

Offensive Realism and the Rise of China*

YUAN-KANG WANG



Can analysts fruitfully apply realism to Asia and examine the implications of the rise of China for world politics? Although international relations scholars have widely used the realist approach to analyze Asia,¹ critics have taken to questioning the logic, coherence, and pessimistic predictions of realism.²

In "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers," Professor Steve Chan challenges the logic and evidence of realism and argues that "realism does not even explain very well the European, or more generally, the Western experience." He then dismisses realism's treatment of states that are revisionist and status-quo oriented as contradicting realism's

YUAN-KANG WANG (王元綱) received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 2001 and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Diplomacy, National Chengchi University, Taipei. He can be reached at <ykwang@nccu.edu.tw>.

*A commentary on Steve Chan's article "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" that also appears in this issue.

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¹See, for example, Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and the Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Gerald Segal, "East Asia and the 'Constraint' of China," *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 159-87; and Denny Roy, "Hegemon on the Horizon? China's Threat to East Asian Security," *ibid.* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 149-68.

²David C. Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks," *International Security* 27, no. 4 (Spring 2003): 57-85; and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *ibid.*, 5-56.

central tenet. Finally, Chan offers three behavioral indicators—vetoes in the UN Security Council, ratification of human rights regimes, and the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to military expenditures—to challenge the idea that China is a revisionist power and that the United States is a status-quo power. Although Chan wants to have us believe that his purpose is not to "bash" realism, one still gets the strong impression that he aims to discredit the realist approach to international relations. If the usefulness and consistency of realism is in doubt, students of Asian international relations should turn elsewhere for guidance about the region's future.

Although mainly dealing with the realist approach to international relations, "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" remains a thought-provoking essay in the sense that it calls our attention to the issue of whether China is a revisionist state. Given our differences in worldviews, there are in my opinion three main problems with Chan's criticism. First, he fails to recognize that realism is a paradigm (and not a theory) and thereby understates its range and diversity. Second, he mischaracterizes important realist theories, including John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, and presents the wrong evidence that would pose a significant challenge to offensive realism. Third, he confounds revisionist intentions with behaviors. States with revisionist intentions do not necessarily exhibit revisionist behaviors, but instead will weigh the costs and risks before proceeding to change the balance of power in their favor.

Contrary to the stance articulated in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers," I argue that realism does a reasonably good job in explaining not only Western but also Asian experience. Although a large literature has developed on the Western experience, few international relations scholars take Asia as their empirical focus. In this article I present evidence from Chinese history to support my claim that realism can be fruitfully applied to Asia. Although the Asian state system existed separately from the European one throughout most of history, Asian states—notably China—behaved according to the dictates of realism. Imperial China placed a high premium on the utility of force and looked for opportunities to maximize China's relative power. China adopted a more offensive pos-

ture as its power grew and shifted to a more defensive one as its power declined.

In this article, I first clarify that realism is a paradigm that embodies a wide range of competing theories. I then highlight the appeal of buck-passing over balancing in offensive realism. Next, I explain that revisionism in offensive realism refers to the intentions of a state to change the balance of power in its favor, which may not reflect actual behavior if the state lacks such capability. To support my claim about the applicability of realism to Asia, I present evidence from imperial China. I conclude by suggesting that realism is a venerable research tradition that is capable of making progress. The article ends with a rejoinder to Chan's closing remarks.

Realism: A Paradigm (Not a Theory)

As Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller have succinctly stated, "Realism is a general approach to international politics, not a single theory."³ Stephen Van Evera points out that "realism is a paradigm, not a theory."⁴ Robert Gilpin also writes that "realism ... is essentially a philosophical position; it is not a scientific theory that is subject to the test of falsifiability and, therefore, cannot be proved or disproved."⁵ As a research program, realism comprises a number of competing theories: classical realism, structural realism (neorealism), defensive realism, offensive realism, neoclassical realism, and the like. Most of these theories share a few common assumptions: states are the central actors, the world is anarchic,

³Sean M. Lynn-Jones and Steven E. Miller, "Preface," in *The Perils of Anarchy: Contemporary Realism and International Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

⁴Stephen Van Evera, "Elements of the Realist Paradigm: What Are They?" (Typescript, January 27, 1992), 4, quoted in Benjamin Frankel, "Restating the Realist Case: An Introduction," in *Realism: Restatement and Renewal*, ed. Benjamin Frankel (London: Frank Cass, 1996), xiii.

⁵Robert Gilpin, "No One Loves a Political Realist," *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 6.

states seek survival, the system largely determines the outcome and behavior of international politics, and states are rational actors. Although all belong to the realist family, these theories disagree over many issues. For example, Hans Morgenthau's classical realism assumes that a state's struggle for power originates from humankind's "will to power,"⁶ while Kenneth Waltz's structural realism ignores human nature and assumes that a state's desire for survival in an anarchic world explains the outcome of international politics.⁷ Offensive realism argues that great powers maximize security by maximizing their relative power, while defensive realism suggests that too much power may be self-defeating and that great powers may be better-off defending the status quo. Neoclassical realism, unlike its structural brethren, assigns greater causal power to domestic factors in explaining the behavior of states. Thus, far from being a narrow monolithic theory, realism—as Stephen Walt points out—"is a large and diverse body of thought whose proponents share a few important ideas but disagree about many others."⁸

This is where Chan's caricature of realism runs into problems. I would argue that he fails to recognize that realism is a paradigm, not a theory, and understates the range and diversity of realist theories.⁹ Although realists adhere to a set of common assumptions, they disagree over a wide range of issues, as we shall see below. Chan's case against realism is directed at Kenneth Waltz's balance-of-power theory and particularly John Mearsheimer's offensive realism; defensive realism and neoclassical

⁶Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, fifth edition (New York: Knopf, 1978).

⁷Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

⁸Stephen M. Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 933.

⁹Vasquez and Schroeder, both cited by Chan, also made the same error. See John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerative Versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 899-912; and Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994): 108-48. Walt and Elman and Elman point out this common error in their rejoinders. See Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," 931; and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, "Correspondence: History vs. Neo-Realism: A Second Look," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 183.

realism are largely ignored. Chan then treats the discrediting of any particular realist theory as a refutation of the entire paradigm.

Furthermore, I would argue that the characterization of realist theories found in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" is inaccurate. First is a failure to recognize that classical realism is based on a theory of human nature. "Classical realists emphasize that it is the general and inherent nature of all *states* to be power-seeking" (emphasis added), writes Chan. For classical realism, however, the source of power-seeking behavior does not originate from the nature of states but from the nature of *humans* to lust for power (termed *animus dominandi* by Morgenthau).¹⁰ Second, Chan fails to make the correct distinction between defensive and offensive realism, stating that defensive realism "argues that states are interested in power as a means to ensure survival," whereas offensive realism "contends that states are motivated to extend their power relentlessly toward the ultimate goal of becoming the global hegemon." In fact, both defensive and offensive realism agree that power is a means to ensure survival; they disagree, however, over how much power is enough. Stated differently, they agree on the ends (security), but not the means. Defensive realism argues that too much power is counter-productive and that great powers best ensure their security by preserving the existing balance of power; offensive realism argues that great powers ensure their security by maximizing their share of world power.¹¹ Third, Chan's assertion that realists "do not believe domestic factors have *any* influence on states' foreign policy" (emphasis added) is misguided. Even the most hardcore of realists would probably object to this straw man. Realism holds that structural variables exert far greater influence on foreign policy and international outcomes than domestic or individual ones. Non-structural factors—such as domestic politics, ideology, and leadership—supplement

¹⁰Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man vs. Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 192.

¹¹John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 24; and Eric J. Labs, "Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 1-49.

structural explanations. Neoclassical realists, for instance, combine structural insights with domestic factors and come up with plausible theories that explain a wide range of state behavior.¹²

Because realism contains a diverse body of competing theories, not all of them will be equally valid. Thus, the failure of a particular realist theory should not be treated as refutation of the entire paradigm.

Balancing vs. Buck-Passing

Waltz elevated the balancing of power to law-like status: "If there is any distinctly political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it." In an anarchic system populated by states wishing to survive, states would adopt both internal and external measures to balance the power of the stronger side. Thus, "[b]alances of power recurrently form."¹³ Although not all realists agree with Waltz's claim,¹⁴ critics of realism, including Chan, point to the historical record to show that balances of power do not recurrently form, and use this evidence as a refutation of the entire realist research program.¹⁵

Offensive realism does not share Waltz's position, however, because the logic of balancing ignores the problem of collective action. Faced with a rising power, threatened states have incentives to let others bear the costs of balancing the aggressor. Balancing, therefore, is often inefficient (except in a situation of bipolarity, in which there is no one to whom the

¹²Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-72. See also Jeffery Talieffer in Peter D. Feaver et al., "Correspondence: Brother, Can You Spare a Paradigm? (or Was Anybody Ever a Realist?)," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 182.

¹³Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 117, 128.

¹⁴See, for example, Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, chap. 14; and Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap. 8.

¹⁵Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory"; Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Richard N. Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein, eds., *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993).

buck can be passed). International relations literature tends to view bandwagoning as the opposite strategy to balancing. Offensive realism argues otherwise. When faced with an aggressor, the choice for a great power is not between balancing and bandwagoning, but between balancing and buck-passing. This is because bandwagoning (joining the stronger side) violates realism's central tenets by conceding power to the aggressor. As Mearsheimer points out, "[b]andwagoning ... is not a productive option in a realist world, for although the bandwagoning state may achieve more absolute power, the dangerous aggressor gains more. The actual choice in a realist world is between balancing and buck-passing, and threatened states prefer buck-passing to balancing whenever possible." He further explains that "[b]uck-passing is preferred over balancing because the successful buck-passer does not have to fight the aggressor if deterrence fails."¹⁶ Whether a great power will balance or buck-pass depends on the distribution of power and geography. Great powers are more likely to buck-pass during the existence of multipolarity and when they do not share a border with the aggressor. A balancing coalition is harder to form in multipolarity because of the allure of buck-passing.

I believe that Chan's articulation misses the mark by focusing criticism of realism on the balance of power and by asserting that states do not always balance. Contrary to Chan's assertions, realism does not predict that all states will invariably balance or that they will balance efficiently. Balancing is *not* the only behavior predicted by realism. Defensive realism, for instance, tends to give balancing a greater role in countering aggression, while offensive realism emphasizes the appeal of buck-passing when a state faces an aggressor. Power transition theory argues that power asymmetry preserves peace and predicts that war becomes more likely as the gap between the dominant power and the rising challenger narrows.¹⁷ Although realism does not claim to predict all behavior, various strands of

¹⁶Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 139-40, 267.

¹⁷A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982); and Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

realism do have a set of boundary conditions for their predictions. Offensive realism, for example, sees geography and the distribution of power as the two major influences on a great power's choice between balancing and buck-passing. Unfortunately, Chan largely ignores these factors in his brief survey of European history. Even if his description of history were correct, "the failure of a particular realist theory does not discredit the entire paradigm, especially since realism deals with a very wide variety of international phenomena."¹⁸

Revisionist Intentions

The distinction between status-quo and revisionist states has a long and rich history in international relations scholarship. The fundamental logic underpinning such a division is whether the intentions of states matter in international politics.¹⁹ For defensive realism, great powers can divine benign and malign intentions from a variety of factors such as offense-defense balance as well as other behavioral indicators.²⁰ These powers can then formulate cooperative or conflictual policies based on their beliefs about intentions. For offensive realism, all great powers harbor revisionist intentions until they have achieved hegemony. Capabilities, rather than intentions, are what matter because states cannot be certain about the intentions of others. Intentions are extremely difficult to know, and, even if known, there is no guarantee that they remain constant.²¹ Prudent leaders

¹⁸Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," 933.

¹⁹The debate over intentions vs. capabilities is a fundamental issue in international relations literature. Almost all strands of international relations theory take a stand on this issue. Democratic peace theory, for example, is based on the belief that states can discern benign intentions according to regime type.

²⁰Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978): 167-214; and Charles Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-help," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (Winter 1994/95): 50-90.

²¹Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 31. See also Copeland's critique of Alexander Wendt's constructivism: Dale C. Copeland, "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism: A Review Essay," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 187-212.

should therefore pay attention to the capabilities of potential rivals rather than their intentions. Since states cannot rely on the good will of others, the best way to ensure security is to accumulate as much power as possible over potential rivals. States change the existing balance of power in their favor if the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Therefore, all states are revisionist, unless they achieve hegemony.

"Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" charges that such a view is "rather incongruous with the basic premise of offensive realism, which argues that states are driven to seek more power even if they have satisfied their immediate security needs." This statement misinterprets offensive realism by suggesting that states maximize absolute power. What offensive realism suggests is that states maximize *relative* power, not absolute power. As Mearsheimer writes:

States that maximize relative power are concerned primarily with the distribution of material capabilities. In particular, they try to gain as large a power advantage as possible over potential rivals... Thus, states motivated by relative power concerns are likely to forgo large gains in their own power, if such gains give rival states even greater power, for smaller national gains that nevertheless provide them with a power advantage over their rivals. States that maximize absolute power, on the other hand, care only about the size of their own gains, not those of other states... They would jump at the opportunity for large gains, even if a large rival gained more in the deal. Power, according to this logic, is not a means to an end (survival), but an end in itself.²²

Chan's misinterpretation of offensive realism leads him to deduce the wrong "critical test." He mistakenly claims that "[o]ffensive realism will be vindicated if the United States continues to seek power after its survival is reasonably assured." Such a view assumes that states maximize power—power here is seen as an end in itself, not a means. Offensive realism does not hold this view. Rather, power is a means to an end (i.e., survival). A state's survival is assured when it has achieved the dominant status in its region of the world. A regional hegemon such as the United States will seek to maintain the existing balance of power so that no other

²²Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 36.

state will become a competitor.²³

Recognizing that the United States might present a hard case for offensive realism, "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" wonders why Mearsheimer excludes the United States "from the logic of his own theory." This is puzzling because Mearsheimer does include the United States in his chap. 7 case study. Mearsheimer recognizes that the American (as well as British) case "might appear to provide the strongest evidence against my claim"²⁴ and examines American behavior from 1800 to 1990. As an offshore balancer, America has adopted a foreign policy designed to maintain the balance of power in both Europe and Asia. The United States buck-passed when a rising power threatened to upset the regional balance of power, and actively intervened when the local powers failed to check the aggressor. The American case, according to Mearsheimer, passes this critical test.

To show that China is not a revisionist state, Chan examines China's adherence to international rules and norms and finds that China not only has refrained from exercising its veto power in the UN Security Council but also has ratified a number of major human rights instruments. China's military expenditures as a percentage of gross national product (GNP) have declined from 3.4 percent in 1989 to 2.3 percent in 1999. Chan concludes that, compared to the United States, "China's conduct and experience do not quite qualify it for revisionism when viewed in a comparative context." Nonetheless, such a conclusion confuses revisionist behavior with intentions. For offensive realism, revisionism refers to intentions, not behavior. A revisionist state is one that harbors malign intentions and is "inclined to look for opportunities to gain more power."²⁵ A state does not necessarily exhibit revisionist behavior because it may not have the capacity to do so,

²³The White House's 2002 *National Security Strategy* is telling: "Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military buildup in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, that power of the United States." See George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, September 2002).

²⁴Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 234.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 37.

even though it still harbors revisionist intentions.²⁶ Should the opportunity arise, states will seek to revise the balance of power in their favor if the expected benefits outweigh the costs.

China's current power does not qualify it as a potential hegemon. According to the World Bank, the GDP of the United States in 2002 was US\$10.4 trillion, comprising 32.29 percent of the world's total output. China's GDP was US\$1.24 trillion, about 12 percent of the size of the American economy.²⁷ China's defense expenditures lag far behind those of the United States. In that same year, the United States spent US\$335.7 billion on defense, comprising 42.81 percent of the world's total defense expenditures, while China spent US\$31.1 billion, about 9 percent of the U.S. total.²⁸ Given this great disparity in power, China is ill-poised to challenge the United States at this point in time. As Mearsheimer points out, "great powers facing powerful opponents will be less inclined to consider offensive action and more concerned with defending the existing balance from threats by their more powerful opponents. Let there be an opportunity for those weaker states to revise the balance in their own favor, however, and they will take advantage of it."²⁹

Can Realism Explain the Chinese Experience?

Although the bulk of Chan's article aims to discredit realism, the real payoff of his critique lies in its implications for the rise of China. Analysts pessimistic about the future of U.S.-China relations tend to follow realist interpretations. Critics counter by arguing that, when applied to Asia,

²⁶Johnston also fails to distinguish revisionist behavior from intentions. See Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" (cited in note 2 above).

²⁷World Bank, *World Development Indicators Online*, <http://www.worldbank.org/data/onlinedatabases/onlinedatabases.html>.

²⁸Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2003: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), Appendix 10A.

²⁹Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 37.

realist theories "do a poor job."³⁰ If such an approach is problematic, analysts should discard realism and embrace non-realist approaches that generally see more room for cooperation. Therefore, contrary to realist predictions, a rich and powerful China is not necessarily at odds with U.S. interests.

Chan contends that realism is ill-suited for Western experience, let alone Asia. As mentioned above, he conflates the realist paradigm with particular realist theories, thus ignoring other realist theories that can explain Western experience. The question remains: can theories derived from European experience be fruitfully applied to Asia, an area with a different history and culture?

As I seek to demonstrate below, realism does a reasonably good job in explaining the behavior of Asian states during the historical periods I cover. Although the European and Asian state systems existed separately throughout most of history, the behavior of Asian states exhibited qualities similar to those of the Europeans. Like their Western counterparts, leaders of imperial China had been sensitive to the balance of power, and flexibly adjusted policy according to their assessment of the strategic situation. Historically, Chinese policymakers have sought to maximize China's relative power until the country achieved a preponderant position in East Asia. I present evidence from two major periods in Chinese history, the Song Dynasty (宋朝, 960-1279) and the Ming Dynasty (明朝, 1368-1644), to illustrate my point about the explanatory power of realism.³¹

The Northern Song (北宋, 960-1127)

Medieval China during the Song Dynasty coexisted with several states, forming a multi-state system. Unlike most other periods in Chinese history, there was no single state powerful enough to dominate the system. China was a "lesser empire" in the interstate system.³² It was under con-

³⁰Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong," 58.

³¹The next section draws on Yuan-kang Wang, "Power Politics of Confucian China" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2001).

³²Gungwu Wang, "The Rhetoric of a Lesser Empire: Early Sung Relations with Its Neigh-

stant military threats from the Liao (遼國), "the most powerful state in East Asia at the time,"³³ and later from the Xi Xia state (西夏國). The system was largely bipolar, with the Song and the Liao as the two major powers. As expected by realism, the pursuit of power was the major concern of states. Throughout this period, these East Asian states balanced against larger powers, formed alliances, employed military means to resolve conflicts, and sought to conquer more territory.³⁴ Northern Song leaders frequently looked for opportunities to weaken their adversaries. When a weakness in an opponent was found, usually in the form of domestic instability, the Chinese leaders would be predisposed to go on the offensive. For example, the Northern Song took advantage of the disarray in Liao domestic politics and launched an offensive in 986. A century later, the Northern Song again launched a major offensive in 1081 when the Xi Xia state was embroiled in a leadership crisis.

China's offensive motivation, however, was mediated by a keen awareness of the balance of power. If the balance was judged to be favorable, the Song leaders would usually take military actions against adversaries. As its power grew, the Song became more aggressive. The decisions to attack Northern Han (北漢) in 979 and Xi Xia in 1081 were predicated on the assessment that Chinese power had grown—either by conquest or domestic reform. In addition, Song leaders had been aware of its relative power position and adopted measures to strengthen the country. Wang Anshi's (王安石) New Policies (1069-1073), an internal balancing effort, aimed to "deliver the benefit to the battleground in north China."³⁵

bors," in *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th-14th Centuries*, ed. Morris Rossabi (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983), 47-65.

³³Jing-shen Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven: Studies in Sung-Liao Relations* (Tucson, Ariz.: The University of Arizona Press, 1988), 10.

³⁴One finds similar results in medieval Europe. See Markus Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800-1300: Communal Discourse and Conflictual Practices," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 427-66.

³⁵Ray Huang, *China: A Macro History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 134. Historians generally agree on the military objective of Wang's reforms. Paul C. Forage states that aside from revitalizing the empire, the aim was "to reconquer north China with all the glory and prestige of the Han and Tang dynasties before them" ("The Sino-Tangut War of 1081-1085," *Journal of Asian History* 25 [1991]: 1). Tao states that "Wang had come to believe

Whenever having accumulated enough power, the Song usually went on the offensive, as it did in 1081 against the Xi Xia. The objectives of these campaigns were not simply to repulse or deter enemies, but rather to destroy them, thus eliminating the threat to Chinese security. However, when offensive campaigns failed to achieve this goal, the Northern Song government bought off adversaries by making annual payments and acknowledged its inferior status in the bilateral relationship, as done in the Treaty of Shanyuan (澶淵) of 1005. The weaker Song bribed the Liao again in 1042 when the latter threatened war.

The Southern Song (南宋, 1127-1279)

In many respects, the Southern Song Dynasty was a continuation of the Northern Song. The structure of the system remained essentially bipolar, dominated by the Song and the Jin (金). Xi Xia ceased to be an important player in the multi-state system, and remained for the most time a vassal state of the Jin. The Southern Song regime inherited a much smaller territory—and a formidable adversary. Accordingly, Song policy toward the Jin was often conciliatory, even concluding a humiliating peace treaty with the Jin in 1141 when the Song was faced with growing domestic problems. Despite several peace overtures, the Southern Song still harbored hopes of annihilating the Jin, and launched a major offensive in 1206, taking advantage of the declining power of the Jin state. In general, once perceiving an increase in relative power, Southern Song leaders became more aggressive and went on the offensive to attack their adversary. The Southern Song's later alliance with the Mongols was aimed at destroying the Jin, although this move led to China's conquest by the Mongols.

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

The Ming Dynasty faced a perennial threat from the Mongols in the north. Given that the Mongols conquered China in the thirteenth century,

that the first priority of the government had to be the consolidation of [Song] power, while any attempt at external expansion was dependent upon the success of the domestic reform program" (*Two Sons of Heaven*, 68).

the specter of Mongol conquest was a powerful source of fear for the Ming leaders. Debates over how to deal with the Mongol threat consequently dominated China's national security decision-making for the next two hundred years. The Ming was most aggressive at the height of its power, and initiated fewer conflicts as its power declined. Unable to weaken the Mongols, the Ming government constructed the Great Wall to defend against attacks from its archrival in the north.³⁶ Perennial conflicts drained state capacity and compelled the Ming government to make peace with the Mongols.

Policy discussions revealed a clear inclination toward the use of force, mediated by the leaders' assessment of relative power. Chinese strategy went through three stages: from offensive, to defensive, and then to appeasement. This shift correlates with the balance of power between the Ming and the Mongols. The Ming was most powerful from 1368 to 1449, and consequently during this period adopted an offensive strategy vis-à-vis the Mongols. As the balance shifted to the disadvantage of the Ming after the Tumu (土木) debacle in 1449, the Ming chose to build the Great Wall along the northern frontiers from 1450 to 1548. Ming power reached rock bottom from 1549 to 1644, when the Ming, forced to appease the Mongols, accepted their demands for trade and tribute.

The Ming Tribute System

Often used to describe the unique nature of the Chinese world order,³⁷ the tribute system was "a natural expression of Chinese cultural egocentricity."³⁸ Under this hierarchical system, vassal states were attracted by

³⁶Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

³⁷J. K. Fairbank, and S. Y. Teng, "On the Ch'ing Tributary System," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1942): 135-246; J. K. Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (February 1942): 129-49; and John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). It should be noted that the term "tribute system" was a Western invention to describe China's relations with neighbors. The Chinese did not use such a term.

³⁸Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," 129.

the superior Chinese culture and willingly sent tributary missions to China, usually triennially, with goods produced in their own countries. To demonstrate the benevolence of the Chinese emperor, these tributaries were in return lavished with a much higher value of Chinese goods and luxuries. By allowing foreigners to pay tribute, China hoped that their neighbors would be transformed into civilized peoples and would not be a threat to China. In this sense, the tribute system served as a "defense mechanism" to protect China from foreign attacks.³⁹ The vassal states were required to adopt the Chinese calendar, and their rulers had to be enfeoffed by the Chinese emperor. These states could also call for Chinese help if attacked.

In practice, however, the functioning of the tribute system required the support of Chinese power. Whenever not backed by power, the system usually fell apart.⁴⁰ The tribute system was thus an institution that helped China manage foreign relations, preserve a dominant position in East Asia, and maintain peaceful borders. Absent significant allies, lesser states submitted to Chinese overlordship because they were too weak to defend themselves. "The Koreans," writes Donald N. Clark, "by providing tributes and gestures of submission, bought security and autonomy by forestalling Chinese intervention."⁴¹ In addition, vassal state understanding of the tribute system was different from the Chinese interpretation. Since China's return of goods was usually in excess of the tribute, tributary neighbors saw this as payment for their cooperation. The Mongols, for example, saw the Ming's return of goods as a tribute paid to them for relative security on the northern frontiers.⁴² Prince Kanenaga of Japan imprisoned and executed some of the Chinese envoys sent by the Ming emperor in 1369

³⁹Rossabi, *China Among Equals*, 1; and Fairbank, "Tributary Trade and China's Relations with the West," 137.

⁴⁰Tao, *Two Sons of Heaven*, 4, 8.

⁴¹Donald N. Clark, "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations under the Ming," in *The Cambridge History of China*, eds. Dennis Twitchett and Frederick W. Mote (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 272.

⁴²Henry Serruys, *Sino-Mongol Relations During the Ming, Tome II: The Tribute System and Diplomatic Missions (1400-1600)* (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1967), 21.

and wrote accusingly in a letter of 1382: "How could we kneel down and acknowledge Chinese overlordship!"⁴³ As Ming power grew, Japan later became a nominal part of the tribute system.

Ming China expanded its interests abroad when the country was powerful; its sphere of influence contracted when the Ming was on the decline. The Ming Dynasty had the making of a regional hegemon since Emperor Hongwu's (洪武皇帝) crushing of the Mongols in 1387. Thereafter, no serious security threat existed to challenge Chinese dominance in East Asia. Emperor Yongle (永樂皇帝) continued to take advantage of the Ming's growing power and expanded the country's strategic interests as far as the country's resources allowed. He invaded and conquered Vietnam in 1407, expanded China's maritime interests to an unprecedented level by sending seven expeditions abroad (1405-1433), and launched several large-scale assaults against the Mongols (1409-1424). China's predominant position, however, ended with the disastrous defeat by the Mongols at Tumu in 1449. Thereafter, the tribute system began to crack. Ming China became incapable of defending its vassal state of Hami (哈密) in Inner Asia when Hami was repeatedly invaded by Turfan (土魯番), and in 1528 the Ming was forced to accommodate Turfan's demands.

In sum, imperial Chinese decision-makers frequently probed for weakness in order to take advantage of their adversaries. The leaders exhibited little or no hesitation when an opportunity to use force presented itself, but paid close attention to the ability of China to launch military strikes. Only lack of capability was what usually kept them at bay. Like many countries in the West, imperial China placed a high premium on the utility of force. Moreover, Chinese foreign policy was generally more coercive when China was in a stronger position, and more accommodating when the state was weaker. In times of strength, imperial China adopted a more expansionist policy by attacking adversaries or expanding state interests abroad. In times of weakness, Chinese leaders sought to maintain a defensive military posture and/or to accommodate the demands of their

⁴³Wang, "Power Politics of Confucian China," 222.

adversaries—while in the meantime embarking on domestic reforms aimed at strengthening the military forces and improving the economy. In their policy debates, the decision-makers made clear that these non-coercive policies were matters of expedience, necessary to provide the breathing space needed to improve the relative power of the state.

Readers should note that I am not making a country-specific point about the behavior or the nature of the Chinese state, but rather a theoretical point about the applicability of offensive realism to Asia. The conclusion reached in the preceding paragraph applies to other great powers as well.

Conclusion

Realism is a venerable research tradition that is capable of making progress. Like other approaches to international relations, however, realism is not without flaws. Solid, well-grounded criticism could help remedy these flaws and strengthen the paradigm. I would argue, however, that Steve Chan's small sample of realist theories and cursory survey of European history found in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" does not help us better understand international relations. His mistake can be viewed in the context of the recent trend among some scholars to brand the entire realist paradigm as "degenerative."⁴⁴ Granted, realism is not the only approach to international relations, and the non-realist research program will continue to attract scholars and guide their research. Such a clash of different approaches is indispensable to progress in the social sciences. As Walt points out, "Progress will be swifter, however, if criticism seeks to do more than merely delegitimize realism, or any other approach a critic happens to dislike."⁴⁵

In fact, much of the advances in realism comes from intra-realist debates rather than extra-realist criticism. Mearsheimer's offensive realism is

⁴⁴Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm" (cited in note 9 above); and Jeffrey W. Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 5-55.

⁴⁵Walt, "The Progressive Power of Realism," 934.

a recent example of such progress. I have attempted to show in this article the explanatory power of offensive realism in the case of imperial China. Like their European counterparts, great powers in East Asia have historically attempted to dominate the region and maximize their share of power over potential rivals. Viewed in this longitudinal historical context, analysts may gain a broader picture of the implications of China's reemergence in international politics.

* * *

I quite appreciate Steve Chan's comments. I am also grateful that he took time to comment on the Chinese case that I employ to demonstrate the explanatory power of realism. In the remainder of this paper, I will respond to Chan's concerns noted in his rejoinder. Given that Chan and I work within different research programs, it is hardly surprising that we have differences of opinion. Readers familiar with the recent "paradigm wars" between non-realists and realists (cited in footnotes 9, 12, and 44 in this article) will likely get a sense of *déjà vu*; in many respects, this "Chan-Wang debate" in *Issues & Studies* looks like a rerun of John Vasquez's debates with realists in the *American Political Science Review* in 1997. That the China studies field can go through the debates found in the general literature not only is good for China studies but also helps fulfill *Issues & Studies'* new mandate to create a dialogue between area studies and the social sciences. All that Chan and I can do, as intellectual sparring partners, is to put forth our respective perspectives and let the reader weigh the arguments and counterarguments.

The central claim in my criticism of "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" is that this article understates the range and diversity of realism because of its small sample of realist theories. I would argue, moreover, that Chan's rejoinder does not challenge this central claim. An evaluation of the realist paradigm should clearly specify the criteria, include a wide range of its constituent theories, and be fair to the theories under evaluation— aspects which I did not detect in Chan's closing comments. His case against the entire realist paradigm is based mainly on two

authors. I would suggest that a more helpful and revealing examination would include a discussion of the large literature on defensive and neo-classical realism. Added to the problem is his mischaracterization of important realist theories. All in all, this flawed methodology casts doubt on the credibility and impartiality of the argument contained in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers."

How (Not) to Judge a Paradigm

One of the underlying disagreements in this "Chan-Wang debate" is based on different views on the philosophy of science. Although not clearly specified, Chan seems to endorse Imre Lakatos' methodology of scientific research programs that was employed by John Vasquez and cited approvingly by Chan. In addition, Chan seems to embrace the "dogmatic falsification" rejected by Lakatos when he asks all realists to come up with a shared set of "core testable propositions" and "a fundamental anomaly" that could falsify the entire paradigm. These are highly rigid criteria for the field. This approach, as championed by Lakatos and others has, however, been discredited by many historians and philosophers of science on the grounds that it does not accord with actual practice and would dismiss virtually every research program in the social sciences.⁴⁶ It is doubtful that other research programs of international relations—such as liberalism and constructivism—meet Lakatos' criteria for coherence and distinctiveness. Would Chan use the same standard to judge liberalism or constructivism? Would disagreements among liberals, for instance, be grounds for rejecting the entire research program? Furthermore, if attempts to fix anomalies and refine theories are viewed as "protean" or "degenerative," how do we have progress in the social sciences? Pushed to the extreme, does that mean we should discard the entire field of international relations?

⁴⁶See, for instance: Paul Diesing, *How Does Social Science Work? Reflections on Practice* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991); Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Toward a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); Frederick Suppe, *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, second edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977); and Stephen E. Toulmin, *Human Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972).

My position should be clear when I quote Gilpin's definition: "realism ... is essentially a philosophical position; it is not a scientific theory that is subject to the test of falsifiability and, therefore, cannot be proved or disproved."⁴⁷ I also stated that "the failure of a particular realist theory should not be treated as a refutation of the entire paradigm." One can falsify individual realist theories, but not the entire paradigm. When realist theories make contradictory hypotheses, scholars can settle the disputes by examining the empirical record to see which theory is correct, or go beyond existing theories by replacing or synthesizing them. Chan nevertheless labels such correction "realism's protean character."

"No One Loves a Political Realist"

In his response, Chan reiterates his "sense of frustration" because he sees so much "logical inconsistency" and "analytical vacillation" in realist writings. Alas, if only critics would take time to listen carefully to what realists have been saying before jumping to conclusions. Gilpin's lucid observation that "no one loves a political realist" keeps coming back to mind.⁴⁸ Although realism aims to "tell it like it is," the pessimistic nature of realist predictions is often at odds with the liberal penchant for progress. Realist ideas are considered harmful to the progressive power of reason and must be eradicated. I would argue that this "liberal intolerance" sometimes clouds the critics' grasp of realism and explains in good part the often harsh tone in their criticism.

As such, critics often overlook important aspects of realist theories. Many of the questions raised in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" have, I would argue, already been answered in Mearsheimer's book. Chan charges that I do not give any reason to support my claim that his interpretation of European history is mistaken. I believe I have done so when I mention that he failed to consider the important factors of the distribution of power and geography. Chan says that the United Kingdom,

⁴⁷See note 5 above.

⁴⁸Ibid.

France, Japan, and later China bandwagoned with the United States against the Soviet Union; since bandwagoning violates realism's central tenets, this serves as a failure of realism. There are two problems with this assertion. First, these states are geographically closer to the Soviet Union than to the United States, which is an ocean away. Geography aside, the Soviet Union had a larger army, which is a key ingredient in the balance of power. As Mearsheimer explains, "those states allied with the United States against the Soviet Union because they feared the Soviet army, not the American army."⁴⁹ The stopping power of water and the primacy of land power were ignored by Chan. Second, Chan commits the fallacy of determinism by suggesting that states must not violate realism's central tenets. This is another idea not shared by realists. Realism says that "the international system strongly shapes the behavior of states."⁵⁰ The structure of the system does not determine state behavior but, rather, as Waltz points out, "[encourages] states to do some things and to refrain from doing others."⁵¹ States are free to do foolish things; they ignore the system's imperatives at their peril.

Chan again ignores geography when he asks: "if the ultimate aim of all great powers is to seek global hegemony, why should the United States stop its expansionist policy after achieving only regional hegemony?" Mearsheimer has stated clearly that the difficulty of projecting power across the Atlantic and Pacific oceans prevents the United States from becoming a global hegemon. It is not that great powers do not harbor such a desire. Rather, the daunting problem of projecting power is what keeps them at bay. "Thus, the ultimate goal of great powers is to achieve regional hegemony and block the rise of peer competitors in distant areas of the globe."⁵² As a regional hegemon without peer competitors, the United States has ensured its security (i.e., the end) and thus seeks to maintain

⁴⁹Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 85.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 915.

⁵²Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 236-37.

the existing balance of power that favors this end.

The Straw Man Bias

There seems to be a tendency in "Realism, Revisionism, and the Great Powers" to misrepresent realism and set up straw men. Realism does not purport to explain everything or predict every possible state behavior; nor do realists insist that states must not violate realist prescriptions. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer have acknowledged the existence of anomalies. Chan asserts that the fact that Germany and Japan depend on the United States for their defense "does not seem to suggest an enigma" for realists. In a 2000 article in *International Security*, Waltz acknowledges that Japan's postwar behavior is "a structural anomaly" but stresses that such a situation is difficult to sustain over time "when external conditions press firmly enough."⁵³ Waltz alerts us to Japan's increasing concerns over China and its aspiration to a larger international role. Mearsheimer also acknowledges that there will be anomalies that offensive realism cannot explain⁵⁴ and that states might concede power "for realist reasons."⁵⁵ For postwar Germany and Japan, the presence of American troops leaves them "little maneuver room in their foreign policy."⁵⁶

Chan chides me for allowing "conciliation, appeasement, or acceptance of humiliation" in my case study because these behaviors fall outside the theoretically permissible alternatives of offensive realism. Although these are strategies rejected by offensive realism, the theory does not say that states cannot accommodate adversaries after repeated failures at balancing. I have said that the Northern and Southern Song had looked for opportunities to weaken their adversaries, and were forced to accommodate after their offensives had failed. As my case has shown, the Song governments still harbored offensive intentions and waited for the next op-

⁵³Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 33-34.

⁵⁴E.g., German restraint in 1905. See Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 10.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 164-65.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 382.

portunity to strike. Accommodating adversaries and waiting for the next opportunity to weaken them is fully consistent with realist expectations. By Chan's standard, Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945 would serve as another example of the "analytical vacillation" of realism since surrendering is not theoretically permitted by realism.

Chan also holds that I select periods of Chinese history that do not demonstrate buck-passing behavior. Perhaps he misunderstands my research question. The question I ask is not whether states balance or buck-pass, but whether great powers will look for opportunities to maximize their relative power—offensive realism's primary hypothesis. If my question were whether states are more likely to buck-pass in multipolarity than in bipolarity, I would have selected the Warring States (戰國時期, 403-221 B.C.) (multipolar) and the Song (bipolar) periods. The buck-passing behavior of the Chinese states in that multipolar system eventually led to their conquest by the Qin (秦朝) in 221 B.C. Since that was not my research question, given space constraints, I focused instead on offensive realism's primary hypothesis.

Although, for offensive realism, buck-passing is preferred to balancing, the theory clearly lays out the conditions (distribution of power and geography, again) for the two behaviors to occur. Chan ignores these conditions again when he mistakenly charges that I treat the occurrence of balancing behavior as if it presents supportive evidence for offensive realism. As I have argued earlier, balancing is consistent with offensive realism.

What Exactly Is a Status-Quo Regional Hegemon?

Offensive realism sees the United States as a status-quo regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere that seeks to maintain its dominant position and prevent the rise of peer competitors in Eurasia. In contradistinction to the views of offensive realism, Chan sees the United States as a revisionist state. The United States has been going against the will of the so-called international community. Just witness the war against Iraq, the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, and other U.S. unilateral actions in the International Criminal Court, the Anti-Personnel Mine Convention, and

elsewhere. The reason for our seemingly opposing view lies in the different conceptions of "revisionism." Chan adopts an ideational definition of revisionism: a revisionist state is "one that seeks to upset and undermine the prevailing *rules and norms* of the international community" (emphasis added). Offensive realism, on the other hand, adopts a material definition of revisionism. Revisionist and status-quo orientations refer to a state's policy toward the existing balance of power. A revisionist state is inclined to *change* the balance of power in its favor, whereas a status-quo state seeks to *preserve* the existing balance of power. This conception of status-quo state does not rule out expansionist policy as long as such a policy leaves intact the existing balance of power. Morgenthau's work helps clarify this point: "Minor adjustments in the distribution of power..., which leave intact the relative power positions of the nations concerned, are fully compatible with a policy of the status quo."⁵⁷ Therefore, a status-quo regional hegemon such as the United States has ample leeway to throw its weight around the globe without upsetting the balance of power. The United States can reject the Kyoto Protocol, refuse to ratify the International Criminal Court, or launch a preventive war against Iraq, and yet still be considered a status-quo regional hegemon.

Because of his ideational focus on rules and norms, Chan sees more indications of revisionist behavior in American foreign policy—such as exercising its veto in the UN Security Council, refusing to ratify a number of human rights instruments, and violating the sovereignty of Iraq. For offensive realism, these behaviors are not considered revisionist because they do not lead to a significant change in the relative power position of the United States. Washington still seeks to maintain its superior position by preserving the existing balance of power that favors the United States.

Therefore, a regional hegemon is free to do many things without significantly changing the balance of power, and yet remain a status-quo power. Chan's misunderstanding of offensive realism's conception of the status quo leads him to charge incorrectly that my account of Ming China

⁵⁷Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 46.

contradicts the logic of offensive realism. Although having had the making of a regional hegemon, the Ming Dynasty had many ways to expand its strategic interests without altering the balance of power. The Ming Dynasty still strove to maintain its dominant position over others.

Toward a Fruitful Paradigm

Chan asks whether the proposition of offensive realism is "unique" by referring to the Marxist contention that "as a capitalist economy gains strength, it will initiate more intense foreign aggression." In order to build a parsimonious theory, offensive realism treats states as black boxes and pays little attention to their domestic characteristics (while recognizing the tradeoff between the number of variables and explanatory power). As for Chan's example, offensive realism actually subsumes the Marxist proposition and suggests that states—be they capitalist or Communist—will likely expand their interests as their power grows.

I would argue that Chan's citation of Dale Copeland's *The Origins of Major War* ironically demonstrates the fruitfulness of the realist paradigm: that realism is capable of making progress. Copeland attempts to fix empirical anomalies of classical realism, neorealism, and hegemonic stability theory in explaining the outbreak of major wars "by synthesizing their strengths into an alternative, dynamic realist theory of major war."⁵⁸ My application of offensive realism (a Western theory) to Asia also demonstrates the fruitfulness of the paradigm.

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⁵⁸Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 2.

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