

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN ASIA

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As a theory of international relations, constructivism arose as a critique of existing approaches. Scholars began working in this new vein in the 1980s and 1990s, taking aim at the rationalist arguments of liberals and realists who have long argued that patterns of international relations could best be explained by examining actors' material interests. These rationalist perspectives differ as to the sources of these interests—usually the structure of the international system, frameworks of domestic politics, or international institutions affecting market activity—but largely view actors as having stable identities and interests that are independent of other actors, even if their strategies for pursuing them involve expectations of others' likely behavior. In contrast, constructivism posits that social reality is constructed out of the meanings that people give to things. For a number of important issues it may not be enough to know how strong or weak some states are, or how they will economically benefit or lose from certain sets of agreements and international arrangements. We may need to understand how people come to believe what they believe, and how they think about things like justice, rights, accountability, progress, fairness, and responsibility. These beliefs may be influenced by sources as different as religious texts, educational curricula, the work of activists and officials, television programs, museums, and, of course, the news media. That is, the social world is one that humans themselves make, and what we believe about the goodness of our own nations, the clarity of our own histories, or the validity of religions can affect people's behavior, and that of states, just as surely as might the demand for power or for wealth.

Perhaps because of the approach's critical underpinnings, constructivists have been not just a diverse but also a querulous lot. In a recent overview, Hurd (2008) traces the key propositions of constructivism and, furthermore, several of its core internal debates. These range from the terminological and conceptual disagreements that mark

any field of scholarship to much more fundamental discord over epistemology, logic, and even ontology. For some, constructivism should provide a capable alternative to realism and liberalism, offering different kinds of generalizable causal analyses—albeit ones that privilege identity and meaning over structurally determined interests—of the stuff of international politics. For others, constructivism should provide a foundational critique not only of traditional theories but also of their positivist roots, those that presuppose the autonomy of researchers from the social and political environment they profess to analyze. While constructivists may agree on the idea that international politics is social and cultural, developed in part out of the meanings that people give to things, there is no unified constructivist approach to how scholars should go about studying it.

The constructivist turn in international relations theory has raised particular problems for the study of Asia, leading to emergence of the region as an almost unsettlingly tempting target for constructivist research. In part because the core of English-language scholarship has long been a North American and European affair (see chapter 7 for further discussion), with key case studies deriving from long traditions in Western international relations, it is not surprising that the constructivist critique would be taken up with gusto in debates regarding Asia. Berger (2003) has argued that many of the key tensions in the region—over matters such as historical memory, legacies of colonialism, and different claims about civilization—boil down to questions concerning ideas and identities, rather than to the kinds of materialist factors on which conventional realist or liberal theories would typically rely. A consequence of this argument is that the combined use of constructivist conceptual frames and material from Asia is likely only to grow in value in coming years. Nevertheless, I argue in this chapter that scholars now face the challenge of drawing from constructivist debates while focusing on research problems rather than broad paradigmatic debates. At the same time, crucially they must avoid some of the normative temptations of constructivist theory, accepting the need to problematize rather than reify concepts of Asia and Asian states.

In coming years constructivism on its own is unlikely to sustain its major challenges to conventional IR theory, but elements from its theoretical insights can be useful in the investigation of Asian international relations if they are matched with a critical eye to the production of ideas and identities in the region. This involves taking theory seriously not only as a tool researchers use to explain the world but also as a way of interrogating assumptions we have as we embark on research projects. Theory matters, in part by signaling what it is we are supposed to notice and what it is that states and leaders are supposed to do. Asia provides a number of rich areas within which to rethink politics by considering the social production of meaning, provided that we do not allow our normative commitments to developments in and ideas about Asia to overwhelm the need to think critically about them.

I will begin by briefly introducing central ideas in constructivist analysis before turning to a set of examples of constructivist research on the Asia-Pacific, focusing especially on national security, political economy, history, transnational social

movements, and institutions. My goal, however, is not to suggest that constructivism is superior to other paradigms such as realism and liberalism. Instead, I only point out that constructivist analyses have encouraged the examination of certain types of issues in East Asian politics that may be both very important and, in some circumstances, illuminated differently by constructivists than they might be by other scholars. I conclude by addressing some of the challenges that constructivists face, which include not only their use of certain standards for proof that differ from those preferred by most political scientists, but also the ways in which constructivist arguments can be exploited for political purposes.

A caveat is necessary. Constructivism is an exceptionally broad intellectual movement, one that shares features with other perspectives, such as the English School and its focus on international society (Reus-Smit 2002; see also Buzan's chapter in this volume), and it boasts a wide array of proponents around the world. My concerns about its place are shaped in part by my own location in American academia, where scholars working in the tradition are normally members of departments of political science. As the discipline in the United States has moved toward increasing emphasis on a specific notion of intellectual rigor—namely, the precision with which independent and dependent variables can be denoted and measured—scholarship on topics such as identity or culture has faced increasing challenges. My sense is that this tension has led many US-based scholars associated with constructivist arguments in the past to undertake more recent research differently, emphasizing additional causal mechanisms rather than fundamental critiques of existing paradigms. With regard to research into Asia's international relations, I argue in part that a focus on paradigmatic critique ensures that these studies exist in a universe parallel to that of major international relations debates, with the key insights of constructivist scholarship having little to no impact on the field. This concern is, I believe, less pressing in European, Australian, and Asian universities, where scholarship on the region often interacts in productive ways with broader disciplines and fields. Rather than focus my argument on the relatively open environments that I know only peripherally, I emphasize the challenges in one particular though significant intellectual arena.

Constructivism in International Relations Theory

For most of the past half-century, the key theories of international politics were based on the idea that the relevant or important actions of states—fighting or not fighting wars, cooperating economically or not—could be understood most effectively by considering the structures of politics, like the international state system or global commodity and financial markets. For a realist, the crucial issue is state security, particularly emphasizing a state's strength relative to other states; patterns of war and

peace, alliance and enmity, could most easily be understood with reference to material power (and see chapter 2). In this view, the United States and China, as the largest global powers, are likely to be rivals rather than friends simply because their size and power make them threats to each other.

For the liberal, the key question might concern economic interests, and particularly how they play out in domestic politics (see chapter 3). Different groups of Americans might have very different ideas about policy toward China, depending on whether they benefit from trade and investment with China or whether they are hurt by it. An investor in a manufacturing business, for example, might want to make sure her company can operate a factory in China due to low costs and access to the Chinese market, whereas a factory worker might be worried primarily about losing his job to a Chinese competitor. In this view, policies might best be understood by looking at the political clout of these competing domestic interests, and who has access to big decisions in Washington. The realist might see the world as a billiards table, with individual countries bumping up against one another, while the liberal might see it as a series of repeated soccer championships, with winners from national contests battling against one another and those results affecting subsequent local matches. Both of these approaches have, in a sense, assumed that human behavior flows out of interests, and that these interests are best understood by looking at one's place in a larger structure. People (or states) behave in certain ways because it is rational to do so: in the threatening environment that realists see, it makes sense to build up as much power as possible; or in the arena of economic opportunity and risk that liberals perceive, you want the rules, agreements, and institutions that provide predictability about the behavior of others and make you richer rather than poorer.

But if we think about the issues that have engaged policymakers, journalists, observers, and activists in Asia over the past two decades, it is clear that much of it might be missed with these lenses. We might think, for example, about the debates over war-time history that have erupted between Japan and its neighbors, including China and Korea. We might consider the ethnic and religious tensions that have shaken up the region, from Indonesia through China and into Central Asia. We might think about the roles of transnational nongovernmental organizations promoting women's rights or environmental protection and their effects on the region's governments (see Part V for further discussion). And we might even think about the boundaries of the region, particularly as marked by regional organization: who is in Asia (or in Europe) and what does such a classification mean for analysts and participants alike?

Although rooted in earlier historical and political theory (see Wendt 1999; Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986), constructivism became a prominent framework only in the 1990s, compelling changes in complex intellectual and political environments alike. The Cold War itself had ended, and with it the peculiar bipolar structure—the United States versus the Soviet Union—that had animated much of the realist research regarding interests, alliances, and deterrence prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to say that the end of the Cold War should have dealt a death blow to realism, as some of its opponents suggested, but rather to note that the international political

environment of the 1990s looked very different than it had just ten years earlier. Rather than examining the logical consequences of submarine-based nuclear weapons or, alternatively, missile defense for the likelihood of nuclear war between the two superpowers, many of the most prominent international relations theorists to emerge in the 1990s turned their gaze toward issues like the spread of global environmental policies, international movements against racial discrimination, and bans on chemical weapons or land mines. For these researchers, focus on the material interests of actors provided little guidance, as did easy reference to ideas and ideology without considering instead how certain ideas—for example, that racism is wrong and states ought not practice it—emerged. We needed to consider the social environment in which these ideas took root and were attached as legitimate concerns to certain kinds of actors.

This meant that the researchers turned instead to the view that the international system is something more than a billiards table on which states bump into one another or a political and intellectual soccer championship in which actors with preexisting interests compete iteratively with one another. It is, in this view, a social system, one in which rules, ordering principles, and legitimate practices are constructed by actors and their interaction. Constructivism might therefore be understood not as a theory of politics that can be tested or falsified but rather as “a framework for thinking about the nature of social life and social interaction, but [which] makes no claims about their specific content” (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001, 393). In this sense, as Finnemore and Sikkink go on to note, constructivism might be viewed as comparable to a broad rational choice perspective: itself not a theory of politics but similarly a framework for approaching the substance of social life even if it is silent about what that content has to be.

Given this orientation, constructivist studies have taken a number of different forms, including variance in terms of the tools as well as the goals of analysis. But much of this has sat uneasily with dominant strands of international relations scholarship, particularly as practiced at major American universities, where rational choice accounts and statistical methods have become dominant elements, if sometimes ill at ease with one another. For example, a number of sociologists writing from the “world polity” approach have used large-*N* statistical studies to examine the global spread of institutions—everything from K-12 education programs to weapons systems—to argue that states, as states, are following scripts for legitimate state practice. While the quantitative sophistication of these studies fits well in international relations scholarship, their tendency to reject the agency of states or their leaders, and to emphasize that states are largely constituted by these global scripts, has militated against wide currency in international relations theory. In contrast, some of the most committed constructivist thinkers, particularly those writing in what Hopf (1998, 181) describes as the “critical constructivist” tradition, have veered close to literary theory, analyzing diplomatic practices and international relations as, in essence, performances that could be “read” for the power relations they contained and illustrated (see, e.g., Ashley 1984; Der Derian 1987). Because the critical approach problematizes the relationship between the substance of international relations and the frames used to analyze it, it has been

in large part a poor fit with the empiricist emphasis of much international relations scholarship: that “the truth is out there,” or that there are causal arguments about war, peace, trade, investment, and so forth that can be demonstrated through testing to be superior to alternative accounts.

Much of the most famous constructivist research has therefore clustered around what Hopf calls “conventional constructivism.” These studies have been less generally concerned with uncovering the hidden power relations in existing theories of politics, or of demonstrating statistically the spread of institutions, than in emphasizing the value of interpretation in analyzing the spread of ideas and their consequences for political action (see also chapter 35). That is, the goal is still a social scientific one of explaining identifiable political outcomes, but it is also one of emphasizing how social actors through their interaction create patterns of meaning that are essential to the basic causal claim. Among these accounts are a number of now-classic studies of the roles of transnational social movements in establishing and spreading ideas about human rights, racism, environmental protection, and justice that have had demonstrable consequences for the enactment of global agreements and conventions (e.g., Risse and Sikkink 1999; Thomas 2001; Klotz 1995; Price 1997). Like the world polity scholars, these researchers have studied the transnational spread of institutions but have been primarily concerned with the development of these ideas as well as the “norm entrepreneurs” in social movements who made the spread possible. Like the critical constructivists, they recognize the importance of interpretation but aim to set up explanations that might be compared effectively to those derived from more commonly used perspectives, like realism and liberalism.

Challenges and Problems

Since constructivist studies began to gain ground in the 1990s, they have been vulnerable to a number of charges by scholars from other traditions in international relations relating to their methodological rigor (Moravscik 1999) and their ideological bias toward progressive causes (Bucher 2007). Desch (1998) consolidated these critiques by suggesting that constructivists tend to cook the books: they explain things that seem obviously connected to issues of culture and ideas but shy away from the hard cases that appear to favor realist accounts and that would provide better tests of the robustness of their theory. But these charges also mask broader tensions in the culture of international relations scholarship, particularly as practiced in the early constructivist days of the 1990s.

Unlike the rough-and-tumble world of most international relations scholars—who were interested in guns, bombs, and money and trade, conversing with statisticians, economists, and behavioral psychologists—constructivists were often more at home talking with scholars in the humanities, cultural history, or anthropology. This meant more than the tendency to quote Jürgen Habermas or, more tellingly, Michel

Foucault rather than Milton Friedman or Gary Becker, though referring to European social theorists instead of American economists was a strong cultural marker. That is, constructivism was sometimes caricatured as being a continental European import to American political science that simultaneously justified relatively idealistic claims about politics while also rendering them nearly incomprehensible.

Additionally, and perhaps more durably, debates about rigor sometimes masked different sets of concerns about what matters in politics. For example, an easy anticonstructivist parlor game would involve referring to a new study of the spread of human rights norms and pointing out, quite rightly, that a number of governments that had signed onto declarations of human rights clearly had no intention to follow through on them. How powerful was a norm that most signatories went on to ignore? The usual response was as obvious to constructivists as it was unsatisfying to critics: the fact that governments felt compelled to sign onto agreements they had no interest in enforcing at home shows that there is in fact a global norm. After all, if human rights were not universally valorized, why not simply refuse to join the agreement? What harm could there be in admitting that one violates human rights if there were not a norm that should not be violated? If there were no norm against torture, a state could proudly engage in it openly without having to develop Orwellian language to label it “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Particularly for realists, this would be sophistry, shifting attention away from the fact that the hard stuff of political reality is still a dog-eat-dog, power-trumps-all world unmediated by the political values and meanings that actors create; it’s just talk. To most constructivists, however, the work of activist networks in spreading norms had not in fact yielded a world free of racism, sexism, violence, or the like, but the existence of these norms had forced states that intended to commit these abuses to deny it.

Indeed, as social theory, constructivism can call attention not to the determined outcomes of political factors but rather to the possibilities created by norms and identities, possibilities that we might miss if we consider only material interests. For example, I myself do all kinds of things that sometimes make little material sense, like writing time-consuming letters of recommendation for former undergraduate students who will never again evaluate my courses, because professors are supposed to do such things. Similarly, states sometimes do things—have national flags and anthems, create national science boards, have K-12 education systems—because that is what states do, not because of their clear functionality or utility. Arguably, individual states also engage in certain practices that can be understood only by considering specific constructions of national identity. As the Japanese government sought to become a normal advanced industrial nation in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, it even began to encourage specific leisure practices among citizens because these were considered “normal” for Americans and West Europeans (Leheny 2003); and debates about identity have been increasingly central to studies of Asia’s international relations.

One area that might be said to unite the divergent approaches to constructivism is, therefore, its social component and its willingness to see political systems as partly cultural. To talk about social meaning and interpretation is to consider the possibility that the world is not simply a series of objective facts equally apparent and obvious to all, but

rather material that people interpret, often collaboratively, and then act upon. In a sense, constructivist approaches need to ask not how political outcomes are created but how the interpretive frames that shape them are constructed, and to engage this question more deeply than a simple stipulation that different groups of people see things differently, or that self-aware political entrepreneurs turn narratives and facts to their own interests. Both of these are true enough, but trite and ultimately unhelpful. After all, any group about which we might wish to generalize in explaining its behavior is likely to be too internally diverse for that generalization to be causally useful. Americans may love their rights and freedoms, but many who support the right to bear arms would be less likely to support another person's freedom to burn the American flag, and vice versa. And a political leader who uses the rhetoric of freedom and rights on a particular issue (guns, abortion, etc.) may be acting strategically, but it is also at least plausible and perhaps likely that she believes much of what she is saying. A competent constructivist approach might well view American support for principles of freedom to be analytically important, but would have to consider carefully how these principles have been developed in open-ended and malleable ways, reflecting contestation and debate rather than unanimity and consensus.

Constructing Asian International Relations

Explaining outcomes in Asia has been a particular challenge for scholars working in the constructivist tradition. On the one hand, the ideological and cultural contexts throughout the region can provide rich fodder for challenging the prevailing assumption that material interests trump ideas and identity in driving politics. On the other hand, however, using Asia (or Asian nations) as challenges to conventional Western assessments of international relations theory also risks naturalizing political actors and contexts in the region—taking it for granted, for example, that there is something stable called “Chinese culture” or “Indian identity,” rather than investigating critically the changing meaning that these categories might have (for further discussion see Acharya in this volume).

But Asia, particularly Pacific Asia, has been a draw for constructivist scholarship. The region is not by any means dominant in constructivist research, that role perhaps being played most strongly by the European nations often seen as generating international norms or by a European Union that has crafted a regional identity that transcends national boundaries (see, e.g., Checkel 2001). But within just a few years, from the mid-1990s through the early 2000s, a group of highly visible studies of the region's international relations drew clear inspiration from constructivist theorizing and suggested that interpretive methods were essential to understanding core developments in the area. These did not mean that most constructivists became Asia specialists or vice versa, but provided at least some sense that constructivist tools might be useful and valid in the examination of East Asia's international relations.

In their very different but frequently cited accounts, both Berger (1998) and Katzenstein (1996) sought to explain Japanese security policy as the outcome of domestic cultural norms; for Berger, this meant the legacy of “antimilitarism” in postwar Japanese politics, and for Katzenstein it was the consequence of consensual norms in Japan’s democratic legislative system. At roughly the same time, Johnston (1995) examined classical Chinese strategic thought and showed that discursive traditions played a role in shaping subsequent policies, suggesting that China’s realist orientation owed a great deal to the long-term cultural construction of views of security. And Amitav Acharya’s highly regarded study of ASEAN as a security community paid particular attention to the development of norms that dictated the interactions of member states: norms often quite different from those apparent elsewhere, such as in Western Europe (Acharya 2001). In other words, some of the most visible and highly regarded early constructivist studies dealt specifically with East Asia, offering both a pathway for younger researchers to work on the region from the constructivist toolkit while ensuring that graduate students with an interest in East Asia would likely be exposed to the major tenets of constructivist theory.

The succeeding years have witnessed highly uneven growth in the use of constructivist theory in studies of Asia, particularly in the pages of major international journals. Studies of Japan have perhaps been among the most heavily affected, possibly because of the prominence of Katzenstein and Berger as pioneers of explicitly constructivist empirical research on security policy (an alternative perspective is represented in chapter 19 in this volume). A few studies (e.g., Leheny 2003; Oros 2009) turned, as Katzenstein and Berger had in different ways, to the development of domestic cultural or political norms that shaped the country’s foreign policy choices. A much larger number, frequently with more avowedly constructivist goals, looked at the development of international norms, often through the transnational activist networks imagined by Risse (1999) and by Keck and Sikkink (1998). While nuanced and substantively different from one another, these studies have often had a similar shape: international activists and NGOs, along with allies within Japan, push for legislative change to stop sexual abuse, protect whales, halt the production of land mines, promote gender equality, or protect minority rights. But these are met with substantial political resistance, often from conservative forces claiming to want to protect Japan from foreign/Western transformation (see e.g., Gurowitz 1999; Leheny 2006; Flowers 2009; Miyaoka 2004; Iida 2004; Chan-Tiberghien 2004; Hirata and Sato 2008; Hirata 2004). In each case, the focus is clearly national with the relevant backdrop as the global: a Japan marked by powerful domestic norms that shape its external interactions, or a progressive global community pounding on the gate of a putatively closed and conservative Japan.

While perhaps not as common as in the English-language work on Japan, constructivism has played an important role in the studies of Chinese and Korean foreign policy as well. Johnston’s seminal research on Chinese strategic culture and subsequent (2008) work on the country’s socialization within international institutions have become touchstones for much of the research on Chinese foreign policy, just as Carlson’s (2005) investigation of Chinese constructions of sovereignty and Callahan’s

(2004) research on transnational ideological flows in China have been important elements of recent debates. The explosion of studies of Chinese foreign policy in the past fifteen years, however, has not been a constructivist project to the same degree that work on Japan has been, especially with robust realist and liberal studies vying alongside the innumerable atheoretical policy studies of contemporary Chinese diplomacy. Research on Korean international relations has been similarly diverse. For example, Suh's (2007) examination of the construction of postwar identity through alliance politics sits alongside a wide variety of realist and institutional accounts of diplomacy on the Korean peninsula (see also chapter 22).

Studies of South Asia and Central Asia that draw implicitly or explicitly from constructivist theories have been limited in number but rich in diversity. Chatterjee (2005) deploys a constructivist framework, not to explain foreign policy or the effects of global norms, but rather to consider the development and management of ethnic conflict in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. More explicitly, Sasikumar (2007) has suggested that constructions of proper behavior and management have shaped conceptions of India's nuclear strategy. While one might look at the complicated identity politics and security strategies of Central Asia and conclude that constructivism might be a valuable framework for investigating them, analysts examining the region have at times pronounced the perspective inapplicable to the region's hard power politics (Xu 2010) or, more interestingly, noted a distinct reluctance to consider national identities as constructed (Laruelle 2008; see also chapter 25).

Significantly, constructivism has also made perhaps its clearest inroads into studies of Southeast Asia, and the debates surrounding the theory there are the richest and most telling of any Asian subregion. Some of the research maps onto the "global norms versus domestic politics" frame that has played such a powerful role in studies of Japan (e.g., Gurowitz 2000), but the more visible and central research has been similar to Acharya's pathbreaking work on norms in ASEAN's security community. Following an early article by Acharya (1997), Busse (1999) argued that the region's norms of cooperation and noninterference had helped to construct a different kind of security system than realist theories might predict. Acharya himself (2009) has followed up his work with a major study of the development of governance norms within ASEAN, arguing that the region's institutional evolution has involved the development of norms that have come to shape its regional identity. With somewhat different inflections but broadly similar concerns, Ba (2009, 2010) and Katsumata (2011) have also offered important and well-regarded studies of the development of norms regarding regional governance and cooperation among ASEAN members (see also Ba in this volume). These arguments have not been uncontroversial. Emmerson (2005) suggests that continuing developments in the region may undermine the confidence one might have in the defining power of ideas of regional identity, and Jones and Smith (2002, 2007) have accused constructivists of engaging in wishful thinking: that they are so committed to supporting a regional identity that can transcend the divisions of nation-states that they believe in the strength of ASEAN even when the evidence suggests that the subregional organization is relatively weak.

Leaving aside the question of whether Jones and Smith are correct in their criticism of the constructivists working on East Asia—and I think that they give up much of their credibility by referring to ASEAN as an “imitation” community and the constructivist scholars who investigate it as participants in a “delusion” (2002)—they raise an important cautionary point, one that should resonate with the earlier discussion of constructivism more broadly. Using an intellectual framework that frequently relies on interpretive methods to draw out the changing rules of the international system as well as the actors involved in this redefinition, constructivists have struggled with the normative implications of their work, and in particular with the fact that many of the outcomes they have aimed to explain seem desirable and just: the delegitimation of apartheid, bans on land mines, antitrafficking conventions, and the like. It is not entirely unsurprising that scholars working from the same toolkit might be accused of examining the promise of Southeast Asian regionalism because they want to see it, in the same way that researchers on human rights might be morally invested in their success.

A second critique of the dominant trends in the first generation of constructivist literature on Southeast Asia, however, challenges these accounts because they are not constructivist enough. In seeking to explain the development of norms in ASEAN, Tan (2006) argues that constructivists have tended to take for granted the prior existence and identities of states and nations. That is, the constructivists working on Southeast Asia have followed the conventional constructivist logics that aim to fit their analyses alongside mainstream realist and liberal accounts, and implicitly rejected some of the implications of the claim that political reality is socially constructed. Tan identifies “state-centrism” as one of the key problems, by which he means the acceptance of states as the key actors in international relations, with the consequence that national or state identities are, in a sense, naturalized, and much of the analytical work goes into explaining the move from them to regional identities that overlap or transcend them. For Tan, this is a problem precisely because a constructivist approach should assume that even those identities are socially constructed, contingent, and mutable, making it logically problematic to take their prior existence for granted when discussing the construction of regional or transnational orders. Tan, however, suggests that this problem is not particular to constructivist studies of Southeast Asia, but rather one that is broadly shared with a number of other major IR theorists working with a “state-centric” form of constructivism.¹

The Risks of an Unreconstructed Asia

Indeed, it is largely the vitality of constructivist work on Southeast Asia that is responsible for the substantial volume of productive debate from studies of that region, which throws into sharper relief than research on other parts of Asia both the promise

and perils of constructivist theory. In broader international relations theory, it has not taken long for the constructivist turn to turn back on itself. Some of this may be because constructivism is a victim of its own qualified success. While a few proponents of critical theory in international relations research had made important contributions before the 1990s, it was the unruly constructivist framing that drew a number of them into a broad third leg that could conceivably challenge realism (or neorealism) and liberalism (or neoliberalism) as main theoretical orientations in the field. In the United States, for example, constructivism quickly replaced Marxism as the theoretical strand likely to receive a week of lip service in a graduate field seminar before students moved back to more conventional studies. Perhaps more important, however, a number of key concepts that are central to constructivist thinking began to shape the broader IR field as well, from a wide recognition that identities are mutable but may be causally important (see Abdelal et al. 2006) to the willingness to consider transnational movement members as political actors, even if within more rationalist accounts.

And so some of the recent work by major thinkers often associated with constructivism's rise has placed relatively little emphasis on—and sometimes scarcely even mentioned—the framework at all, whether in Finnemore's (2009) discussion of the social implications of unipolarity or Katzenstein's (2012) ambitious reading of civilizations in world politics. Perhaps this reflects the demolition of the field, whether one views that as the unwelcome victory by number-crunchers and rational choice theorists at top American political science departments or, alternatively, as the happy outcome of a wide recognition that most practitioners of constructivism were too methodologically incautious to ensure a sustained dent in the increasingly rigorous world of political science. But I think it may speak instead to a weariness best summed up in David Lake's (2011) argument that “‘isms’ are evil.” That is, the paradigmatic debates that long animated much of international relations theory may have been replaced by something else: an epistemological battlefield in which it matters less whether one's key assumptions flow from realism, liberalism, or constructivism, but rather whether one has the tools necessary to answer interesting research questions. As Lake is aware, this does not create a completely level playing field, as the increasing commitment at top political science departments in the United States to training in methodology usually steers clear of interpretive or narrative methods, focusing instead on various tools associated with rigorous statistical testing, field experimentation, and formal modeling. But it does suggest that for most of the major figures in the field, there is little to be gained at this point from planting a constructivist flag on top of the edifice of one's research design and firing away at supposed competitors in other fields.

Instead, we see an increasing commitment to questions—such as Finnemore's investigation of the social production of unipolarity or Katzenstein's interest in internally contested but still powerful civilizational frames—that likely would have been difficult to articulate in mainstream international relations theory had there not first been a critical effort to engage difficult concepts like culture and identity by starting with the assumption that they are socially constructed, malleable, and contingent. And I would

suggest that some of the best and most promising recent work on East Asian international relations displays precisely this kind of commitment, informed by conceptualizations that emerged in part with constructivism but without focusing primarily on which -ism the study promotes.

Recent books by David Kang (2003, 2010) on hierarchy in East Asian diplomatic history and the consequences for the region of China's rise explicitly aim to challenge key assumptions in international relations theory, but they avoid any kind of firm commitment to constructivism. The way, however, in which they configure both the implications of hierarchy and the cultural role of Confucianism is telling. On the one hand, any kind of causal argument about Confucianism in contemporary East Asia would have to be viewed with considerable skepticism by most constructivists, as it relies on the treatment of a diffuse set of classical texts—themselves reinterpreted over the course of centuries and deployed strategically in myriad ways throughout the region—as fixed and immutable: Confucianism says X, so Confucians (whoever they might be) do X. Kang's point, however, is nearly precisely this, focusing on Confucianism not as A Thing but rather as a malleable intellectual frame that constrained outcomes and conferred legitimacy in ways that suggest at least the possibility of different views of power in medieval and early modern East Asia. Similarly, He's (2009) analysis of the production of memory in China and Japan regarding atrocities during World War II avoids constructivism-versus-rationalism debates while drawing on understandings of culture and ideology that give some causal force to ideas themselves. These critical and discursive readings of culture differ dramatically from the ways in which political culture was discussed two decades ago, and I would argue that constructivism—following logics that have taken strong root in the humanities—has enabled these more sophisticated approaches to crucial political problems.

In an excellent overview of the state of the field, Johnston (2012) argues that the international relations of East Asia pose a number of serious challenges to the IR field more broadly. He calls particular attention to three areas of research with clear implications for international relations theory: the limited balancing activities taking place despite China's rise; the role of regional institutions (particularly those associated with ASEAN); and tensions surrounding historical memory. As is clear from other chapters in this volume, one need not be a constructivist to deal with these topics, and Johnston himself mentions constructivism only in passing. But it is equally clear that part of the conceptual vocabulary of constructivism—that Asia is, in a sense, what people make of it—has profoundly affected the terrain for all of these discussions. Whether we consider Kang's view of the malleability but relevance of ideational factors in China's rise, Acharya's arguments about the creation of regional identity through institutional development changing norms, or He's suggestion that memory is constructed and not simply remembered, we see that three crucial areas shaped by constructivist or quasi-constructivist frameworks might be important to IR theory, not because they show that constructivism is right, but because they tell us things that could alter our confidence in widely accepted causal arguments.

Commitments and Conclusions

And here lies a dilemma for scholars considering the use of constructivist arguments in the study of Asia. The days in which case studies illustrating paradigmatic fights between constructivism and realism (or liberalism) might serve as the basis for major international relations publications are perhaps over, with constructivists having won a seat at the table but having failed to upend more conventional rationalist approaches. Savvy graduate students and junior scholars working on Asia will likely want to turn to research questions in which the rich empirical substance of regional international relations can challenge prevailing assumptions about how the world works, and constructivist tools may serve—as they have for others—in exploring the ways in which ideas and identities help to shape important and distinctive political outcomes.

Epistemologically, however, it is not a risk-free proposition. Constructivism draws its power not from its realization that ideas and identities matter, but rather from its recognition that these ideas and identities are socially constructed and reproduced, and that they must be investigated with unbridled rigor. And this means that whatever our normative commitments to the region, to the sense that there may be something quasi-imperial about the expectation that theories developed in other regions should work perfectly in different contexts, we have to approach it with the critical eye we demand of scholars working on more time-honored topics. We must accordingly problematize the conceptual categories of Asia, India, Southeast Asia, Japan, China, Central Asia, Indonesia, Uzbekistan, or Korea with the same skepticism we would attach to assumptions that the European Union represents a model international institution to which others should aspire, or that America's role in Asia noncontroversially represents democracy, liberty, or whatever else one might make of American culture. Any constructivist worth his or her salt should be able to critique the simple idea of "Asian values" as a cohesive social form in the region. But in considering, for example, the spread of international norms into the region, we have to be equally careful to avoid construction of a traditional/authentic Japan, Korea, India, or any other place that existed prior to the interventions of transnational activists, international organizations, or even something we might generically label "the West."

Constructivism has helped to shape international relations theory and to carve out spaces to consider what lessons Asia might have for the rest of the world. In deploying its tools, even those scholars most committed to investigating political phenomena, causal chains, and religious or intellectual frames that seem distinctive to the region should remember that Asia is, like the rest of the world, socially constructed: a conceptual category to which people attach contested meanings. It is, like the rest of the world, a moving target, and constructivism's promise lies not in reifying Asia or its myriad nations but rather in problematizing their experiences and using them to destabilize what is all too often taken for granted about the ways in which "normal" countries interact.