentially serve the world political and economic hegemony system established by the United States after the war. Due to the dominant position of Western countries led by the US in the study of international relations theory, there is such

inequality phenomenon where “the West produces theory, while non West produces material”. This phenomenon has changed with the trend of “rising in the east and falling in the west”. Qin Yaqing, a Chinese scholar in international relations theory, pointed out that since 1979, the development of international relations theory in China has undergone three debates. The first was about China’s opening up to the outside world. The second one began in the 1990s, with a focus on how to apply theory to better serve China’s national interests. The theme of the third debate is about China’s rise. As it can be seen, the theoretical system of international relations is constantly deepening with the improvement of China’s capabilities. Moral realism emerged in the third debate.

In short, as a type of realism theory, the development process of moral realism is closely related to traditional realism. At the same time, due to the continuous improvement of theoretical sources and reality in practice, the development of moral realism cannot be separated from the reality of international politics.

## 2. Analysis of Moral Realism Theory

### 2.1 The Definition of Morality

In the process of integrating traditional Chinese political philosophy into the paradigm of realism, moral realism defines morality from the dimensions of its nature and hierarchy.

On the one hand, the morality in moral realism is a kind of instrumental. (Yan, 2019, p. 6) The definition of morality in moral realism differs from classical realism and is similar to the political ideology of the Pre-Qin period in China. “On the one hand, there is the dual error of confounding the moral rules ...on the other hand, there is the misconception...that international politics is so thoroughly evil that it is no use looking for ethical limitations...(In fact), their restraining function is most obvious and most effective in affirming the sacredness of human life in times of peace.” (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 174) As can be seen, Morgenthau attaches importance to the function of moral restriction of power and the universal value of morality itself. Confucius, Guanzi and Xunzi all valued the role of morality in the order of nations, but they emphasized morality as a tool for major powers to maintain order among nations, while weakening the value of morality itself. Xunzi proposed: “The nature of today’s people, born with good benefits, therefore, the struggle for life leads to resignation and death...But, from the perspective of human nature, courtesy towards others, out of competition, conforming to criminal division and disorderly reasoning leads to violence.” Due to the “evil nature of human”, most Chinese Pre-Qin politicians believed that morality couldn’t fundamentally improve the selfishness of human nature, but could constrain people’s (Political Leadership) desire for power and pursuit of power. Starting from the instrumental nature of morality, moral realism derives the relationship between morality and national interest, national strength, international power and international authority.

$$(E+M+C) \times P = C \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{International Power} \\ \text{International Authority} \\ \text{(Strategic Credibility)} \end{array} \right\} \quad \text{National Interest}$$

(Flowchart made by author. In this flowchart, “E”=Economy capability, “M”=Military capability, “C”=Cultural capability,” “CC”=Comprehensive Capability)

According to the flowchart above, political capability plays a decisive role in enhancing comprehensive capability, which improved by international power and international authority. Yan mentioned the level of comprehensive capability determines national interests. Traditional realism defines comprehensive capability through the size of power, thereby determining national interests. However, in moral realism ,national interest exists objectively and are not transferred by human will. If national interests are determined by power, it’s easy to misjudge the goals of interests. High or low goals can lead to the failure of national diplomacy. The instrumental nature of morality is specifically manifested in:

Firstly, strategic credibility is a quantitative indicator of morality in international authority. Strategic credibility is the lowest level of international morality, and a prerequisite to a leading power’s establishment of international authority. (Yan, 2019, p. 21) Yan adopted Xunzi’s propositions. “...Therefore, those who use the state are established with righteousness as the king, with faith as the ruler, and with power as the conspirator, they perish.” In other words, compared to international power, international authority can more sustainably stabilize a state’s comprehensive capability and international scene. International power is based on material capabilities, while international authority is based on non-material capabilities. “...but such promoted material capability cannot automatically establish the international authority of that state when other states do not accept its leadership. The improvement of a leading state’s international authority entails...” (Yan, 2019, p. 17)

Secondly, morality is an important tool of enhancing comprehensive capability. Traditional realism believes that national strength is measured by the size of power. In fact, the realism paradigm, as a theoretical cluster, doesn’t provide a unified explanation for whether power belongs to the national interest. Moral realism proposes: (1) power refer only to influence, and it is a national interest; (2) capability refers only to strength. (Yan, 2019, p. 12) On such. basis, morality directly affects power and indirectly affects strength. As an international authority, morality can enhance a state’s international power and thus enhance its strength. In short, morality is the fundamental tool to safeguard national interests and enhance national strength.

On the other hand, the morality in moral realism belongs to the national level. Yan adopted Morgenthau’s proposition. “The morality of the particular group, far from limiting the struggle for power on the international scene, gives that struggle a ferociousness...not known to other ages.” (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 174) In Morgenthau’s view, the moral principles of a specific country are not equivalent to universal morality. Firstly, the subject of implementing and adhering to moral principles is the state, usually the central government of the country. Therefore, morality in moral realism refers to “Government Morality”. Secondly, there are different levels of moral standards. The moral standard in moral realism refers to the most fundamental morality.

In short, moral realism regards morality as its core concept, which is the biggest difference between this theory and traditional realism. In addition, morality, as a human consciousness, cannot

automatically enhance comprehensive capabilities and safeguard national interests. Any policy is formulated, implemented, and executed by people. Therefore, the subject of behavior that adheres to moral principles is political leadership.

## 2.2 The Role of Political Leadership in Moral Realism

Moral realism regards political leadership, measured by morality, as the core explanatory variable to analyze World Power Transition---the potential mechanism by which rising states replace dominant states in international scene.

Both classical realism and Chinese Pre-Qin political ideology mentioned the role of political leadership. “But they have rarely asked themselves whether and to what extent such precepts, however desirable in themselves, actually determine the action of men...It is pertinent to ask whether they are mere ideologies concealing the true motives of action or whether they express a genuine concern for the compliance of international policies with ethical standards.” (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 174) As can be seen, classical realism uses morality to measure whether the power behavior of political leadership conforms to international norms. However, Chinese Pre-Qin political thinkers believed that the moral policies of political leadership (of major powers) would determine the international order. Due to the differences between the national and international systems, political leadership is divided into National leadership and International Leadership. Yan Xuetong pointed out that Proactive Leadership and Humane Authority Leadership are the two types are most helpful for rising countries to seize opportunities for rise. As shown in the table below:

**Table 2. Proactive Leadership and Humane Authority Leadership**

Type of leadership	Name	Characteristic
National leadership	Proactive Leadership	Responsibility; change status quo
International leadership	Humane Authority Leadership	Consistent; trustworthy

(Table made by author).

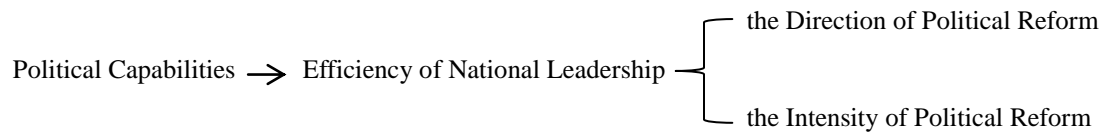
All in all, political leadership is the fundamental reason for determining the rise and fall of a major power. Its essence is the direction, determination, and ability of a government to carry out reforms to adapt to the constantly changing international and domestic strategic environment. This indicates that the stronger the political leadership of a major state, the more advantageous it has in the international status.

The type of political leadership determines the changes in international relations. Moral realism proposes that the comprehensive strength of a country is the foundation for determining its international status. According to the distribution of comprehensive capabilities, countries in the world are mainly divided into four categories: dominant states, rising states, regional powers and small



countries. As mentioned earlier, moral realism aims to primarily focus on global countries---dominant and rising states. The role of political leadership in international relations is manifested in the following aspects:

First of all, political leadership determines national strength, which in turn affects the international landscape. The international pattern is composed of two elements: (1) the distribution of relative strength of states; (2) strategic relations between major powers. According to comprehensive level formula, political power is an operational element that plays a decisive role in the improvement or decrease of comprehensive strength. The type of political leadership determines the level of political capabilities.



(Flowchart made by author)

As shown in the figure, political power is determined by the efficiency of national leadership. The efficiency of national leadership is composed of two elements: the direction of reform and intensity of political reform. Among them, the direction of reform is a decisive factor in determining changes in political power. The reason for this is that: (1) the correct direction of reform is based on moral principles, and on this basis, the greater the implementation of the reform, the higher the efficiency of national leadership, and thus the improvement of political leadership, and thus the improvement of political strength; (2) on the contrary, if the reform direction is not based on moral principles or violates these principles, it will lead to a decline in political power. In addition, the principle of alliance is the core factor that affect the strategic relationship of major powers. In Yan's view, the alliance policy is not a kind of "Mentality of Cold War", but rather the main way for a country to enhance its international strategic credibility. By forming alliance with other countries, major powers provides security guarantees for other country and enhance its international strategic credibility. Therefore, the increase in the number of major power alliances helps to enhance the strategic relationship of the country, thereby promoting changes in the international landscape. Based on the discussion above, Yan believes that the international landscape in the next 10 years will exhibit "Polarization" led by China and the US. Political leadership, therefore, will determine the future power gap between China-US.

Next, diplomatic strategy is influenced by both national strength and political leadership. As mentioned earlier, moral realism proposes that national strength defines national interests. Therefore, national strategic goals are first based on national strength. The stronger the national strength, the higher and more strategic goals the country has, and vice versa. Diplomatic strategy is the action guide for a country to achieve its own strategic interests and goals. Therefore, diplomatic strategy is essentially based on national strength. For example, according to this theory, there is a gap in national strength and international influence between the US and African countries, resulting in a greater diplomatic strategic goal for the US compared to the latter. However, the type of political leadership generates changes in

strategic preferences. On the one hand, different political leaderships of the same country adopt different foreign policies. For example, since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the international landscape has shown a characteristic of “One Superpower, Multiple Strengths”, while the US government experienced the periods of George W. Bush, Obama, Trump and Biden. Each leader’s foreign policy exhibits different characteristics. On the other hand, different countries adopt different foreign policies within the same system. For example, in the late Cold War, different foreign strategic orientations led to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the United States becoming the world’s only superpower.

The last but not the least, changes in political leadership shape new international norms, affect the existing international order, and promote the transformation of the international system. International Norms means standards, guidelines or code of practices that is generally agreed on by the international community. In IR, International Norms mainly refer to the international rules followed by countries in their actions on the international community. Due to the “anarchic nature” of the International System, there is no international law based on violence in the international community. Therefore, International Norms have become the main standard for constraining national behavior. After rising states become new dominant state, establishing new international norms helps to maintain its leadership position, while promoting international norms based on moral principles is conducive to promoting world peace. In IR, International order refers to patterned or structured relationships between actors on the international level; while International System is a network of states, organizations and individuals that interact on a global scale.

### **3. Enlightenment of Moral Realism Theory**

#### *3.1 Academic Contribution of Moral Realism Theory*

Moral realism enriches the realistic international relations theory camp. The construction of Moral Realism is conducive to enriching the camp of Realism theory of international relations. On the basis of the framework of traditional realism theory, Moral Realism shows that the cultural construction paths should be emphasized in the process of theoretical construction. This helps to promote the diversified development of realistic international relations theory.

On the one hand, rooted in traditional Chinese culture, the theory of moral realism in international relations proposes how to theorize in the fields of values, Norms, systems, and practices. As a result, the theory of moral realism has become a product of traditional Chinese culture and social practice, and ideas from traditional Chinese culture have been reshaped in the process of theoretical construction. From such perspective, the theory of moral realism provides spiritual strength for the realism of international relations theory.

On the other hand, the theory of moral realism utilizes the paradigm of Western realism to achieve cross-cultural communication. Some scholars question the cross-cultural construction of moral realism. As far as Amitav Acharya concerned, the theory of moral realism is not a manifestation of equal

dialogue between Western and non-Western traditional ideas. In his view, although the theory of moral realism is rooted in China's profound historical and cultural ideology, its theoretical foundation based on the Western realism paradigm reflects a "concession" to Western centrism. In response, Qin Yaqing pointed out that the theory of moral realism reflects the intersection of his cultural ideas and his own cultural ideas. The relationship between traditional Chinese culture and Western realism is not incompatible, but rather draws on each other's strengths. The development of global international relations should reflect inclusiveness. In short, the cultural construction path of moral realism theory has contributed its unique academic value to the diversified development of current realism international relations theory.

Moral realism realize the transition from theoretical consumption to theoretical creation. The development of China's international relations theory has its shortcomings of starting relatively late. Some Chinese scholars have called for the construction of a theoretical paradigm of international relations with Chinese characteristics. This proposition has been questioned by Qin Yaqing and Yan Xuetong. Yan pointed out that any theory of international relations transcends time and space, and has universal explanatory power. In fact, during the long-term process, the theoretical system of international relations in China has faced two core issues in the construction process: (1) How to understand China's relationship with the international system and the international community; (2) What is China's identity in the international community?

Over the past few decades, China's international status and role have been mainly influenced by the mainstream evaluation of Western international relations theory. China needs to construct a discourse system for international relation to enhance its understanding of its international status. The Chinese school represented by the "*Tsinghua Approach*" has gradually developed. The theory of moral realism has become one of the main research paths in China's international relations theory system in recent years. The main innovations of this theory are in the following two aspects:

On the one hand, emphasizing the role of moral factors is undoubtedly the greatest innovation of this theory compared to previous realism paradigms. The connotation of morality comes from the political philosophy; on the other hand, utilizing the framework of realism to seek international recognition, The theory of moral realism is integrated into global international relations by filling the long-standing gap in non Western international relations theory. As Amitav pointed out that moral realism theory, as one of China's international relations theoretical systems, should be committed to enriching and developing global cultural exceptionalism in order to provide a global paradigm for international relations theory. In short, any theory of regional international relations should be an integral part of global international relations.

China's Diplomacy abides by Moral Principles. Historical experience has taught us that the Chinese Dream can ultimately be realized through peaceful means. The pursuit of power and the use of force to achieve and maintain international status is not advisable and not sustainable. "China should attach importance to the advantage of "morality" in its national diplomatic strategy to enhance its

international identity.” The rise of China cannot be separated from “morality”. One of the important characteristics of China’s diplomacy as a major country with distinctive characteristics is the practice of the value of unity of justice and benefit. In international relations, it is necessary to properly handle the relationship between righteousness and benefit. The international situation is undergoing a sudden change, and the world is currently in a major upheaval that has not occurred in a century. On the one hand, the trend of multi-polarization in the world is constantly strengthening; on the other hand, the level of mutual trust between major powers has decreased, showing a trend of “fragmentation”. The principle of leading by example in China’s diplomacy helps to enhance China’s international strategic credibility.

China has long adhered to the policy of opening up to the outside world. Through its economic influence, China and countries with friendly and peaceful development together achieve common prosperity. This has expanded China’s “Circle of Friends”. This policy guideline reflects that China’s international strategic credibility is steadily improving, and China’s own leadership as a major power continues to play a role. Only in this way can we fully understand China’s rejuvenation strategy, reduce and eliminate misunderstandings and fallacies of some Western countries regarding China’s peaceful rise process. In today’s era, to achieve national rejuvenation, China needs to surpass the United States in terms of “justice” and “faithfulness”. At the same time, China actively participates in the reform of the global governance system and provides the world with Chinese experience.

### *3.2 Evolution of Moral Realism Theory in the Academic Community*

The theory of moral realism has received widespread attention from both domestic and international academic circles. The academic evaluation of moral realism theory mainly includes the following aspects.

Firstly, regarding the relationship between alliance and morality. Zhang Feng does not agree with the idea of establishing strategic credibility through alliance policies. Alliance means that while a major power strengthens its relationship with allies, it deteriorates its relationship with non-allies. The pros and cons of alliance should be analyzed from the perspective of national interests, rather than using moral principles as a measure. Scholars such as Liu Wenxiang raised the following questions: according to the logic of moral realism, the number of allies reflects the level of credibility. So, does it mean that all countries within the alliance system adopt moral policies towards each other? The moral realism of countries forming alliances to enhance strategic credibility does not clarify these issues.

Secondly, regarding the definition standards of morality. Zhang Feng believes that the morality in the moral realism has actually departed from Confucian origins and is closer to the western realism. Acharya pointed out that the moral realism is only based on the political ideology of the Pre-Qin period in China and lacks historical coherence. In contrast, the development process of western realism is more historically coherent.

Finally, regarding the role of Major, Medium-sized, and small countries in the international order. Acharya does not agree with the claim of moral realism that changes in the international order depend

on the balance of power among major powers and changes in strategic relations. He proposed the concept of “Multiple Order” in *the End of the American World Order*. In his view, with the deepening development of globalization and regionalization, the influence of medium-sized and small countries in the region on the international order will continue to rise. Therefore, international relations theory is not limited to the analysis of global powers, but should also maintain attention to medium-sized and small countries.

In summary, although the theory of moral realism has been criticized and questioned by the academic community during its development, its construction undoubtedly has positive significance. As Qin Yaqing pointed out that although moral realism takes realism as its basic theoretical framework, its core concept includes the moral factors excluded by realism. This knowledge practice constitutes a critical fusion and competitive reference. Therefore, it is an innovation. As mentioned before, different scholars have varying perspectives on moral realism. But overall, the theory of moral realism is the focus of most scholars’ attention at both the logical and feasible levels.

### *3.3 Reflections on the Moral Realism Theory*

Moral realism theory proposed by Yan Xuetong has innovative value for both the construction of China’s international relations theory system and the development of the realist international relation theory camp. Morality play a unique role in the current reality of international relations. Strategic credibility is even more essential for major power diplomacy.

As a theory based on analyzing international political reality issues, moral realism needs to keep up with the times and constantly enrich its own connotations. With the changing international situation, the theory of moral realism continues to enrich its own connotation, which is conducive to better explaining international political reality. At the same time, as a universal theoretical explanation, moral realism theory needs to constantly polish itself in practice. Only theories that can withstand practical testing are worthy of recognition.

## **4. Conclusion**

This paper mainly introduces the background and main content of the proposal of moral realism, and briefly analyzes and summarizes the construction inspiration of moral realism. This paper believes that moral realism enriches the theoretical camp of international relations in the field of path innovation, which is conducive to the diversified development of international relations theory. At the same time, the proposal of moral principles has certain guiding significance for China’s diplomacy. With the development and changes of the international situation, moral realism is also constantly adjusting and deepening its connotation. In short, the formation and development of moral realism theory has its specific academic and practical significance.

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