

Internationalizing International Relations *Developments in Asia*

An Interview with L.H.M. Ling

The study of International Relations (IR) is almost by definition concerned with relations among nation-states. In the past two or three decades, debates have abounded that the discipline of IR does not represent nations or states globally and is predominantly influenced by Western philosophies and histories. As one of the world's most densely-populated regions containing the fastest-growing economies, Asia is a good starting point in the effort to internationalize the study of IR. The *Journal* has invited L.H.M. Ling, Professor of International Affairs at The New School, to broaden the intellectual discussion on international affairs.

Journal: What prompted your inquiry into alternative theories of international relations?

Ling: During my graduate studies, I often thought of this grocer who owned a small shop around the corner from our house in Bangkok. He probably had no more than an elementary school education. Nonetheless, he spoke several languages fluently: Thai, Burmese, Laotian, Mandarin, Minnan Chaozhouhua, and a smattering of other local dialects. He used all these languages daily to buy and sell goods. He also needed them to get along with neighbors.

My circumstances differed from his quite a bit, but I still felt our lifeworlds matched. I, too, needed multiple languages to survive in multiple worlds. When my family lived in Saigon, for example, we spoke Mandarin and Cantonese at home while honoring Confucian rites like kowtowing to our parents on the Lunar New Year. At school, we spoke French and prayed "*au nom du père, du fils, et du saint esprit...*" (in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) every morning before class. The same applied

whether we lived in Bangkok or Tokyo, New York or Ottawa.

Later on, I realized that multiplicity characterized the world at large. Over the millennia, people have moved and mixed. Even in imperial Beijing, the supposed center of the Center, several linguistic communities jostled for attention in daily life. Manchus rubbed shoulders with Mongolians, Koreans with Japanese, Arabs with Persians. It was only when colonialism and imperialism became state policy from the sixteenth to early twentieth centuries that singularity became the standard of the day, creating the conditions of what Gramsci called hegemony.

IR theory reflected such hegemony. None of the hallowed IR theorists I read had grown up outside the country of their birth, worked overseas, or knew a second language fluently. This posed a serious problem for me. Languages were not just an instrument of communication—they revealed *worlds*. Simple forms of address like “uncle” or “aunt” for one’s elders, even when unrelated, convey a social ontology radically different from that where everyone, even strangers, is called by a first name. Not knowing that we live in a world-of-worlds, yet pontificating with certainty about it, especially in perilous terms such as war and peace, made these IR theorists terrifying to me. In world politics, ignorance reinforced by arrogance invariably leads to death and destruction.

I soon came upon a crossroads. Either I would deny my upbringing and accept the hegemony of IR theory or I would embrace my upbringing and forge another path. I chose the latter.

Journal: Why is theory important to IR students, especially in our society today?

Ling: *Everything* comes from theory. It may have developed in conjunction with practice but a theoretical framework emerges nonetheless. Even those who claim to be “pragmatists” or “realists” and who deal with the “real world” are only working from a *theory* of pragmatism, realism, and the real world. You cannot have one without the other. Otherwise, we wade in chaos.

Journal: Why should the policy and political science communities consider the concept of “the Other” in the 21st century?

Ling: Just read the news. You’ll find that lots of people around the globe are “mad as hell and won’t take it anymore.” It’s not simply a matter of needing a job or having a stable government. They’ve been robbed, bombed, and debased for *centuries* and over *generations*—typically by the same groups who exploited them yesterday but, today, want to keep out Others because “they will take away our jobs.” History affirms that suppression and eradication won’t work. There is no brutality that can compare with the genocides of the conquistadores in the New World or the Belgians in the Congo. Yet, as the Andean activist Humberto Cholango declared in a letter to Pope Benedict XVI in 2007: “We are still here.” The world—and IR—needs to take note.

The other Other—Nature—also suffers. Conquerors and captains of industry alike

have justified “taming” and “harnessing” Nature supposedly to benefit “mankind” but, really, for their own pockets and profiles. To preserve our planet, not just the lives on it, we must find a way to not just “consider the concept of the Other” but also get out of the Self versus Other binary altogether.¹

Journal: In 1977, Stanley Hoffman published a famous essay entitled “An American Social Science: International Relations.” In your opinion, is IR still an American social science? What has changed in the last three decades or so, with regards to IR theory?

Ling: In a sense, IR is still an American social science. The U.S. intellectual establishment dominates IR in terms of methods and queries, not to mention funding and other kinds of institutional support. And English remains the lingua franca of contemporary social science. But I don’t see the issue in narrow, nationalistic terms like Hoffman did. I see it more as a global infrastructure of thinking and doing, being and relating that comes from what I call Hypermasculine Eurocentric Whiteness or HEW. It normalizes what the West considers the “standard of civilization” (hypermasculinity, Eurocentrism, and whiteness) against everything and everybody else. Only by recognizing HEW as ideology, and not biology only, can we hold comprador states, organizations, and individuals to account. By comprador, I mean those entities or persons that may not qualify as male, European, or white but that still uphold the norms, practices, and interests of HEW.

Still, IR has changed. To learn how, I suggest a recent chapter.²

Journal: Your research has looked at how “Eurocentric” IR theorists have historically constructed a hypermasculinized West and a hyperfeminized East. Could you talk a bit more about how this might apply today to how Western actors frame their engagement with Asian countries? Building on this question, how do you think academics or even policymakers can better come to terms with that history?

Ling: Let me address the second question first. As many postcolonial scholars have shown, Eurocentric theorizing in IR comes from internal sources. Ashis Nandy’s work, especially *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (2010), shows how the British hypermasculinized (his term) the Self to justify conquering people they didn’t know and claiming resources they didn’t own. Domestic policies previewed this kind of consumption of the Other to benefit the Self. Note, for example, how the English historically treated the Irish, the Welsh, and the Scots. Even today, local populations still harbor desires to break away from the “United Kingdom.” Accordingly, academics and policymakers need to renew their understanding of relations between

¹ See, for example, L.H.M. Ling, “After Binaries: Multiplicity and Difference in IR Theorizing,” paper delivered at an International Workshop on “Theorising China’s Rise In and Beyond International Relations,” Deakin University, Melbourne, 31 March-1 April 2016.

² L.H.M. Ling, “Don’t Flatter Yourself: World Politics As We Know It Is Changing and So Must Disciplinary IR,” in Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson (eds.), *What Is the Point of IR?*, (London: Routledge, 2017), 135-146.

Self and Other at home before they can apply any insights from such to places and people elsewhere. For IR theorists in the United States, this means paying closer attention to historical relations between the U.S. government and the peoples of the First Nations, those who were enslaved from Africa, and immigrants as a whole before they start theorizing about “the world.”

As for your first question, one can find assumptions of a hypermasculinized West versus a hyperfeminized East in various venues and modalities. These range from economic development to foreign policy to domestic policy to...you name it. For example, economic development’s surface rhetoric might proclaim: “Man up with our policies and strategies so you can be more like us!” However, a second message underlies the first: “You can never catch up because you don’t have the balls to do so.” This second message rang most loudly during the Asian financial crisis (1997-1998). Clearly, the liberal press intoned, “crony capitalism” rotted these economies because “they can’t really be like us (wink wink).”³

If states like North Korea refuse to abide by rules set down by the “international community,” then they are conveniently coded as hysterical, unruly females. They are “backward,” “rogue,” or “failed” states that require manly supervision. “See,” the West shrugs, “we have no choice but to intervene.” If a state like China does catch up and according to all the criteria set by HEW, then a third rhetoric emerges. “China is not civilized (manly) like us—just look at its (perverse) human rights record—so we need to stay in charge.”⁴

Let’s abandon this rhetorical game. It’s no good for either Self or Other, as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have amply demonstrated. Let’s stop digging the same holes.

Journal: One of your works is entitled *Asia in International Relations* (2017). How well is Asia represented in traditional (as versus critical) IR theories? What different perspectives can Asian IR theories offer to world politics?

Ling: In this edited volume, we had gathered several authors from Asia and elsewhere to discuss what it means to take Asia seriously in IR—and that begins with contesting how “Asia” has been defined. In so doing, and here I cite from the book’s blurb, we “refram[e] old problems in new ways with the possibility of transforming them, rather than recycling the same old approaches with the same old ‘intractable’ outcomes.”

Again, I urge your readers to look into the book to find out what difference this approach makes.

³ For more on this, see: L.H.M. Ling, “Cultural Chauvinism and the Liberal International Order: ‘West versus Rest’ in Asia’s Financial Crisis,” in Geeta Chowdhary and Sheila Nair, eds., *Power, Postcolonialism, and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender, Class* (London: Routledge, 2002), 115-141.

⁴ See: L.H.M. Ling, “Worlds Beyond Westphalia: Daoist Dialectics and the ‘China Threat,’” *Review of International Studies* 39, no.3 (July 2013): 549-568.

Journal: In the past decade, much has happened in Asia that has repercussions world-wide. In your view, what have been the landmark developments in Asia that have shaped its landscape in the past decade? Looking into the future, with the surge of nationalism, protectionism and populism particularly in Europe and the Americas, how would you foresee the development of Asia in the next ten years?

Ling: First of all, no one can “predict” the future. Secondly, to think that one could, comes from the hubris of colonial management. It rationalizes social science into speculations of “prediction” so as to “control” the natives. To me, this method of dealing with the world, let alone oneself, is neither possible nor desirable.

Journal: The rejection of globalization you predicted in *Postcolonial International Relations Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (2002) seems particularly prescient in the wake of President Trump’s recently enacted ban on immigrants from seven predominantly Muslim countries. However, the ban seems to originate from a fear of physical danger in the form of terrorism, not an economic dependence due to globalized trade. Is this an unexpected development?

Ling: Let’s not be fooled by the ban’s rhetoric. The fear of terrorism comes from a sense of economic dependence *due to* globalized trade. To put it bluntly, it’s no longer the heyday of Western colonialism and imperialism when the white man always wins. Today, the formerly colonized are actors in their own right, making headway under the banner of Neoliberal Capitalism. That’s the scary part for former colonizers. Otherwise, why Brexit?

Journal: You argue that the rejection of globalization signaled by the election of Trump and Brexit are rooted in the history of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. Can you elaborate more on how this transpired? How can scholars and policymakers envision an integrated world that avoids alienation and exploitation of the past?

Ling: Some on the Left claim that Trump and Brexit merely represent extensions of the past. That is, the Westphalian-capitalist state welcomed immigrants only in so much as they could provide cheap labor for booming economies. Once the economy stops booming then the national attitude of hospitality towards Others also ends.

This argument, however, doesn’t get to the heart of the matter: that is, why is there no learning by the state? We all know, for example, that the United States started out by treating African slaves as three-fifths of a human being. Would a return to that mean the United States is simply continuing its historical trajectory? Bill Clinton as President of the United States apologized to Japanese-Americans for the state’s internment of their elders during World War II. Why does this not serve as a reminder, if not precedent, for current policies?

To simply say that self-interested, exploitative policies have happened before may be intellectually satisfying to certain elites. But it risks normalizing what is happening. What’s more important, to my mind, is to examine why the present is not held to

account for the hard-won victories of the past.

L.H.M. Ling (凌煥銘) is Professor of International Affairs at The New School in New York City. She is the author of four books: *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (co-authored with A.M. Agathangelou, Routledge, 2009); *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (Routledge, 2014); and *Imagining World Politics: Sihar & Shenyua, A Fable for Our Times* (Routledge, 2014). Two books are forthcoming: *A Worldly World Order: Epistemic Compassion for International Relations* (Oxford University Press) and *Between India and China: An Ancient Dialectic for Contemporary World Politics* (co-authored with Payal Banerjee, Rowman & Littlefield). Professor Ling's articles have appeared in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Globalizations*, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, among others.
