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# The Idea of the “Road” in International Relations Theory

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## Abstract

*A pressing question in international relations (IR) theory today is how to overcome its Western-centric character. Recent articulations of a non- or post-Western IR theory offer a significant step forward; nonetheless, a Western-made critical method still prevents scholars from going beyond the West in a geographical and intellectual sense. This paper makes a modest proposal to compare inter-civilisational ideas, rather than theoretically de-centring IR in the West. Here, the conception of a “road” may provide a useful underpinning as a type of infrastructure, a normative concept and a cultural praxis. The “road” as a system may also provide a framework for integrating all three functions.*

## Key Words

International relations theory, West-centrism, civilisations, road, road system.

## Introduction

Many today observe that international relations (IR) theory seems at a crossroad. One could interpret this observation in

one of two ways: (i) a “crossroad” indicates a sense of intellectual indirection, a situation where IR theorists must make a choice as to where to go and what to believe in, or (ii) a “crossroad” suggests a contact point where different people from different places meet, then depart again into different directions. The latter could provoke a merger or a clash, or it incites nothing. Pretty much similar to “crossroad” in our ordinary sense, something may or may not happen at the intersection. What can be derived from these two understandings may be the quite boring fact that merely standing at a crossroad is neither special nor inherently dynamic.

Whatever the take, there has been little consideration of the conception of the road itself and its possible role in IR. One could dismiss the relevance of roads for IR, apart from some geopolitical concerns. But as a social metaphor, the concept has been underdeveloped despite its relevance and usefulness. In this paper, I explore the concept of the road as an important element to wider interactions

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among ideas, under the rubric of the Global History of Ideas (GHI). The GHI seeks to overcome the “West-centricity of world politics” by shifting (ontologically) from a Westphalian to a post-Westphalian setting among civilisations, as well as (epistemologically) from an interaction among polities to one of ideas. In this context, the road may function as a “road system”, indicating both the physical and social processes of developing ideas on which different social realities may be constructed. The road as a metaphor for inter-civilisational interaction is not new, as demonstrated by countless numbers of travel memoirs. However, through the combination of another idea of travel, it has provided a richer backdrop for an inquiry into the inter-civilisational interaction. This paper is the revisit of the “road” from intercivilisational journey of ideas.

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The paper aims to clarify the road metaphor, introduce the GHI and examine its potential to direct us to a post-Western IR. I begin with the background to this paper. Following, I explore the concept of the road and

highlight its geographical, normative and praxeological meanings. These correspond to the road’s three immediate functions, namely the road as an infrastructural system, normative principle and a process of learning and translation. I conclude with using the GHI as a possible research design, one that is based on the conception of the road and the “road system”.

## The “Westfailure” Problem and Its Aftermath

Many consider IR a “Westfailure”.<sup>1</sup> Developed primarily in the West, IR remains relatively ignorant of or mistreats the non-West. Issues of identity, culture and civilisation are at stake. Many take a “non-Western” approach by presenting a diversity of IR scholarship,<sup>2</sup> followed by a “post-Western” IR that questions foundational tenets in IR theorising.<sup>3</sup> To some, the “Westfailure” problem reflects identity politics in the discipline and, in this context, identity is almost equivalent to nationality. Thus stories of trial<sup>4</sup> and error<sup>5</sup> of various “national schools” have been appearing in the name of non-Western IR. Post-Western IR, however, problematises the matter of identity and nationality altogether. Accordingly, there are always *at least* two stories to tell: one may be a nationalised, non-Western IR; another, a post-Western IR that simultaneously opposes the master narrative of Western IR and the

nationalised ones of non-Western IR. Pluralism plays an important part in post-Western IR,<sup>6</sup> accompanied by a method to “provincialise”<sup>7</sup> or compare<sup>8</sup> so as to prevent any totalising projects. To be sure, bringing the non-West (back) into IR is not new. This time, however, non-/post-Western IR seems to be enjoying some success. At least they have broadened the theoretical vista to include different cultural traditions, considered why no international theory exists outside the West and suggested possible directions for theorising about the world.

These movements suffer a major drawback, nevertheless. They enact in the name of non-/post-Western IR what already counts as Western intellectual activity. At least two aspects of this can be observed. Regardless of which movement one endorses, it is *critical* in nature. Indeed, all academic exercises hold to this tenet. No thought process could qualify as academic without criticality. Criticality is an activity to stop and reflect, to ask if the current situation is acceptable and reject received knowledge as given. Historically speaking, criticality comes from the European Enlightenment,<sup>9</sup> which sought to “struggle against the absolutist state”.<sup>10</sup> Here, what one may fight is the totality of IR, its theorising of a unified picture of the world or its universal approach and methodology. Against this background, calls for plurality or “democratisation”<sup>11</sup>

make sense. The second aspect of Western intellectual activity can be found in insertions of *political* moments. There is an intimacy between the rise of criticality and political activism. Modern critical thinking started as chats on plays, music and literature- in short, culture- which eventually nurtured a “public sphere”. Being critical came to stand for being political. Criticality thus serves as “the continuation of politics by other means”.<sup>12</sup>

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A problem arises with criticality and politics in tandem. Eagleton labels it an “irony of criticism”: while showing “resistance to absolutism... the critical gesture is typically conservative and corrective”.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, non-/post-Western IR suffers from a similar conservatism by standing on a Western intellectual tradition and ethos. The word “corrective” also suggests attempts to reform the discipline; therefore, the project becomes “reformist” as incremental change is again the tenet

of Enlightenment criticality.<sup>14</sup> Put differently, such contradictions evoke a language game. Considering the whole intellectual space as a game set by the West, all attempts to oppose the game may have meaning only through using particular language, such as “criticism” or “politics”, already defined by the West. Accordingly, the “reformers” almost never reach the point of exiting the game or reconstituting it.

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A major challenge remains: how do we build an alternative game or field free of the culture of criticality and the political? This does not mean only proposing a post-“international” (Western) IR; it must also entail a post-theoretical theorising. Here, a different question arises. On the one hand, one cannot discard theory simply because it may be critical and political. On the other hand, attempts at a post-“international” theory may fall into the same pitfalls if we do not take the nexus of the critical and the political into consideration. For

this reason, we may need to momentarily leave theory and seek a post-theoretical direction.<sup>15</sup>

## The Global History of Ideas and the Problem of Process

Elsewhere, I have proposed a historical turn for a post-Western international approach, namely towards a “Global History of Ideas (GHI)”.<sup>16</sup> Simply put, the GHI can be a project to shift from a critical theoretical inquiry of international life to a comparative historical analysis of civilisational lives. Such a shift reflects some major assumptions, in particular on the importance of history, comparisons and civilisations. Some important intellectual predecessors include Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Nakamura Hajime and William McNeill. In the study of IR, the GHI could join some existing studies as a part of their inquiries.<sup>17</sup>

The GHI focuses specifically on ideas. Here ideas are almost equivalent to what Arthur O. Lovejoy once called “principles” or “meta-ideas”:<sup>18</sup> that is, ways and conceptions of human thinking which may be the foundation of higher levels of ideas, or “philosophy” in a general sense. Following Lovejoy and Nakamura, the GHI supports an assumption that even different cultures may share similar types of thinking on particular questions of life. Thus the

project is invariably oriented towards intercultural or inter-civilisational studies. Also, “ideas” in GHI cover a wide range of human activities or simply the essence of human being, eventually making it interdisciplinary.<sup>19</sup> In a neighbouring field, a similar project of “comparative political philosophy” has been developing,<sup>20</sup> and indeed there are excellent works that have direct relevance on order and peace in international society.<sup>21</sup> What differentiates the GHI, however, from these other attempts is (i) its rejection of an exclusive focus on political ideas (as comparative political theorists do) and (ii) its extension to international ideas beyond those typically highlighted by English School theorists.<sup>22</sup> The GHI thus covers more than political philosophy and cuts across cultures and civilisations. A tentative list of possible topics may include:

- On the human being, defined both individually and collectively;
- On the general environment surrounding humans;
- On the human “life-cycle”, both individually and collectively;
- On human dynamics, both individually and collectively;
- On the transformation of our general environment.

One problem so far with the GHI is its (still) unclear methodology. This does not mean that the GHI and its

predecessors did and do not have any methods of inquiry, but it does identify the situation in which relevant projects have been carried out with only partial confidence in terms of their frameworks and concepts. The difficulty lies in tracing how ideas can, and have, constructed reality, and vice versa. It is a problem of process, and some studies seek to clarify this point. One influential idea for some IR scholars comes from institutionalist “isomorphism”.<sup>23</sup> Another is “process sociology”, inspired by the works of Norbert Elias. Process sociology attempts to tell a story of the spread of particular ideas; it emphasises the proscribing and prescribing effects of ideas on human action, and the foundational changes that come with social settings. One major weakness with these approaches is they presuppose a particular idea will spread throughout the globe. This “expansionist” tendency faces “mimicry” when similar ideas emerge from other cultures in a relatively overlapping period yet the latter do not spread to the whole world. Some studies have pointed to a parallel development in common ideas.<sup>24</sup> Andrew Linklater’s latest exploration into the idea and the history of a “harm convention”<sup>25</sup> approximates the plurality of similar ideas-in this case, harm or equivalent- even though it still lacks a wider explanation of process. The problem of process is primarily one of explicating mutual interactions between ideas and social reality.

## The road and GHI

The concept of a “road” is useful here. Both physically and socially, the road embodies and facilitates a process of mutual exchange of ideas, people and social realities. The road assumes that it involves a person or persons who play “the game”, and that both human agents and the road physically exist. The road also symbolises another aspect of social life: i.e., a moral function, implying the normative route to follow. And the road enables a process of travelling. Considering the plurality of cultures/civilisations and its continuous interaction, the road serves as:

### *Infrastructure*

The road provides a vital part of human infrastructure. More a social construct than a mere physical existence, the road presupposes its recognition, as well as habitual use, of the road as a road. In this sense, the road signifies certain degree of human communication. As noted below, the road does not always symbolise friendship. Indeed, quite the contrary, hostile groups can use the same road to conquer others. However, roads portend positive interactions; therefore, they deserve to be considered as sites of minimum sociality.

An interesting commonality in roads is that empires had been the chief agent to develop a sophisticated system of roads,

connecting towns and ports, capitals and eventually outside territories. In addition, merchants developed road systems that were no less important. These routes often went beyond territorial borders, forming a road system closer to a “network” that was based on the flow of their persons and their commodities. Roads have also served religious purposes. Muslims and Buddhists transmitted devotion, learning, and translation through roads. From this, we see the road as a norm;

### *A Norm*

The road sets an imaginary route to ethical destinations. Daoism(道) refers to “the way” as a road. It has both moral and practical dimensions, guiding people to proper living. Aristotle exhibits a similar tendency by recognising the essence of his ethos as a “via media”- interestingly, the Greek word “*mesotes*”, or Golden Mean in English, does not always have the nuance of the road, while it holds the meaning after translation into Latin, which is the “middle of the road”. A similar understanding can be found in the Confucian doctrine of the “mean”(中庸); the middle-ness of a road also appears in Buddhism by *Nāgārjuna* (नागार्जुन). This quick comparison tells us that the idea of the road as a norm suggests a path to a moral ideal.

The road as a practiced norm creates a specific site for learning. In ancient Greece, all roads led to the Academy

of Plato and Aristotle; in Islam, to the mosque; in Hindustan, the ashram; in medieval Europe, the abbey; and in China and other Asian cultures, to temples and shrines. These were sites of religion but they also worked as educational institutions to disseminate knowledge among people. Here, we see a linkage between the normative concept of the road, its institutions and the activities (especially intellectual) that it fostered. This leads us to the third category of the road as a process.

### *A Process*

This third aspect focuses on what people do on the road, not just what it is (an infrastructure) or what it conveys (a norm). This “praxeological” aspect of the road entails two questions: what one does generally, and how one differs among cultures, in particular.

Crudely speaking, travel has long represented the road’s praxeological aspect. Without travel, there can be no interaction. Travel memoirs have been a major resource to know how ancient, pre-modern and modern interactions are like—one could invoke Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta repeatedly.<sup>26</sup> It is also worth remembering that travel has had a variety of meanings. Almost in tandem with travel have been “explorations” and “missions”, whose purposes were more than just travelling, even including

economic exploitations and religious and political suppressions.

The encounter of ideas is one major phenomenon of the road-as-process. After all, the road is for all kinds of human interaction and communication, yet in particular, as already mentioned, learning has been one of its core activities. Suzerain states in East Asia dispatched monks and scholars to learn the latest developments in Buddhist thought, while Ibn Battuta travelled around the Islamic world partly to learn law, politics and other elements of his society. Christian scholars studying in the abbeys ushered in the “13<sup>th</sup> century revolution”,<sup>27</sup> whereby the West encountered Islamic interpretations of Ancient Greek thought.

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Language is vital in the learning process, which highlights the role of translation. If we accept language and reality as mutually constitutive, different ideas about translation can give us greater insight into each. For instance, the Japanese philosopher, Nakamura

Hajime, argues about the impossibility of translation as the duplication of original thought. Instead, he focuses on surfacing and heightening the gap between the original and translated ideas, as it often entails a process of rejecting contingent elements while sharing and clarifying the common components of ideas.<sup>28</sup> Another instance closer to IR comes in treating translation as “cultural” rather than linguistic in establishing cosmopolitanism.<sup>29</sup> We are now shifting from a “whether-or-not” translation is possible to “how”, and the kind of change or result that may follow. The idea of the road may provide some clues to the social and praxeological settings to understanding the exchange of ideas among cultures.

### *A Possible Research Design*

How, then, could the idea of the road help the GHI? One possible function would be to provide a geographical and contextual framework for the creation, development, (re)interpretation, modification and abolition of particular ideas. In particular, the concept of the road would help GHI through its geographical, normative and praxeological functions.

Geographically, the road may help the GHI develop the notion of a “road system”. It would consist of roads as both hubs and spokes, linking a number of cities and cultures, comparable to

the contemporary “Asian highway”. Different/similar ideas may flow along different road systems that would merge and diverge at various points. For instance, major ideas on Buddhism had spread along three routes; (i) to Mongolia via Tibet; (ii) to China, Korea and Japan through the Silk Road; and (iii) to Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean. Each road system corresponded to a different set of ideas about Buddhism: Tibetan, Mahāyāna and Theravada Buddhism, respectively. What this small example demonstrates is the possibility of categorising ideas based on how they came and went.

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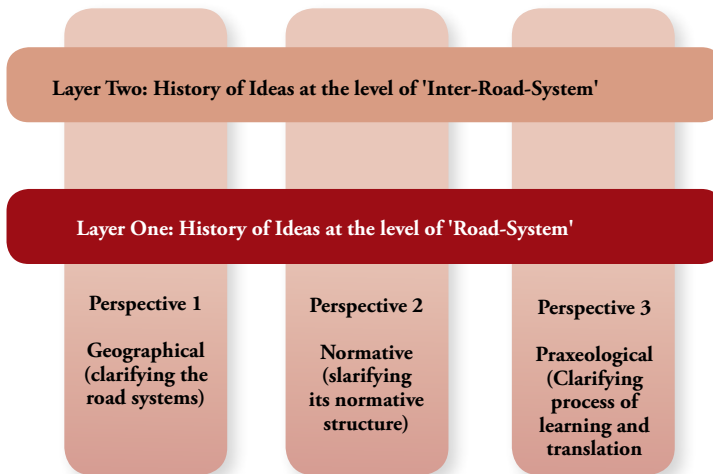
Based on the road system framework we may add second and third aspects to the concept of the road. Again, using Buddhism as an example, each flow of ideas carried different normative principles. While Theravada Buddhism stressed individual religious development and thereby required strict rules, Mahāyāna Buddhism held a “macro” approach that emphasised collective salvation. Tibetan Buddhism paved another path, creating its own version of *tantra*, or way of mediation. Finally,



the different road systems with their variety of normative principles furthered different processes for learning and translation. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, written texts enabled monks to learn; while in Tibet, oral transmission served this purpose. Furthermore, in each case, groups of monks played a vital role in establishing particular venues- namely, temples- for learning, exchanging and translating ideas. Each road system was

also connected to others, thereby forming a larger, inter-civilisational network of roads. Thus what can be envisioned is a greater map of roads that entails its own ideational developments while, at the same time, interrelate dynamics on ideas at the level of multiple road-systems. To summarise, the possible structure of a GHI based on the conception of the road and the road systems would look like the following:

**Table 1: Possible structure of GHI based on the road system**



## Conclusion

Could a paradigm shift occur in IR theory? This paper may give some clues to an answer. One involves an analytical framework for culture or, more precisely, civilisation. Introducing civilisation into restructuring IR theory always carries a particular danger: it evokes accusations of “the Empire Strikes Back”, whereby a statist/colonialist reading of culture re-emerges especially towards those outside the “West”. Still, there is room to innovate ideas that may overcome “Westfailure”. Another possible answer to the above question entails re-considerations of the post-political. What makes IR Western

is not only its Westphalian setting but also its persistent focus on politics and the political. IR theory may be rightly political for international relations, but we also need some deliberation on the “non-political”. It is almost impossible to separate the political from the critical, but one still must ask: what comes after the post-political? This paper proposes that an historical survey may at least serve as an alternative mode of inquiry. Clearly, this remains a big assumption. It requires a turn towards history from theory, together with an insertion of comparative analysis. After all, we cannot see what lies ahead on the road- only that there is one.

## Endnotes

- 1 As argued elsewhere, the term “Westfailure” is not the author’s original. It was coined by the late professor Susan Strange, who attributed the Westphalian world’s problems to its simultaneous development under conditions of excessive capitalism. I chose the same term for a different reason. The word “Westfailure” accurately points out how IR as a discipline has treated its Other improperly. For its original use, see Susan Strange, “The Westfailure System”, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (July 1999), pp. 345-354.
- 2 Major works include: Arlene B. Tickner and Ole Waever (eds.), *International Relations Scholarship Around the World*, London, Routledge, 2009; Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, *Non-Western International Relations Theory: Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, London, Routledge, 2009; Robbie Shilliam, *International Relations and Non-Western Thought: Imperialism, Colonialism and Investigations of Global Modernity*, London, Routledge, 2010; Aelene B. Tickner and David L. Blaney, *Thinking International Relations Differently*, London, Routledge, 2012.
- 3 Giorgio Shani, “Provincializing’ Critical Theory: Islam, Sikhism, and International Relations Theory”, *Cambridge Review of International Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (September 2007), pp. 417-433; Giorgio Shani, “Towards a Post-Western IR: The Umma, Khalsa Panth, and Critical International Relations Theory”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (December 2008), pp. 722-734; Rosa Vasilaki, “Provincialising IR? Deadlocks and Prospects in Post-Western IR Theory”, *Millennium*, Vol. 41, No.1 (2012), pp. 3-22.
- 4 The Japanese case can be found in Takashi Inoguchi, “Why Are There No Non-Western International Relations Theories? The Case of Japan”, in Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan (eds.), *Non-Western International Relations Theory- Perspectives On and Beyond Asia*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 51-68. The latest challenge from China includes: Yongjin Zhang and Barry Buzan, “The Tributary System as International Society in Theory and Practice”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 3-36; Feng Zhang, “The Tsinghua Approach and the Inception of Chinese Theories of International Relations”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 73-102.
- 5 Kosuke Shimizu, “Nishida Kitaro and Japan’s Interwar Foreign Policy: War Involvement and Culturalist Political Discourse”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2011), pp. 157-183; Ching Chang Chen, “The Im/Possibility of Building Indigenous Theories in a Hegemonic Discipline: The Case of Japanese International Relations”, *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (July-September 2012), pp. 463-492. These provide critical insights on the “Japanese School”, while Young Chul Cho’s latest article “Colonialism and Imperialism in the Quest for a Universalist Korean-style International Relations Theory”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, (2013), gives a Korean illustration.
- 6 Vasilaki, “Provincialising IR?”, pp. 6-8.

- 7 See articles by Shani and Vasilaki, for example.
- 8 Chen, “The Im/Possibility of Building Indigenous Theories in a Hegemonic Discipline”, pp. 476-478.
- 9 Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1979, especially chapter 3 of Volume I.
- 10 Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, London, Verso, 1984/2005, p. 9.
- 11 Ching Chang Chen, “The Absence of Non-Western IR Theory in Asia Reconsidered”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2011), p. 3.
- 12 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, London, Penguin Books, 2003/2004, p. 29.
- 13 Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism*, p. 12.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 It is obvious that throughout world history riots, rebellions and making complaints are seen ubiquitously. The problem here is, however, that sometimes we may not be certain if those activities were linked with the particular idea of “politics”. Some movements (such as riots against heavy taxation) might have been “utilitarian”, placated once people’s immanent purposes (avoiding heavy tax) were met. In such situations, a populist movement can be considered reactionary, rather than purposive, in other words not calling for political transformation.
- 16 Previous writings include: Josuke Ikeda, “The ‘Westfailure’ Problem in International Relations Theory”, in Shiro Sato et al., *Re-Examination of “Non-Western” International Relations Theories*, Kyoto Working Papers on Area Studies, No. 118, Kyoto, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 2011, pp. 12-42; Yoroppa Kokusai Shakai no Kakudai to Genkai (“The Expansion and Limits of European International Society”), in Makoto Sato, Makoto Onaka and Josuke Ikeda (eds.), *Eikoku Gakuha no Kokusai Kankeiron (English School of International Relations)*, Tokyo, Nihon Keizai Hyouron Sha, 2013.
- 17 Major works include: Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012; Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- 18 Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1936/1960, pp. 5 and 14-15.
- 19 Here some important studies can be included such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and R.T. Raju, *The Concept of Man: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1960. As well as John Bowker, *Problems of Sufferings in Religions of the World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975.

- 20 For instance, Fred Dallmyr’s edited book of *Comparative Political Theory: An Introduction*, New York, Routledge, and Christopher Goto-Jones’s chapter, “Comparative Political Thought: Beyond the Non-Western”, in Duncan Bell (ed.), *Ethics and World Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 219-236, seem to share the opinion that human ideas are to be analysed on a comparative basis.
- 21 Here, Adda Bozeman’s book is a striking example. Adda Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1960.
- 22 English School notions, such as order, justice and international society, are based on both the Western idea of politics, and at the same time are criticisms of those ideas.
- 23 For instance, see, Martha Finnemore, “Norms, Culture and World Politics: Insights from Sociology’s Institutionalism”, *International Organizations*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring 1996), pp. 325-347.
- 24 They include: Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, translated by C.F. Atkinson, Two Volumes, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1932; Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, London, Routledge, 1946/2011; Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 12 Volumes, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1934-1961; Hajime Nakamura, *A Comparative History of Ideas*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1992.
- 25 Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*.
- 26 Marco Polo, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, translated by Ronald Latham, London, Penguin Books, 1958; Ibn Battutah, *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, edited by Tim Mackintosh-Smith, London, Pacador, 2003.
- 27 Hans Van Steenberghen, *The Philosophical Movement in the Thirteenth Century: Lectures given under the Auspices of the Department of Scholastic Philosophy*, The Queen’s University, Belfast, London, Nelson, 1955.
- 28 Hajime Nakamura, *Kodai Shisou (Ancient Thought)*, Tokyo, Shunju-sha, 1974, p. 45.
- 29 Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 193-198.