

International Relations Theory of Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism: A Comprehensive Look

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〈Abstract〉

Established by Professor Yan Xuetong from Tsinghua University, the theory of moral realism in international relations theory represents the achievement of Chinese scholars in innovations in international relations. This theory aims to use political leadership measured by morality as an explanatory variable to analyze the reason and logic of the rising power replacing the dominant position of the dominant power. However, extant literature on the theory fails to systematically review moral realism in Yan's work, reflecting fragmentation and misunderstanding. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively review moral realism in international relations, refute and correct problematic understandings, and explore potential applications for theoretical development. It argues that moral realism corresponds to classical realism more than neoclassical realism as a theoretical paradigm and that it is not a theory with ideological purposes serving China's grand strategy. The study further argues that the theory has not matured owing to issues with concept definition, logical contradictions, and biases of case analysis. Moreover, the influence of ancient Chinese thought in Yan's moral realism and the limited research object and field may impede its theoretical application. This study proposes applying moral realism to the study of foreign aid and holds that the field of foreign aid conforms to moral realism, alleviates some moral realism deficiencies, and expands the application scope of the theory.

Keywords: Moral Realism, International Relations Theory, Political Leadership, Morality, Ancient Chinese Thought

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1. Introduction

Established by Professor Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, moral realism is typical of the innovative Chinese approach to international relations theories (IRT). Yan's 2019 book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* epitomizes his thoughts and marks the formation of moral realism in the discipline of international relations. By referring to ancient Chinese thought and highlighting morality in realism, Yan proposes an alternative explanation for the world power transition between the rising power and the dominant power(Yan, 2019).

The birth of Yan's moral realism is the outcome of the lack of innovation in western IRT and the efforts of non-western scholars to diversify IRT scholarship. After the Cold War, barring the emergence of constructivism led by Alexander Wendt, there had been no significant breakthroughs in the paradigm of western IRT(Zhang, 2009), which, in its one-dimensionality, cannot fully explain the entire, globalized, and diversified world(Qin, 2019: 3). As Acharya and Buzan(2007: 293-294) highlighted, the hegemonic position of western IRT has been backed up by the dominant power of western states and is rooted in the particularities and peculiarities of European history. Thus, the discipline of international relations seldom represents the voices of the non-western world(Acharya, 2014: 647). Consequently, western IRT rarely produces knowledge concerning non-western ways of practicing and considering world

politics(Cheng, 2021: 4).

China entered a period of innovation and development of Chinese IRT at the start of the 21st century(Sun, 2018: 9). Chinese international relations scholars are seeking to transform from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers, thereby altering the previously described imbalance in the discipline of international relations(Ren, 2020: 393). Through the exploration and reference of traditional Chinese thoughts and concepts, Chinese academia has formed three leading schools of IRT, namely *Tianxia* system theory (Zhao, 2019), relational theory(Qin, 2018), and moral realism(Yan, 2019). All three theories have helped to enlighten contemporary international issues as well as Chinese diplomacy. Among them, Yan's moral realism is worth thorough review as it belongs to the realism family while also extending this theoretical paradigm.

However, there are problems of fragmentation and misunderstanding in the review of moral realist theory. The fragmentation is reflected in two aspects. First, most reviews are based on Yan's 2019 book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. Although Yan systematically introduces moral realism here, the book alone is not enough to review Yan's thoughts and arguments on the theory as theoretical research and innovation are cumulative processes. Thus, a more in-depth and critical review of moral realism is needed, incorporating analyses of Yan's academic articles, lectures, and interviews.

Second, the review and criticism of moral realism have not formed a systematic framework. For example, some scholars criticize certain concepts and definitions of moral realism(Rajagopalan, 2019; Wang,

2021), while others refute some of Yan's arguments(Larson, 2020). Few studies critically review moral realism in terms of basic concepts, theoretical logic, and research method. Nor do they point out the challenges to theoretical development or explore the potential applications of moral realism. More seriously, some critics misunderstand the theory of moral realism altogether.

Therefore, this study aims to (1) systematically and critically review moral realism based on Yan's books, articles, speeches, and interviews, (2) correct the problematic understandings of moral realism, and (3) explore challenges and potential application of moral realism for theoretical development.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the main content of moral realism. Section 3 refutes the two major misunderstandings. In Section 4, the paper raises criticism of the theory in terms of concepts, logic, and research method. Section 5 points out the challenges to theoretical development and explores possible applications of moral realism. Section 6 concludes.

2. What is Moral Realism?

Before intending to correct moral realism's misunderstandings and point out its shortcomings, it is necessary to clarify what moral realism is. Moral realism is a theoretical paradigm in realist international relations theory. Its main objective is to explain the shift of the center of world power or to explain how the rising power replaces the dominant position of the existing dominant power. This

theory analyzes the logic of world power transition by emphasizing political leadership measured by morality as the most fundamental explanatory variable.

Moral realism is attributed to the realist paradigm even as it introduces the concept of morality. Yan justifies his introduction of morality by asserting that classical realism initially emphasizes morality but with a neutral attitude. On the one hand, it underscores the influence of moral principles on the behaviors of state decision makers, and on the other hand, it opposes overstating the role of morality and stresses the significance of material capability(Yan, 2019: 4).

Therefore, moral realism regards morality as equal to capability in its importance in policymaking but adopts an instrumental approach in which morality influences decision makers' perceptions of strategic preferences or how national interests can be achieved(Yan, 2019: 6-7). However, in moral realism's view, the concept of national interest is objective and determined by state capability. Yan(2019: 59-61) argues that under the anarchic international system, state leaders must define their national interests carefully according to state capability. Moral realism defines four types of states-dominant states, rising states, regional states, and small states-and the national interests of each type. For example, the primary interest of a dominant state is to maintain its leading position, while the interest of a rising power is to narrow the capability gap and strive for the dominant position.

One reason for this categorization is that moral realism is undifferentiated from realism in terms of ontology(Lu, 2018: 82). For

one thing, moral realism accepts the assumption of an anarchic international system in which states are self-interested actors. Therefore, moral realism emphasizes the survival and security of the state and a zero-sum power struggle. Further, highlighting the role of morality in international relations does not mean that moral realism ignores the significance of material capability. On the contrary, in the equation of comprehensive capability formulated by moral realism (see Figure 1), military and economic elements constitute basic sources of state capability.

$$\begin{array}{c}
 \begin{array}{cc}
 \text{Resource} & \text{Operational} \\
 \text{Elements} & \text{Element} \\
 \underbrace{\hspace{1.5cm}} & \underbrace{\hspace{0.5cm}} \\
 \text{CC} = (\text{M} + \text{E} + \text{C}) * \text{P}
 \end{array} \\
 \text{CC: Comprehensive Capability} & \text{C: Culture Capability} \\
 \text{M: Military Capability} & \text{P: Political Capability} \\
 \text{E: Economy Capability} &
 \end{array}$$

〈Figure 1〉 The Equation of Comprehensive Capability

Source: Yan, 2019, made by the author

In essence, moral realism aims to raise an explanation for world power transition. Its fundamental purpose is to propose a potential mechanism by which a rising state can replace the dominant state in a given interstate system(Yan, 2019: 2). To this end, moral realism answers the key question: how can a rising state overtake the dominant nation and become the new world leader(Yan, 2019: 25)?

Moral realism defines the single independent variable of the state's political leadership. It adopts a perspective of political determinism enlightened by the words of *Xunzi*, a Chinese Confucian philosopher

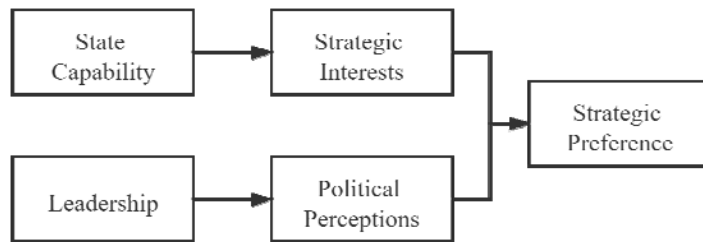
during the Warring States Period: “Domination, or safety, or peril, or destruction, all is determined by the Leader”(Yan, 2019: 25). Moral realism divides political leadership into two levels: domestic leadership and international leadership. Leadership at each level can be further divided into different types according to moral standards. Each type of leadership corresponds to a strategic preference for achieving national interests, and each strategic preference, then, is related to particular behaviors and policies(see Table 1). Moral realism stresses that a state’s moral behaviors can be judged according to the responsibility to protect national interests, the duty to practice international norms, and strategic credibility committed to allies(Yan, 2019: 9). To measure the morality of behavior, moral realism judges the morality of domestic leadership according to domestic reforms and the morality of international leadership according to strategic credibility.

〈Table 1〉 Types of Domestic and International Leadership

Domestic Leadership		International Leadership	
Type	Preference	Type	Preference
Conservative	Impose economic impacts	Humane Authority	Behave in accordance with international norms
Proactive	Enlarge international support	Hegemony	Apply a double standard to policymaking
Inactive	Avoid conflicts	Tyranny	Adopt politics consistent with the principle of realpolitik
Aggressive	Military expansion	Anemocracy	Bully the weak and bow to the strong, and take no responsibility for international norms

Source: Yan, 2019, compiled by the author

From the above, both state capability and political leadership influence the strategic preference of a state because the former determines national interests while the latter determines approaches for realizing those interests(see Figure 2). However, as national interest is objective according to the state's capability, political leadership becomes the variable in strategy building.



〈Figure 2〉 Impact of Capability and Leadership on Strategic Preference

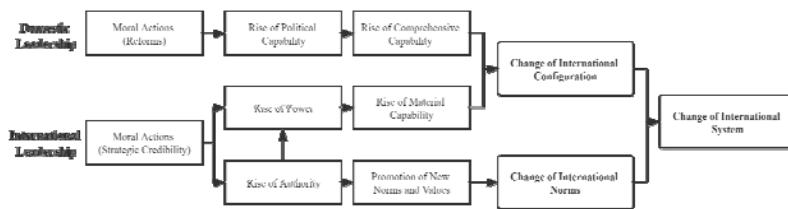
Source: Yan, 2019

Therefore, moral realism argues that when the political leadership of a rising power exceeds that of the dominant power, the power dynamic is reversed, turning the rising state into the new dominant state. In other words, when the political leadership of the rising state is more capable and efficient than that of the dominant state, international influence is redistributed in a way that allows the rising state to overtake the dominant state(Yan, 2019: 2).

In parallel, moral realism keeps the theoretical parsimony(see Figure 3). Primarily, through domestic moral actions, namely domestic reforms, state leadership can enhance the state's political capability. Since political capability is the operational element of state capability, which can enlarge the influence of resource elements,

such as military, economy, and culture, it ultimately enhances the comprehensive capability of the state. Meanwhile, at the international level through international moral behaviors, such as shaping and raising strategic credibility, international political leadership can raise its influence and authority, promoting comprehensive capability.

Due to the rise of a state's comprehensive capability, its position in the distribution of international capability is elevated, leading to a change in international configuration. If a rising state can catch up to or even surpass the dominant power, this will change the international configuration accordingly and offer a new type of international leadership to the international society. To re-establish international norms in favor of the new leading state and maintain its international status, the new dominant state will advocate fresh international norms and values, thereby bringing about a change of international norms. When both international norms and configuration change, the international system shifts(Yan, 2019: 78).



〈Figure 3〉 The Logic of Moral Realism

Furthermore, Yan's moral realism makes predictions regarding international configuration, international norms, Sino-US relations, and China's foreign policy. As a first example, moral realism believes

that the international configuration will step into a bipolar world dominated by China and the United States. This bipolarization will be spurred by the differing level of efficiency of Chinese and American leadership(Yan, 2019: 103). Because the United States lacks capable political leadership to perform domestic reforms at home, the capability gap narrows(Yan, 2019: 84-85). Nevertheless, bipolarization is not a linear process. How fast the bipolar configuration can be finalized depends on political leadership. Moral realism predicts that if the Chinese government undertakes more political reforms over the next decade than the American government does, the bipolarization will accelerate. However, if the Chinese government makes more strategic mistakes and retrogression than the American leadership, the bipolarization will stop(Yan, 2019: 83).

Second, the bipolarization of the international configuration does not necessarily lead to the transformation of the international system because moral realism holds that the international norms do not necessarily change along with the arrival of a bipolar structure. It believes that the coming decade will be an era without dominant values(Yan, 2019: 137-139). Specifically, while US-led liberalism declines, China has not developed a unified value system to replace it. Therefore, it will be difficult for the international community to produce prevailing norms based on shared values. Since international norms are an essential part of the international system, a change of the international configuration alone will not change the whole international system(Yan, 2019: 77-78).

Third, as for Sino-US relations, moral realism believes that due to the bipolarization between China and the United States, both sides

will inevitably fall into a zero-sum competition. However, moral realism anticipates that the competition between China and the United States will not be in the style of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union(Yan, 2019: 87-93).

Fourth, although moral realism believes that performing the principle of humane authority(winning the voluntary subordination of other states through morality instead of power) is an advantageous characteristic of building and securing international leadership, it also stresses that China is less likely to implement humane authority. This is because the Chinese government pursues different values at home versus abroad, while the consistency of humane values rooted in both domestic and foreign policies is the precondition for humane authority(Yan, 2019: 50-51).

3. What Is Moral Realism Not?

1) Moral Realism Is Not Neoclassical Realism

Some scholars mistakenly attribute moral realism to neoclassical realism because moral realism draws lessons from neoclassical realism's return from system-level to national-level analysis(Yan, 2016: 6). Yang and Liu(2015: 16-17) follow this point, arguing that as moral realism inherits the neoclassical realist analysis of combining unit and system level, it can be classified as neoclassical realism.

There are two reasons why these two theories are confused. Primarily, both moral realism and neoclassical realism are dualist

theories. In his speech, Yan(2020) pointed out that moral realism is a dual theory that equally values material capability and subjective cognition. Similarly, neoclassical realism also occupies a middle ground. It emphasizes the influence of the objective reality of relative power on international relations while also maintaining the belief in subjectivity as the decision makers of a state are constrained by international and domestic factors(Rose, 1998: 152-153).

Further, both theories underscore the importance of domestic factors in international relations. In moral realism, the domestic variable is political leadership, which refers to the leading group of decision makers(Yan, 2019: 27). In a 2019 interview, Yan clarified that the leading group mainly refers to the US administration in the White House and the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party in China.

Neoclassical realism also tries to open the black box of domestic politics to analyze foreign policies. It shares classical realism's concern for the state and domestic society(Taliaferro et al., 2009: 19). Therefore, several domestic variables are defined, including leader image, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions, to respond to systemic stimuli and analyze foreign policy and international outcomes(Ripsman et al., 2016: 33-34). From this point of view, both theories challenge the assumption of neorealism that states are undifferentiated units performing specified functions regardless of domestic politics(Waltz, 2004: 93-97).

Yet, the differences between moral realism and neoclassical realism are obvious(see Table 2). First, their independent variables differ. For moral realism, the only independent variable is political

leadership. In contrast, the independent variable of neoclassical realism is the international system. Neoclassical realism presents a “top-down” concept that systemic forces ultimately drive the state’s external actions(Taliaferro, et al., 2009: 205). It defines several domestic factors as intervening variables, which may amplify, obstruct, or distort the influence of the international system and finally affect the policy outcome of the state(Ripsman, et al., 2016: 117). From this point of view, moral realism is more closely related to classical realism, which also directly defines domestic factors as independent variables.

Second, though moral realism and neoclassical realism choose the state leader as an explanatory variable, their understandings of this variable differ. In moral realism, political leadership is defined in terms of moral standards wherein morality refers to universal moral codes(Yan, 2019: 9-11). However, neoclassical realism defines leadership by the core values, beliefs, and images of national leaders (Ripsman, et al., 2016: 62). Neoclassical realism investigates a

(Table 2) Similarities and Differences between Moral Realism and Neoclassical Realism

Similarities	Differences	
	Moral Realism	Neoclassical Realism
1, Dualist theory 2, Emphasis on domestic variables	1, Political Leadership as the single independent variable 2, International system as the dependent variable	1, International system as the independent variable with intervening variables 2, Foreign policy as the dependent variable
	Leadership defined in terms of universal moral standards	Cognitive factors of leaders

leader's cognitive factors, such as personality, character, and operational codes(Ripsman, et al., 2016: 63-66). In contrast, moral realism does not look for explanatory factors from the personal characteristics of state leaders.

2) Moral Realism is Not a Theory With Ideological Purposes

Moral realism has also been wrongly accused of being a theory with ideological purposes. Some critics argue that moral realism serves China's strategy to achieve world leadership(Anderson, 2017). Some contend that Yan's theory is a challenge to the institutional perception that rapid growth and modernization of a state should be attributed to government institutions and political systems(Babbitt, n.d.). As moral realism attributes the momentum of power transition to leadership, it is accused of being a dictatorial perspective(Trigkas, 2020: 953). Others question Yan's opinion of the decline of western liberal values and norms as hasty and needing stronger empirical support(Rajagopalan, 2019). However, moral realism assumes a critical attitude toward China's domestic and foreign policies. It objectively evaluates the capability gap between China and the United States, advocating for reforms and avoidance of conflict and encouraging the fusion of different values.

(1) Prudent Capability Assessment

Although Yan predicts that bipolarization will come to pass, he does not see the advent of a bipolar world due to Chinese

leadership being superior to American leadership. Moral realism argues that a change in leadership in a dominant state is more likely to undermine, rather than enhance, the national capacity of the dominant state(Yan, 2019: 168). In other words, the relative decline of a dominant state is more likely to be the consequence of a change or decline in its domestic political leadership than the result of a rise in power of a rising state. This opinion echoes *Guanzi*, an ancient Chinese reformer during the Spring and Autumn Period, who stated that “ancient kings became the world leaders, which benefited from the wrong policies of their neighboring states”(Yan, 2019: 81).

In 2018, Yan revealed in an interview that challenges to the US-led world order come from the US itself, including protectionism and populism which discredit American democracy. What challenges liberalism are the anti-establishment forces in the United States and the West. Yan further detailed his disappointment with liberalism at an academic talk in 2021 when he explained that liberalism no longer tolerates other opinions. The polarization in domestic politics is not consistent with liberal ideology, and some wars are waged under the guise of liberalism. Yan is not the first scholar to question liberalism. In his book *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, John J. Mearsheimer clearly points out that liberalism and the liberal policies carried by American liberal hegemony are doomed to failure because of solid obstacles from nationalism and realism(John J. Mearsheimer, 2018: 1-12).

On the other hand, pessimism toward liberalism and the leadership of the United States does not mean that moral realism contends that China's capability has already caught up with the US.

Neither does it assert that it would be appropriate for China to employ expansionary foreign policies at this time. Rather, moral realism objectively assesses the capability gap between China and the United States and encourages China to implement prudent foreign policies. Yan(2018) further argues that China's capability has been overrated and that China and the Chinese model are not strong enough to challenge liberalism and the US-led world order.

Moral realism also stresses that leading by example is a more effective mechanism for internationalizing and socializing the leading state's norms so that other states will follow these norms and principles(Yan, 2019: 113-114). After all, moral realism accepts the principle put forward by classical realism that "political realism refuses to identify the moral aspirations of a particular nation with the moral laws that govern the universe"(Morgenthau, 2006: 12). Hence, Yan(2021) reveals that China is not yet confident that it could provide leadership accepted by everyone.

Moreover, moral realism advocates prudent foreign policies based on national interests defined in terms of national capability. Therefore, Yan argues that China should assume international responsibilities and pursue national interests compatible with its international status as a developing country and the world's second-largest economy(Yan, 2017: 7). However, he also argues that China's diplomatic strategy of striving for achievements(*fen fa you wei*) since 2015 may lead to the problem of interests pursued outpacing capability, raising the risk of strategic overdraft.

(2) Calls for Policy Reform

Moral realism calls for the Chinese government to conduct foreign and domestic policy reforms. In terms of foreign strategy, moral realism calls on China to abandon its non-alignment strategy. Moral realism argues that strategic credibility toward allies is the most basic element of international morality and the precondition for a leading power to establish international authority(Yan, 2019: 21). Hence, number of allies becomes an important indicator of a state's strategic credibility(Yan, 2014: 124). The more allies a great power has, the higher strategic credibility it will enjoy. The rise of strategic credibility will help the great power gain more legitimacy for its leadership and allies, increasing the state's power and authority(Yan, 2019: 19-21). Yan believes that amassing allies means expanding the international material power that the rising state can use and reducing the international material power that the dominant state can use(Yan, 2014: 124).

Moral realism argues that the alliance strategy remains an effective moral strategy(Yan, 2019: 65). Refusing to use force to fulfill security commitments to small states is immoral because it is irresponsible to deny the leading state's duty to protect international order and justice (Yan, 2019: 66). In light of this, China's long non-alignment strategy is outdated and denotes a Cold War mentality(Yan, 2019: 65). Moral realism addresses that one of the necessary conditions for China to achieve national rejuvenation is to acquire and maintain extensive international political support(Yan, 2014: 128). Thus, Yan reveals that the non-alignment strategy is no longer in China's best interests

(Huang, 2016).

In terms of domestic policies, moral realism shows concern over China's contrasting values at home and abroad. According to Yan's analysis, China has not yet unified its domestic ideologies. There are four competing ideologies in China: Marxism, economic pragmatism, liberalism, and traditionalism(Yan, 2019: 132-134). China has not reached a consensus on which ideology should be prioritized in China's domestic policies and foreign strategy. As discussed above, the application of consistent values at home and abroad is the prerequisite for humane authority, and leading by example is the most effective way to promote a leading state's norms and values. If there is no internal consensus on ideology, China will not be able to implement consistent internal and external policies or lead by example at an international level. Hence, it will be difficult for China to become a new global leader with humane authority and the establishment of new international norms and values.

(3) Advocating Value Fusion

From the above, moral realism is pessimistic toward both US-led liberalism and the possibility of a new and unified ideology provided by China. Rather, it suggests an integration of liberalism and traditional Chinese values instead of advocating ideological confrontation. Moral realism ventures to combine the core values of equality, democracy, and freedom from western liberalism with the key values of benevolence(*ren*), righteousness(*yi*), and rites(*li*) from traditional Chinese thought(Yan, 2019: 145).

First, moral realism regards that western liberalism, which over-

emphasizes equality without considering individual differences, equals “the law of the jungle.” In international relations, the principle of equality puts weaker states at a disadvantage, leading to conflict rather than cooperation. Instead, the idea of benevolence in Chinese Confucianism embodies care for all people. Therefore, benevolence can be used to manage unequal relationships. When applied to the international system, benevolence would require the principle of differentiated treatment toward strong and weak states(Yan, 2019: 146-147).

Second, democracy in liberalism means the legalization of governmental actions through majority support, which affirms government decisions but cannot ensure the justice of outcomes. The core of Chinese righteousness is upright, reasonable, and proper behavior, and the principle underscores the just results of policies. In the international community, by combining democracy with righteousness, moral realism believes that it will help to ensure legitimacy in both form and result(Yan, 2019: 147-150).

Lastly, moral realism encourages the embrace of freedom rooted in the principle of rites. It is human nature to pursue freedom; but to establish social order, it is necessary to regulate individual behavior at the cost of a certain degree of freedom. The Chinese concept of rites emphasizes using morality to prevent unethical behaviors and social conflicts caused by individual freedom(Yan, 2019: 150-152). Thus, moral realism hopes to establish a universal moral code to constrain the behaviors of state actors in the international society and prevent violence caused by unchecked freedom.

(4) Avoidance of Conflict in Traditional Arenas

Moral realism sees a great deal of international support and alliances as a pathway to increasing state authority and power. These factors would inevitably reduce resistance to a rise of power and attract support for the rising state from other states. However, moral realism holds that competition between the rising and dominant states is inevitable. Therefore, the rising state needs to reduce conflicts of interest with other states. To this end, moral realism suggests expansion into emerging fields rather than traditional fields because most states have little strategic interest in emerging fields (Yan, 2016: 12-13).

Given this, moral realism encourages the Chinese government to expand its interests in cyberspace instead of traditional fields such as territory or territory waters(Yan, 2016: 3). From this point of view, moral realism is not an offensive theory of international relations that advocates for or defends China's expansionary foreign policy in all areas.

4. Critics of Moral Realism

1) Problems with Concept Definitions

One of the serious problems of moral realism lies in the circular and unclear definitions of its core concepts, which are reflected in the concepts of political leadership and morality.

First, the definition and classification of leadership expose the circular definition problem. Moral realism distinguishes leadership types from moral standards. Specifically, the criteria for types of domestic leadership are the state's sense of national responsibility and capacity to fulfill its duty. The criteria for types of international leadership are the state's responsibility to sustain international order and strategic credibility(Yan, 2019: 29). Such a classification is crude. For example, conservative leadership is defined as being responsible for its policy results and striving to maintain the state's international status(Yan, 2019: 30). To further clarify the characteristics and enrich the definition of this leadership type, Yan has to further claim that conservative leadership highlights the importance of the economy as the foundation of the state's comprehensive capability(Yan, 2019: 31). Conservative leadership tends to enlarge economic benefit as the best strategy marker for maintaining the state's international status. In other words, although this type of leadership is defined according to moral standards, its specific context is illustrated by the policies adopted by this type of leadership.

However, moral realism holds that leadership type determines strategic preference(Yan, 2019: 33). To continue the above example, conservative leadership follows the doctrine of economic determinism and tends to adopt foreign policies for the sake of imposing economic influence on other states(Yan, 2019: 34). Namely, strategic preference in this case is still defined according to certain policies. As a result, moral realism falls into a circular definition: a particular policy is used to define the leadership type, while the type of leadership determines the preferred policy.

Second, moral realism does not clearly define and is very vague about how to measure morality, while also being vague about the differences between international morality and international responsibility. For one thing, Yan takes advantage of the fourth and fifth principles of Morgenthau's principles of political realism to justify his introduction of morality into realism; however, his concept of morality differs from Morgenthau's(Yan, 2019: 4).

Morality in Yan's moral realism refers to governmental morality, meaning that a state's behaviors will be judged based on the accepted codes of conduct relating to national interests and national capability(Yan, 2019: 8). At the same time, moral realism adopts the concept of instrumental morality. Here, morality is a tool used by a state to expand its capability for power competition and securing national interests. By contrast, Morgenthau underscores individual morality, arguing that "real man is a composite of 'economic man,' 'political man,' 'moral man,' 'religious man,' etc."(Morgenthau, 2006: 15). If political realism is rooted in human nature, then morality is an important component of the pluralistic nature of individual human beings.

Further, morality in Morgenthau's definition is not an instrument for political struggle. Conversely, morality is regarded as a restriction on power. Morgenthau wrote that "from the Bible to the ethics and constitutional arrangements of modern democracy, the main function of these normative systems has been to keep aspiration for power within socially tolerable bounds(Morgenthau, 2006: 235). All ethics, moral, and legal systems dominant in western civilization recognize the ubiquity of power drives and condemn them." Power is subject

to restrictions, and these restrictions are not the result of power struggle but rather of individual or social will imposed on the power struggle in the form of norms or rules of behavior(Morgenthau, 2006: 236).

Lastly, the concept of “national interest” for Morgenthau is a matter of morality rather than a political purpose of instrumental morality. The morality of national interests is reflected in two aspects. Based on the review of Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, Xu finds that on the one hand, national interests compel practitioners in the field of international politics to avoid designing foreign policies according to personal motives and ideologies to avoid threatening state survival and world peace(Xu, 2016: 51). On the other hand, national interests can mitigate conflict and promote peace, since this concept enables the constant adjustment of conflicting interests through diplomatic action, thereby alleviating the threat of conflict and war.

In terms of the measurement of moral level, moral realism equates a state's international morality to its strategic credibility to its allies, with the number of allies being a key indicator of strategic credibility. Since China adopts the non-alignment principle, it does not have any allies in the strict sense. However, the United States has many allies and established military and security alliances with many states in Europe, East Asia, and other regions. According to moral realism, this suggests that the United States enjoys a higher international strategic credibility than China.

During the Trump administration, upholding the doctrine of “America First,” the United States implemented policies characterized by unilateralism and protectionism, including withdrawing from many

international organizations, launching trade wars against allies, withdrawing from the Iran nuclear agreement, and forcing South Korea to increase sharing costs of US forces. Although these behaviors have not fundamentally changed the alliance relationship between the United States and its allies, they harmed the nation's image and credibility.

Further, many states, including allies of the United States, have begun to adopt hedging strategies without taking sides in the context of Sino-US competition(Wu, 2021a). This weakens the significance of allies to the United States to some extent. Hence, the number of allies of the US cannot truly reflect the level and changes of its strategic credibility.

Moreover, moral realism views strategic credibility as a universally accepted moral code among states whereby the leading state shows credible and reliable leadership(Yan, 2019: 22). Thus, the audience for the leading state's strategic credibility should not be limited to its allies but should include all state actors in the international system. If moral realism only defines strategic credibility among the leading state's allies, this could suggest that the dominant state only needs to keep commitments to its allies, regardless of whether their actions violate universally accepted moral codes. If its allies' behaviors contradict the widely accepted moral code, but the leading state does not punish them for sacrificing credibility, this would undoubtedly mark an extremely negative demonstration effect for non-alliance states. In this case, it would be difficult for the leading state to establish international authority and expand international support.

Lastly, Yan's moral realism fails to distinguish international morality

from international responsibility. Yan once pointed that out China's strategy of striving for achievements, which highlights providing more international public goods and shouldering more international responsibilities, is in line with its rising comprehensive capability. He also cited the provision of foreign aid as an example of how much international responsibility China should shoulder(Yan, 2016: 9-10). In other words, Yan agrees that taking on more international responsibility is a moral act.

However, Chinese foreign aid is not just allocated to its close strategic cooperative partners. According to moral realism, this behavior is not conducive to strategic credibility among allies. If Yan thinks that undertaking more international responsibilities regardless of whether the beneficiaries are allies is moral, international morality must include international responsibility apart from strategic credibility among allies. Therefore, some scholars have attempted to revise Yan's definition. Jia(2017) thinks that the core element of international morality is to undertake international responsibility, and further, that strategic credibility means fully implementing policies, regulations, treaties, and obligations under international law and covenants.

2) Contradictions in the Theoretical Logic

There are two main contradictions in the theoretical logic of moral realism. First, moral realism proposes judging the morality of political leadership by easily-executed morals instead of more stringent ones (Yan, 2019: 11). It defines low-demand moral codes, including the

dichotomies of care and harm, fairness and cheating, authority and subversion, and sanctity and degradation, arguing that such basic morality is universal and has a greater impact on state behaviors. Examples of high morality, on the other hand, such as providing foreign aid, are difficult for many states to fulfill(Yan, 2019: 10-11).

Marking the contradiction, moral realism also adopts a relative perspective of morality. For example, when the moral level of the rising state's policy is higher than that of the dominant state, it will be considered moral. If it is lower, it will be considered immoral. Therefore, if the moral level of China's foreign strategy is higher than that of the United States, it can effectively reduce the international community's fear and opposition to China's rise and receive more international support(Yan, 2016: 11).

Therefore, moral realism both adopts low morality and recognizes the relativity of morality, which leads to three problems. The first problem comes in judging which actions are defined as low morality and which reflect a higher moral level. Moral realism is quite vague in judging the standards of morality. Its attitude toward the provision of foreign aid reflects this vagueness. To be specific, moral realism attributes the provision of aid to high-level morality. Nevertheless, care and fairness embodied by aid-giving conform to the low-level moral codes defined by moral realism. Therefore, moral realism cannot determine whether foreign aid, an important foreign policy tool, is a high-moral or low-moral behavior.

Second, since low morality is universal, it should be the moral requirement for all states in the international system. Hence, for the leading state, it is imperative to meet high moral standards if they

want to promote its moral leadership. Otherwise, how can the moral leadership of the leading states be highlighted when both small and leading states can fulfill low morality?

Third, although moral realism holds that the moral level of China's foreign policy should be higher than that of the United States, it also argues that China's policy should conform to its national capability and international status as a developing country and the world's second-largest economy. This means that China should not assume more international responsibilities than the United States, and its proportion of foreign aid to national GDP should not be higher than the standard for developed states(Yan, 2016: 9-10). How, then, can China achieve a higher moral standard than the United States and other developed countries in this scenario?

The second contradiction inherent in Yan's moral realism arises from its emphasis on the role of both political leadership and material capability in the state's comprehensive capability. According to the equation in Figure 1, moral realism claims that political capability has a multiplicative influence on resource elements. Therefore, if political capability is zero, then the state's comprehensive capability will decrease to zero accordingly(Yan, 2019: 13).

However, Yan argues that moral realism does not believe that morality can function unconditionally(Yan, 2014: 126). Rather, it believes that morality can safeguard the interests of the leading state only on the condition of security of survival and strong material capability. In other words, moral realism admits that material capability is the foundation of moral leadership. The contradiction then comes with this question: in promoting a state's national

strength and international status, is political leadership or material strength more important? Some scholars argues that the rise of contemporary China is fundamentally based on its economic power (material strength) rather than its political leadership(Pu, 2019: 807).

Further, if moral leadership can only work from a certain material foundation which guarantees survival, China and the United States are not the only actors that meet this standard. For example, the European Union(EU) also meets this standard and has global economic, political, and normative influence. Moral realism, however, does not mention other actors beyond China and the United States.

3) Bias in Case Study

Problems of bias arise when using historical cases to demonstrate moral realism. For example, Yan makes use of the ancient Chinese cases in pre-Qin periods to illustrate the process of system transformation, namely the transition from the Western Zhou Dynasty to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States periods, as well as the rise of the Qin Dynasty(Yan, 2019: 174). Yan's problem is that he does not justify why the case of the ancient kingdoms in the pre-Qin period thousands of years ago in Chinese history can be used to demonstrate moral realism. After all, the system under the rule of the Zhou Dynasty was not an international system constructed by sovereign states in the modern sense.

Second, moral realism only chooses pre-Qin cases when using ancient Chinese cases to support and demonstrate the theory. In fact, the pre-Qin period is not the only period in Chinese history that

involves complex interstate relations. For instance, competition existed among the three kingdoms, Wei, Shu, and Wu, in the Eastern Han Dynasty and the confrontation between the Song Dynasty and the Liao Dynasty. Yet, neither of these examples are mentioned in Yan's discussion of moral realism.

5. Challenges to and Future Research of Moral Realism

Although moral realism in IRT has been created, very few studies have applied this theory and few applications constitute a challenge to the development of moral realist theory. There are three causes for this point. First, moral realism has not yet matured as a theory. As mentioned above, problems exist in terms of definitions, theoretical logic, and the method of case analysis. Therefore, more theoretical studies are needed to modify and improve these three aspects.

Second, the ancient Chinese thought embodied in moral realism is difficult to understand and apply by the non-Chinese world. As Acharya suggests, it is unclear whether ancient Chinese wisdom can be applied to the international relations of states outside the Chinese cultural circle and whether non-Chinese states can understand the Chinese cultural concepts contained in moral realism(Acharya, 2019: 479). If the ancient Chinese thought cannot be understood, moral realism can hardly develop into a widely accepted theoretical paradigm in the academic community.

Third, the research object and field of moral realism are limited. Moral realism mainly focuses on great powers. Yan's theory seldom mentions small states or even regional powers. Acharya criticizes moral realism by asserting that the exclusive emphasis on great powers ignores the complexity of the contemporary world(Acharya, 2019: 478). Moral realism fails to explore issues like the role of political leadership of small and mid-sized powers in the changing international system or the significance of these powers to rising and dominant states. Much of the existing research within moral realism still focuses on the power competition or transition between great powers(Liu and Yang, 2019).

Moreover, the concept of comprehensive political leadership may limit the research field of moral realism. The political leadership defined in moral realism is a comprehensive concept, yet moral realism remains unaware that a state's political capability differs in different issue areas. Yan mentions that there are many areas of national interests and that the power of a state in a particular interest area is determined by the state's capability related to this interest (Yan, 2019: 12). In that case, political leadership and political capability must be discussed in different fields. Otherwise, the analysis and application of political leadership will be confined to a macroscopic and abstract sense. To broaden the research field of moral realism, future studies should subdivide political leadership in each field and investigate the influence of leadership, authority, and power structure changes in these different fields.

This paper proposes that moral realism can be applied to the research field of foreign aid. There are four reasons for this

proposal. First, foreign aid is concerned with morality. Moral realism attributes foreign aid to high international morality and considers it an international public good reflecting the international responsibilities of donor states. The beneficiaries of foreign aid are not limited to allies and can include non-allies. Therefore, high-moral behaviors can reflect the moral leadership of the dominant state. In addition, foreign aid is also one of the means of power competition from a realist perspective(Soh and Moon, 2017). It is a policy tool used to obtain international support, consistent with instrumental morality in moral realism.

Second, levels of morality are more conveniently measured in studies of foreign aid since the amount, distribution, and effectiveness of aid can be objectively demonstrated through quantitative methods. For example, Kim and Oh(2012) and Wu (2021b) used quantitative methods to analyze the altruism and self-interest of South Korean and Chinese foreign aid in their studies.

Third, applying moral realism to the field of foreign aid is conducive to expanding the field and research objects of moral realism. Many countries and regions, not only great powers, are dedicated to foreign aid, including the EU, Japan, and South Korea. This could help expand the research object and sample size to verify the effectiveness of moral realism.

Fourth, China is an emerging foreign aid donor, though it holds different aid philosophies and methods than traditional developed country donors and imposes challenges on the international aid regime(Brautigam, 2008). Moral realism calls for China to expand into new areas to reduce interest conflicts. Therefore, in the

international environment of Sino-US competition, foreign aid becomes an excellent lens to observe and test whether China will play an active role and whether China and the United States will compete in this field.

More importantly, applying moral realism to foreign aid will help scholars to better examine the aid motives of donors by considering both domestic governance and foreign policy. For example, existing studies have proposed that China's increasingly ambitious aid-giving behavior is motivated by an objective to obtain economic power and resources and geopolitical advantages and build a responsible international image. However, these studies fail to examine the changes in China's domestic policies that correspond to China's shifting foreign aid policies, nor can they explain the relationship between the two dimensions. For example, Chinese President Xi Jinping(2021) proposed a new domestic reform direction called "common prosperity" in 2021. Subsequently, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs introduced this term into Chinese diplomacy. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin(2021) said that all countries' development is real development and that common prosperity is real prosperity. Wang further stated that China will share development opportunities with the world and promote globalization toward a more open, inclusive, balanced, and mutually beneficial international situation.

By this, China seems to be unifying its domestic governance and global governance approaches. Foreign aid may become a way for China to practice the concept of "common prosperity," bridging and unifying China's domestic governance and global governance.

Questions for further research may include the following. What are the reasons and motives for China to do so? What is the relationship and interaction between domestic and foreign policies? How will this affect China's authority and power and the existing norms in this field accordingly? As moral realism emphasizes, the reform of domestic policies and the consistency of domestic and foreign policies help state powers achieve humane authority. Further study should use the framework of moral realism to investigate and explain whether China is committed to achieving uniformity of its domestic and global governance to enhance its authority and power.

6. Conclusion

This paper comprehensively reviews the theory of moral realism put forth by Yan Xuetong according to theoretical background, purpose, question, main arguments, logic, and predictions. It corrects the two main misunderstandings of moral realism by asserting that moral realism is neither a work of neoclassical realism nor a theory with ideological motivations. It is much closer to classical realism and adopts an objective, prudent, and integrative stance.

However, moral realism is far from a mature IRT. It has serious problems, such as unclear definitions, contradictions of theoretical logic, and biases of case analysis. In addition, the Chinese thought contained in moral realism may be difficult to be understood by the outside world, and its research objects and field are also limited. Therefore, few studies apply moral realism to the analysis of

international relations.

This paper proposes the possibility of introducing moral realism into the realm of foreign aid studies. Such an approach would alleviate some flaws in moral realism and expand its theoretical applications. More importantly, moral realism can examine both domestic governance and foreign policy to analyze the motives of foreign aid provision by dominant powers and examine changes in power distribution and norms.

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〈국문초록〉

옌쉐통의 도덕현실주의 국제관계이론: 포괄적인 검토

우웨이

칭화대 옌쉐통 교수가 정립한 국제관계론 도덕현실주의는 국제관계 혁신에 대한 중국 학자들의 업적을 대변한다. 이 이론은 도덕이 측정된 정치적 리더십을 설명변수로 삼아 지배적 권력의 지배적 지위를 대신하는 신진 권력의 이유와 논리를 분석하려는 것이다. 그러나, 이 이론에 대한 현존하는 문헌들은 단편화와 오해를 반영하여 옌쉐통의 작품에서 도덕 현실주의를 체계적으로 검토하는 데 실패한다. 따라서 본 연구는 국제관계에서 도덕현실주의를 종합적으로 검토하고, 문제가 있는 이해를 반박하고 바로잡으며, 이론적 발전을 위한 잠재적 응용을 탐구하는 것을 목적으로 한다. 도덕현실주의가 이론 패러다임으로서 신고전주의 현실주의보다 고전주의 현실주의에 부합하며, 중국의 대전략에 봉사하는 이념적 목적을 가진 이론이 아니라는 주장이다. 이 연구는 또한 개념 정의, 논리적 모순, 사례 분석의 편향에 대한 문제 때문에 이론이 성숙하지 못했다고 주장한다. 게다가, 옌쉐통의 도덕현실주의에 대한 고대 중국 사상의 영향과 제한된 연구 목적과 분야는 그것의 이론적 적용을 방해할 수 있다. 본 연구는 대외원조 연구에 덕현실주의를 적용하는 것을 제안하며, 대외원조 분야가 덕현실주의에 부합하고, 덕현실주의의 결핍을 일부 완화하며, 이론의 적용 범위를 확대한다고 주장한다.

주제어: 도덕현실주의, 국제관계론, 정치 리더십, 도덕, 고대 중국 사상

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