

# Culture and global thought: Chinese international theory in the making

## Cultura y pensamiento global: una teoría china de las relaciones internacionales

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**Abstract:** *In this article, the author examines the study of international relations in China, a discipline that has proliferated as the country has opened up to the rest of the world. He examines the three main trends of international thought that have become most widespread: the first, which the author calls the obverse approach, situates Chinese thought as the theoretical basis for considering a genuine worldism, thanks to traditional concepts such as Tianxia and Confucian family bonds. Secondly, there is the reverse approach, which applies Western theoretical paradigms to the concept of power in ancient Chinese thinkers; this is a theory that emphasises the hierarchy of the international system and seeks international Chinese dominance. Finally, the third is more interactive, and which constructs an intercultural, thoughtful and critical dialogue, at the same time as applying autochthonous conceptual frameworks such as Confucian relationism, and foreign ones, such as rationalism.*

**Keywords:** *China, international relations, culture, paradigms, globalisation*

**Resumen:** En este trabajo el autor aborda el estudio de las relaciones internacionales en China, una disciplina que ha proliferado a medida que el país se ha abierto al mundo. Examina las tres principales corrientes de pensamiento internacional que más se han extendido: una primera, que califica de *enfoque anverso*, sitúa al pensamiento chino como base teórica para pensar un mundo «mundializado», gracias a conceptos tradicionales como el *Tianxia* o el vínculo familiar confuciano. En segundo lugar, encontramos un *enfoque reverso*, que aplica los paradigmas teóricos occidentales al concepto de poder en los antiguos pensadores chinos; es una teoría que recalca la jerarquía del sistema internacional y busca la hegemonía china internacional. Finalmente, el tercero es más *interactivo*, y construye un diálogo intercultural, reflexivo y crítico, que aplica simultáneamente marcos conceptuales autóctonos, como puede ser el relacionismo confuciano, y extranjeros, como puede ser el racionalismo.

**Palabras clave:** China, relaciones internacionales, cultura, paradigma, globalización

The theoretical inquiry of China's international studies did not begin until the early 1980s, when the national strategy of reform and opening-up started. One of the most important events of the 1980s was that new ideas in humanities and social sciences in the West, and especially in the United States, were pouring into China's intellectual communities, helping to establish or re-establish most of the academic disciplines, International Relations included.

As I have discussed elsewhere, there was eagerness and enthusiasm among Chinese scholars to learn, to understand, and to interpret, and as a result, the three decades since the early 1980s witnessed great progress in translating Western IR classics into Chinese, writing textbooks in accordance with the mainstream theories (and especially those from the United States), and developing international relations as an academic discipline (Qin, 2007: 313-340). If we look back at the progress made in the last 30 years, the achievements are remarkable. There have been studies in almost every area of international relations, from major power relations to structures of the international system, from economic interdependence to regional integration, and from international institutions to global governance (Wang, 2002). The use of theories has been wide-ranging: realism, liberalism, social constructivism, the English School, Marxism, feminism, etc., including almost all the possible theories in the Western repertoire (Qin, 2008: 306-343). Chinese scholars study these theories, teach them in their respective institutions, introduce them into the Chinese IR community, and apply them in their analysis of international affairs and Chinese foreign policy.

At the same time, Chinese scholars have expressed concern over two questions. The first is whether it is reasonable to use exclusively Western theories to explain world affairs in general, and non-Western practices in particular. Western International Relations theory has sometimes failed to explain the reality in our world. Realism, for example, was unable to predict and explain the end of the Cold War, and the "back to the future" prediction, which Professor John Mearsheimer made immediately after the end of the Cold War, has so far not materialised in Europe (Mearsheimer, 1990: 5-56). Moreover, the past few decades have seen a mega-trend of globalisation, which has enabled many of the non-Western nations to join the international community and to become increasingly important on the world stage, all of which represents a major transformation in world politics that has made the existing Western IR theory far from adequate when trying to explaining their behaviour. Theory based upon the practices and experiences of the European integration, for example, seems inadequate when applied to the East Asian regional processes (Acharya, 2008: 115-140). It is true that there are some abnormal observations, but it is more likely that these abnormal events are not merely as such, waiting for a Lakatos improvement, but that they are simply beyond the reach of existing Western mainstream theories.

The second is whether culture matters in the construction of international relations theories. Mainstream American international relations theories often claim to be universal, but in fact they are rooted in American culture, practices, and problems. That is why International Relations is called “an American social science,” as Professor Stanley Hoffmann has pointed out (Hoffman, 1995: 215). If we agree that social theory is heavily dependent upon the history, experience, and practice of a people, we need to recognise that culture matters in theoretical innovation and evolution. As I have argued previously, theory required a certain degree of universality, as the rational choice theory has demonstrated, but any social theory starts locally from the everyday practice of the people of a cultural community. In the study of international systems, therefore, culture matters. Studies have already shown that actors’ mindsets, behaviours, strategies, norms, institutions, and worldviews differed conspicuously in the Chinese-centric, Tokugawa and Westphalian systems, which in turn led to their different approaches of governance and types of performance (Kang, 2007).

The questions have thus brought “cultures” in its plural form back into the study of international relations, for there is a near consensus among Chinese scholars that Western International Relations theory is not sufficient, and that culture does matter in developing social theory. New ideas and new actors have appeared, and behind them are new and different cultures. Even within the Western culture, numerous subcultures have appeared where you can find different ideas and views, and Emanuel Adler argues that a likely civilizational clash will be between Europe as a post-modern normative power and others that are modernity-oriented, including the United States (Adler, 2010: 67-90). At the same time, China, India, and other non-Western countries, which have cultures and practices clearly different from those of the West, have become important players in world affairs, and their ideas and worldviews will play an important role in shaping the world and global order.

Chinese scholars have made great efforts to explore this field, as many of them believe that Chinese culture can help to enrich International Relations theory. On the one hand, they are continuing to study Western IR theory, paying great academic attention to any new thinking in the West and trying to introduce it into China; on the other hand, they are not satisfied with a situation that I term “a Western discourse in the Chinese context,” or rather, merely borrowing existing Western IR theories to explain world affairs and Chinese international behaviour, and they have begun a persistent search for something that can help them develop international thoughts. The major source they turn to is culture, the Chinese culture that has developed within a 5000-year civilization and which has made the Chinese the way they are today.

In this article I will discuss three main international ways of thinking that have developed largely over the last decade. All of them attempt to go back to the Chinese tradition, culture, philosophy, and practice for their theoretical nutrition, or in other words, they all recognise the importance of culture and seek to reconstruct in some

way cultural and philosophical ideas into contemporary international theory. However, even though their ideational nutrition comes from Chinese culture, the ways they are theoretically reconstructed are very different. Here, a highly relevant concept is “*geyi*,” or “analogical interpretation”, which means using a certain conceptual schema to explain and interpret reality. We often see three approaches of analogical interpretation: *obverse*, *reverse*, and *interactive*<sup>1</sup>. Taking Chinese IR study as an example, the obverse analogical interpretation refers to the interpretation of reality through an established Chinese conceptual system; the reverse analogical interpretation, very much to the contrary, employs a foreign conceptual system to interpret reality, including, for instance, the interpretation of Chinese elements by employing a foreign theoretical framework; the interactive interpretation constructs an inter-cultural dialogue in a reflective and critical way, and co-employs indigenous and alien conceptual frameworks, for instance, using both a Chinese conceptual system, such as Confucian relationism, and a Western conceptual system, such as rationalism, to analyse social reality (Huang, 2006).

## The obverse approach: a theory on the *Tianxia* system

The use of the traditional Chinese conceptual schema or worldview to understand problems we face today is the obverse analogical interpretation, of which Professor Zhao Tingyang is most representative. He has put forward a theory on the *Tianxia* system, or a system of “all-under-heaven” which he believes is a genuine, responsible system for the whole world rather than just for nation-states. In an attempt to shed light on what we should turn today’s world into, he uses the Chinese philosophical and conceptual schema and goes back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BC), arguing that the *Tianxia* system created and practiced at that time was the ideal world system. Three views are particularly significant in Zhao’s theory: the *Tianxia* system created by the Chinese practices, its ordering principle of family ties, and its inspirational potential to develop a genuine global system for today’s world.

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1. The concept of “*geyi*” is borrowed from Liu Xiaogan, but with slight revisions. He discusses obverse analogical interpretation and reverse analogical interpretation. Here I add one more concept: interactive analogical interpretation. This refers to the mutual and inclusive borrowing between conceptual systems. See Liu Xiaogan, 2006.

## Chinese practice in the Zhou Dynasty: the creation of the *Tianxia* system

Zhao Tingyang's aforementioned study is based on his understanding of the system of the Zhou Dynasty, a Chinese dynasty that existed 3,000 years ago before China became a unified and unitary empire. The dynasty before the Zhou was called the Shang, and was formed of an alliance of many tribes that lasted several hundred years. It was a time of great disorder and chaos. There were numerous tribes of different sizes and types, each highly autonomous. As a result, the Zhou, a small tribe in the Shang alliance, rebelled and overthrew the Shang Dynasty. When the Zhou had become the ruling tribe, the major problem they faced was how to establish and maintain order among all the tribes. Many tribes were much larger than the Zhou, and therefore using coercive force would not work. In other words, the hegemonic approach was doomed to failure. Zhao argues that the Zhou Dynasty succeeded in maintaining legitimacy, order, and peace because it established an all-under-heaven system (*Tianxia*), a universal system inclusive of all nations, and a world of, and for all peoples (Zhao, forthcoming publication). Conceptually, the *Tianxia* system had three underlying ideas. Firstly, that the solutions to problems in world politics depend on a universally-accepted world system rather than on coercive force; secondly, such a system is politically justified if its institutional arrangements benefit all peoples of all nations; and thirdly, such a system works if it creates harmony among all nations and civilizations (Ibid.). In short, it should be a system – in the real sense – of the world, rather than of the states.

The Zhou Dynasty managed to establish such a system. Zhao describes the major features of the *Tianxia* system during the Zhou period: it was an open network, or a world-home, consisting of a general world government and others for sub-states. The former was responsible for generally keeping order, as well as being in charge of the rules and laws and arbitrating in conflict among the sub-states; meanwhile the latter, which were highly autonomous, were responsible for their respective internal political, economic, social, and cultural affairs. In addition, people enjoyed complete freedom of movement, working and living in whatever sub-states, as they wished (Ibid.). It is argued that the *Tianxia* system that was established in the Zhou Dynasty reflects a genuine worldism, a situation of unity in diversity. By definition, it is effectively the politics of the world, and is thus essentially different from the Greek practice of *polis*, which is merely the politics of states. It is also highly relevant today, because globalisation has created a worldwide space that covers all dimensions, and where efforts based on nation-states are doomed to failure.

## Confucian Ideal of society: family ties

An all-under-heaven system, with the basic value of harmony, had maintained peace for 800 years and was highly praised by Confucius himself, who called it “Wang-dao (the Way of the King)” in contrast to “Ba-dao (the Way of the Overlord)”. Since the family was the basic and most important unit of society in traditional Chinese society, Confucius argued that decent politics and good governance should be based upon family ties. The ideal type of family represents a living space where all calculation of self-interest is minimal, and where the atmosphere is completely harmonious, and thereby favourable for the unconditional development of cooperation, caring, and responsibility between the different members (Zhao, 2005: 66-67).

If the principles used to manage relations between the members of a family are applied for managing relations between members of society, the end result tends to be a harmonious society, one which encourages caring and responsibility among all its members. Zhao’s argument is that in traditional Chinese society, the principles used within a family also apply for all social groupings, including the state and the world as a whole; thus in traditional Chinese thinking, the same set of principles are universally applicable. This forms a sharp contrast with the realist argument that the morality of a state should be different from that of a person, and that “universal moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation” (Morgenthau, 1961: 10). The *Tianxia* system was an enlarged family, and its organisational principle was family ties. As he emphatically puts it, Confucianism takes the family as the basic unit in society, as “it is inclusive of the best of all possible relations, such as love, harmony, mutual aid, and reciprocal obligations, therefore [it is] championed as the qualified archetype of social systems. Confucianism therefore insists that states and all-under-heaven should be better developed by mapping the model of the family, inheriting the harmonious gene of family ties, so as to maximise the possibilities of universal cooperation and peace” (Zhao, forthcoming publication).

An important feature of these family ties is their completeness. Since *Tianxia* is a complete system, both physically and institutionally, there is no dichotomy between the self and the other, and therefore the alter ego question is not a question at all. For a system called all-under-heaven, everywhere and everyone is within rather than without, so that only degrees of closeness exist. Because of this principle, there should be no discrimination, and everyone should have the right to participate in world affairs. In other words, the right to govern was open to everyone in the *Tianxia* system. Traditional Chinese dynasties had no clear geographical and cultural boundaries, and ethnic groups – different from the Han people – not only ruled China but were also recognised as legitimate (Zhao, 2005: 49-61). Such a system based upon the principle of family ties provides an order that is much more suitable for the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the empire or hegemonic system that is based largely on coercive power.

## Global issues, a “non-world”, and a renewed *Tianxia* system

The *Tianxia* system and its organising principle of family ties constitute the ideal type of society and good governance for a space that is the whole world. It is a Chinese model that existed 3,000 years ago and was created during a time of war and chaos. Zhao uses this model as his conceptual and analytical reference point for studying the world today. He defines today’s world as a non-world, meaning that philosophically and institutionally it is not a world at all (Zhao, 2005). The existing institutions have been created by the states and for the states, based on the self-interests of the states, and therefore cannot go beyond the boundary of the nation-states. Globalisation has gone worldwide, but no world exists yet, institutionally and philosophically speaking, apart from something that has been given that geographical name. Kantian perpetual peace and its modern version of democratic peace cannot solve the problems of a globalising world, because it fails to overcome the cultural and spiritual conflicts, the conflicts between different cultures and civilizations. The “federation of free states”, for example, is a necessary condition for perpetual peace and cooperation, but it is not realistic with regard to other states that are not recognised as “free states” because they are not on “our” side. In which case it is legitimate to alienate them and even declare war on them. Kant is wrong because he does not offer a view that covers the whole world. And the same applies with Western philosophy (Zhao, 2005).

Thus, the root cause for the inability to solve global problems is that there is no genuine worldview, no view that takes the whole world into consideration and that refuses to think locally or regionally at the cost of the rest of the globe. The modern international system since Westphalia has been more or less a Hobbesian jungle, in which coercive power dominates, and where everyone is fighting for their own interests. The world is understood and interpreted by Western philosophy as a mere geographical concept, an empty shell, in which the state is the actor, who cannot see beyond its national interests and cannot understand the long-term interests of the world as a whole. In the literature of political studies in general, and in the most influential works of International Relations theory in particular, self-interest is fully justified, and therefore the world-ness of the world is missing. Zhao argues that such a world shows an absence of a decent philosophy of the world, a worldview that is responsible for all members of the world.

The only solution lies in reconstructing a new all-under-heaven system, a creatively renewed model of the Zhou Dynasty. To make the non-world into a real world, or to make the world into a *Tianxia* system—this is the fundamental requirement for any solution to the global problems we face. It provides a good historical example for establishing true worldism, a worldview that considers the whole world rather

than just the local, and which considers global common interests before local ones. It works according to the principle of family ties, thereby creating a world of universal family ties where hostility is converted into hospitality, harmony prevails, and nobody makes enemies. The highest achievement is: “a mind at peace, free from the trap of thinking in terms of war, enemy, winner and loser. It is a different political mentality, theoretically speaking, from those of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, Freud, Schmitt, Morgenthau, and Huntington, and different in a practical sense from the hegemonic order of Pax Romana, Christian cosmopolitanism and democratic peace under US leadership” (Ibid.: 7).

## **The reverse approach: science, power, and hegemony**

In the past three decades, Chinese IR research has largely followed the American model and the three mainstream IR theories (namely, realism, liberalism, and constructivism) that have dominated academic studies in the Chinese international relations community. By the late 2000s, most of the theory-oriented research has used American IR theories to construct their analytical framework<sup>2</sup>. I term this type of research “reverse analogical interpretation”, for it attempts to understand world affairs and Chinese international behaviour by using an imported conceptual and theoretical schema. A typical example is that of Professor Yan Xuetong and his colleagues, who not only try to interpret international affairs by using American mainstream IR theories, but are also the forerunners in setting up an analytical framework based upon American IR standards and then use them to interpret the ideas of the pre-Qin (before 221 BC) Chinese thinkers such as Laozi, Confucius and Mencius. The study by Yan and Song has focused on three aspects: firstly, they set up a scientific framework using American social science standards; secondly, they try to explain how ancient Chinese masters understand power; and thirdly, they seek to identify strategies for gaining hegemony in the international system.

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2. Theory-related studies that apply the three mainstream American IR theories, realism, liberalism, and constructivism, occupied a dominant place. A survey of the theory-related journal articles from 1978 to 2008 shows that 45% in 1978-1990, 69% in 1991-2000, and 75% in 2001-2007 use American IR theories. See Qin Yaqing, 2008.

## Ancient Chinese ideas in a contemporary American scientific framework

Yan and his colleagues have studied seven ancient Chinese thinkers, including Guanzi, Laozi, Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Xunzi, and Hanfeizi, all of whom lived in the “Warring States” period of Chinese history, a chaotic era more than 2,000 years ago, but also a most prosperous time that allowed “a hundred schools of thought to blossom”. Yan believes in science and the scientific method of studying international politics, and argues, “If we do not need a Chinese school of physics and chemistry, why should we need a Chinese school of IR theory?” (Yan, 2001). Therefore, he has set up an analytical framework based upon American social science to study the thinking of those masters.

The framework contains two dimensions. The first is the Western philosophical dichotomous division of materialism vs. idealism, in which three categories can be identified: conceptual (idealistic) determinism, material determinism, and dualism (meaning something in between materialism and idealism). The second dimension is the analytical levels. In accordance with David Singer and the behavioural social scientists, they distinguish between three levels: the system, the state, and the individual<sup>3</sup>. Using these two forms of categorisation, Yan places the seven ancient Chinese masters: Laozi and Mozi are conceptual determinists and view things at the systemic level; Guanzi is a dualist, focusing his attention on the state level; Hanfeizi is a materialist and also a state-centred thinker; both Confucius and Mencius are conceptual determinists and pay their attention to the individual; while Xunzi is a dualist and focuses on the state level (Ibid.: 26).

Confucius and his student Mencius, for example, are conceptual determinists and examine inter-state relations at the individual level, because they “believe that the basic influence on state relations is the moral outlook of the ruler” (Ibid.: 31). Yan cites a long passage by Mencius: “If the Son of Heaven is not benevolent, he cannot retain what is within the four seas. If the feudal lords are not benevolent, they cannot retain their state altars of grain. If ministers are not benevolent, they cannot retain their ancestral temples. If the officials and ordinary folk are not benevolent, they cannot retain their arms or legs”. (Ibid.). Guanzi and Hanfeizi are considered to be materialists, and conduct their analyses at the state level because they argue that the relative power of the state is crucially important.

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3. American mainstream IR theory is the model for such a categorisation, for Yan argues that *realism* is material determinism, constructivism conceptual determinism, and institutionalism something in between, or dualism. Ibid., p. 73.

To some extent, Hanfeizi is very much a modern-day American realist or an ancient Chinese Morgenthau, for he “believes that human beings are selfish; hence conflict cannot be eliminated, and only if a state is strong can it uphold state interests” (Ibid.: 32).

## **Power: moral and material**

Since Yan admits that he is a believer in realism, power is the focus of his study of the ancient Chinese thinkers. As with most other international studies, one particularly conspicuous aspect of his study is the elements of power. Ancient Chinese thinkers, according to Yan, generally believe that political, economic, and military factors are the most important power elements (Ibid.: 53). Of these power elements (he argues) Chinese masters hold that political power is the most important one, and, interpreting Xunzi, he says, “...political strength plays a role as the basis for economic and military strength. He [Xunzi] believes that whatever the strength of one’s economic or military might, they are meaningless without the foundation of political strength” (Ibid.: 78). To Yan’s understanding, political power is the ability of rulers and ministers to mobilise resources. It is the power of political manipulation, or “the power of resources used by military power, economic power, and cultural power” (Ibid.: 117, 138, 101). Guanzi is cited as summarising political power as the “technique of doing”; as the master says, “those who are called sage kings by people in the world know the techniques of doing... [Those] who are not esteemed by people in the world do not know the techniques of doing. For one who is capable of doing, a small [state] becomes great, a weak [state] powerful” (Ibid.: 56).

One point that stands out in the ancient Chinese masters’ discussion on power differs conspicuously from that of Western international thinkers; that is, political power belongs more to the category of soft, non-material power, and should have a firm moral basis. In fact, most of the Chinese masters discussed by Yan are idealists, and only one (Hanfeizi) is somewhat of a thorough materialist. For Yan, morality is the core of political power, firstly, because it gives the power holder legitimacy, without which, for example, an hegemon cannot last long. As Daniel Bell has noted, Yan uses the cases of Great Britain and France to support the hypothesis that morality is crucial, arguing that the former’s colonist policy was gentler than the latter’s, and therefore met with less opposition in its colonies (Bell, in Ibid.: 10). Secondly, political power is reflected by whether a ruler is able to select and employ capable ministers and officials who possess the ‘technique of doing’. Thus, “If China’s ascension strategy cannot attract more first-class people than the United States can, then it will be difficult to implement a national resurgence” (Bell, in Ibid.: 10).

On the other hand, Yan stresses the importance of material power such as military might. He cited Guanzi to argue that to maintain a stable international order, both material power and moral thought are necessary. Either one alone is insufficient. “If virtue does not extend to the weak and small, if authority does not overawe the strong and great, if military expeditions cannot bring all-under-heaven to submission, then it is unrealistic to seek to be a hegemon over the feudal lords” (Ibid., 30). It is with this logic that Yan warns us that today “China should rely mainly on its own military construction to maintain its own peaceful environment. Given that the concept of peace cannot yet become the external security policy of all states, and given that international order and norms are not yet able to effectively prevent war breaking out, China has no option but to increase its military capacity to maintain its own peaceful environment” (Ibid.: 63-64).

## Hegemony and international order

Yan argues that the international system is and should be hierarchical. If we consider power as the most important factor in international relations, it is natural and logical that there should be states of different sizes and capabilities: the hegemon, major powers, medium-sized states, and small nations. It is not only the reality of the world, it is also reasonable, for the hierarchical structure justifies the different responsibilities of actors in the international system. A hierarchical structure of power, norms and responsibilities helps maintain the system and inter-state order, while disruption of the international hierarchy leads to inter-state conflict (Ibid.: 95-99).

Ancient Chinese masters envisage three types of hierarchy: humane authority (*Wangquan*), hegemony (*Baquan*), and tyranny (*Qiangquan*). Humane authority is the highest form of rule, based upon morality, and ruling by winning the support of the people and practicing justice. The leadership of a humane authority is thus readily accepted by other states and members of international society. Hegemony is inter-state domination. Its moral requirement is lower than the humane and its domination is based upon strong force and strategic reliability. The minimum requirement for hegemony as an international order is strategic reliability, meaning that the allies feel that the hegemon is reliable for their security needs, and therefore strong power is important. Tyranny is the lowest form of rule, relying exclusively on military force and stratagems. In addition, hegemony and tyranny both require strong power, while humane authority may be either powerful or weak in material capabilities, but must be strong in morality and justice (Ibid.: 84-91). Yan, being a realist, explains that “Hard power may in fact be equally important for both humane authority and hegemony”, since morality, though a necessary condition for attaining world leadership, is “not a sufficient condition” (Ibid.: 91).

Yan argues that it is reasonable for the ancient Chinese masters to believe in humane authority as being the highest form of power and rulership, but it is not easy to put it in practice, since “right up to the present era of globalised information, the struggle for hegemony is still at the core of international politics” (Ibid.: 137). Since attaining hegemony is mainly done through strategies, he proposes some of the important strategies, based upon his understanding of the Chinese history book *The Stratagems of the Warring States*, and with China’s rise as the backdrop. Yan argues that China should definitely seek world leadership, and in this respect, in addition to increasing the state’s comprehensive power, he particularly stresses alliance as a strategy for attaining hegemony. When a powerful state forms a bloc and leads it, and when this bloc is the strongest in the international system, the leading state is the hegemon. As he points out, “... the alliance formation has become the main strategy used in international politics in seeking to attain hegemony” (Ibid.: 131). Thus, Yan suggests that China should change its present policy of non-alliance, and form an alliance with potential allies such as Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and the People’s Republic of Korea (Yan, 2012).

It is extremely hard for Chinese scholars to agree with the analytical framework proposed by Yan, since ancient Chinese thinkers have complex ideas and thinking, and even Yan himself at one point argues that Xunzi is a constructivist and compares him to Alexander Wendt (Yan, 2011: 72-73), and then goes on to say that Xunzi’s “understanding of interstate conflict and stability is like that of contemporary realist theory” (Ibid.: 91). It is true that a so-called scientific way of rigorous categorization of ancient Chinese thinkers is too simplistic, but his work fits more easily into the Western mind, especially an American social scientist’s mind, and makes certain Chinese ideas more readily understandable.

## **The interactive approach: a theory on “Relationality”**

What I have adopted is the interactive approach, which attempts to construct a dialogue between Western international theories and Chinese cultural thinking. It is an inter-cultural dialogue with more critical reflections, both taking its inspiration from Western theories and engaging them with Chinese culture, practices, and worldviews. Using this method, I have developed a theory on relationality to understand the dynamic international relations.

## Relationality as the theoretical hard core

Taking my inspiration from Western social theories, in many of which “rationality” constitutes a hard core, I have tried to develop a general theory on relationality, a concept that has been deeply rooted in traditional Chinese practices and thoughts, and which constitutes a key idea in the classical Chinese work *Yi Jing (Book of Change)*, which was considered by Confucius as the fundamental concept for governance. As I have discussed elsewhere, for a new theory to develop, it is crucial to have a hard core which constitutes the nucleus that can begin the process of theoretical nucleation. Most of the mainstream Western social theories start with rationality, which has largely dominated the history of scientific evolution despite all criticism by post-modernism, post-structuralism, and critical theory. Realism and liberalism, the two major paradigms that have dominated American IR discourse for several decades, are both rooted in the key assumptions of rationality. Although it has been found that rationality is not omnipotent, the concept has successfully served as the hard core for most influential mainstream social theories in the West, which have in turn been quite successfully introduced to other parts of the world.

Rationality is indeed a crucial concept. It is, however, a concept rooted in Western societies and practices. If we agree that culture matters, then we may find other important concepts which have been nurtured in different cultures, histories and practices. Feng Youlan, a late Chinese philosopher, implied a strong criticism of the concept of rationality when he tried to answer the question: “Why is there no science in China?” He argued that traditionally the Chinese did not need knowledge based on human rationality to understand and conquer nature. What they needed was not knowledge for other-conquering, but knowledge for self-cultivation, so that they could live harmoniously with one another in society (Feng, 1991). It points, in fact, to the existence of different key concepts in Chinese culture, a most important one of which, I would argue, is relationality, a concept that is equally as important as rationality and that has been deeply rooted in Chinese culture. I have developed my theory on relationality along these lines.

The theory consists of three main components: process in terms of relations, the meta-relationship, and relational governance. It argues firstly that process is ontologically significant and is defined in terms of dynamic relations. It also identifies the meta-relationship, which according to Chinese dialectics is the *yin-yang* relationship. It is the “relation of relations”, and represents the essential nature of all relations, including relations between humans, between social groups, and between nation-states, as well as between humans and nature itself. It then discusses relational governance, which places emphasis on managing relations between individual actors for the purpose of establishing order rather than on simply ruling individual actors. Let us discuss these three more fully in the following sections.

## **Processes: interacting relations in motion**

Relations and processes are in fact two things in one, since a process is defined in terms of relations, referring to ongoing interactive relations that are found in any human society, embedded in social practices, and producing social meanings. Processes are relations in motion, or a complex of interconnected and dynamic relations formed through social practices (Qin, 2012). In my theory on relationality, therefore, process is ontologically significant and relations are the primary unit of analysis.

When we examine the mainstream theories in the West, and especially those in the United States, we find that there is little room for processes and relations. The three mainstream American international relations theories- structural realism, neo-liberal institutionalism, and structural constructivism<sup>4</sup> - have all missed the most important dimension, i.e. the study of processes in the international system and of relational complexities in international society. It is somewhat ridiculous that International Relations theory, called as such, does not have any systematic theory on relations: theories based on rationality tend to focus on individual actors and to treat them as discrete entities. Structures, rather than processes, have thus become the most important element for theoretical pursuit. In addition, and influenced strongly by the Enlightenment tradition, they seek certainty by establishing the structure-agent framework, with which they attempt to explain what behaviour agents possess in a given structure, whether it is a structure of power, institutions, or ideas. A static structure seems to be the best thing for certainty. As a result, such theories focusing on structures cannot help but be static, often failing to explain changes which, according to the Chinese worldview, are the constant state of everything in the universe.

Process is by definition dynamic rather than static.<sup>5</sup> “Process”, defined as relations in motion, can stand on its own, has its own dynamics, and play a crucial role in human relations in general and international relations in particular. The central core of process consists of relations. If “rationality”, rooted in individuality, has been a key concept for Western society, then its counterpart in Chinese society can be “relationality”. To conceptualise relationality, the theory claims that relational networking in international society helps nation-states to form their identities and

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4. See Kenneth Waltz, 1979; Robert Keohane, 1984; and Alexander Wendt, 1999.

5. An analogy of “process” is flowing water, always moving and changing according to the terrain, while the approach of “entity” resembles the rock, standing and remaining unchanged until two rocks collide by external forces and break up. When two waters meet, they merge into one; when two rocks meet, they clash. It is argued that Chinese culture is a “water” culture.

produces international power. Furthermore, the theory of relationality is an evolution theory at a systemic level, focusing on interactive and intersubjective practices between international actors and emphasising the independent ontology of social processes which play a meaningful role in constructing international norms and actor identities (Qin, 2010: 129-153).

## **Meta-relationship and the nature of relations: Chinese dialectics**

If relations are the primary unit of analysis, then what is the most representative relationship in the universe, one which will enlighten us in our understanding of all relations? *Yi Jing (The Book of Change)* emphasises the *yin-yang* relationship, and claims that it is the primary, most fundamental one. In that case, what is the nature of this relationship? It is here that Chinese dialectics, or *Zhongyong (the Middle Course or the Mutually Inclusive Way)*<sup>6</sup>, provide the epistemological essence for my theory on relationality. Like Hegelian dialectics, it sees things in opposite and interactive poles; but unlike Hegelian dialectics, it assumes that the relations between the two poles (*yin* and *yang*) are non-conflictual and can co-evolve into a harmonious synthesis, a new form of life containing elements of both poles and which cannot be reduced to either. Thus, relationality emphasises the connectivity of everything in the universe and the complexity of relations between various actors therein, and the relation of relations is what exists between *yin* and *yang*, or what I term the meta-relationship. Chinese dialectics understands the meta-relationship of *yin* and *yang* as being fundamentally harmonious; the interaction between them is the process of harmonisation, and harmony is realized through *Zhongyong*, or the mutually inclusive way.

The relevance of this approach to international relations is that it provides a fundamental understanding of cooperation and conflict between the actors. Chinese dialectics does not assume the non-existence of conflict. Rather it takes conflict as representing progressive steps toward harmony, which is the highest form of life. Use of Chinese dialectics may provide an alternative explanation of relations between actors of different cultural and civilizational backgrounds in global society. Western IR theory often focuses on the conflictual nature of opposites. Relying more on conflictual dialectics modelled on Hegel, Western International Relations theory tends

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6. The authoritative translation of *Zhongyong* is the “the mean,” or “the middle course;” but I feel it does not reflect the interaction between the opposites. I prefer to put it into the “mutually inclusive way.”

to stress the conflicting nature of world politics where thesis and anti-thesis evolve into a new synthesis through conflictual interaction. Realism takes conflict as being the nature of international relations in terms of the Hobbesian state of nature and liberal institutionalism, acknowledging this conflicting and anarchical nature of the international system; it then seeks to reduce conflict and anarchy through establishing and implementing international rules. Scholars of the English School argue that it is difficult for norms in one international society to be accepted by another. Norms and institutions in European international society, for example, are hard to accept for by nations in different regions and cultures, because different cultures produce different norms and institutions (Buzan, 2010: 5-36). They are biased, for they take what I term an “entity approach”, by placing things into opposite categories as discrete entities with *a priori* defined and fixed properties, and seeing them as conflictual in nature until one conquers or eliminates the other.

Chinese dialectics allows room for a “process approach”, which relates things in an ongoing process, moving toward harmony by combining opposites and thwarting conflict. It is not conflicting opposites in this case, rather it is harmonious opposites. It is not thesis and anti-thesis, rather it is co-theses<sup>7</sup>, or *yin* and *yang*, making a new synthesis through a harmonising process. Norms and institutions are like co-theses, differing at the beginning, interacting through a harmonising process, and integrating into a new synthesis. As do cultures, co-evolving without mutual elimination and forming new life while maintaining the properties of each. In this way, the norms and institutions of the West and the East meet, interact and evolve into new forms which are mutually inclusive, more robust, and therefore universal in the true sense.

## **Relational governance: a complementary approach to rule-based governance**

The theory on relationality also provides a different perspective for understanding governance in general and global governance in particular (Qin, 2011: 117-145). “Global governance” has become a popular term in international relations over the past few decades. However, most research has focused mainly on international institutions and regimes. Following primarily the regime studies initiated in the United States in the mid-1980s, the tradition of neoliberal institutionalism has been the

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7. “Co-thesis” is a term I have coined for interpreting the Chinese dialect. See Qin Yaqing, 2012 Chapter Three.

dominant paradigm, and rule-based governance has become virtually the only model to be used in international relations studies<sup>8</sup>. This emphasises the importance of international rules, their functions and their implementation. If non-cooperation should occur, the blame is given to the violation of rules. It is true that international rules are extremely vital for governance, but rules are not omnipresent, and rule-based governance is not the only model, either in history or in different international systems.

Mainstream IR theorists, therefore, have correctly argued the case for rule-based governance, but at the cost of its alternatives. In economic and management studies, relational governance has been discussed and relational governance models developed<sup>9</sup>. It is significant to note the value of relational governance, as it has been clearly observed when firms in East Asia, including Japan, South Korea, and China, have emerged into the global arena. However, those studies rely too heavily on transaction cost economics (TCE) and are mainly informed by rational choice theory. Since rationality is still the underpinning conceptual assumption, they have noticed the phenomenon of relational governance, but failed to explain why it appears more in East Asia.

I have tried to bring in the cultural dimension, by arguing that relational governance is not only based on mere cost-benefit calculation, it is a more culturally oriented behaviour, formed and developed out of practices over millennia. It takes relationality as the key concept in society, relations as the basic unit of analysis, and governance as a process of balancing relations, maintaining relations, and managing relations. Based upon these assumptions, I have developed a model of relational governance, for which I offer the following definition:

“Relational governance is a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust that evolves through a shared understanding of social norms and human morality”.

This definition has several distinct features. Firstly, it does not stress “control” as the essence of governance, as authoritative English dictionaries do<sup>10</sup> and as much of international relations scholarship implies. Instead, it emphasises “negotiation”. In any issue area, for example, governance requires responsibility on the part of all parties in the community, but it must go through negotiations to decide who should do what, and how much. Secondly, it views governance as a process of mak-

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8. See Stephen Krasner, 1983; Keohane, 1993; Helen Milner, 1997.

9. See Jeffery H. Dyer and Harbir Singh, 1998; Laura Poppo and Todd Zenger, 2002: 707-725; Kevin Zheng Zhou, Laura Poppo, and Zhiling Yang, 2008: 526-534.

10. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 319; *Webster Third New International Dictionary*, p. 982.

ing arrangements to illustrate its dynamic rather than its static nature. Governance is not government. It is full of uncertainties and changes, revealing the necessity for constant consultation and coordination. Thirdly, the governed is not the individual actor; rather, he is his relations (relations between actors). To govern means to govern relations; to maintain order is not to balance mere power, but to balance relations between powers. Its aim is to carry out good governance by coordinating and harmonizing relations. Fourthly, trust is the key word. It is not like rule-based governance, which uses rules and regulations to govern selfish and rational actors who are considered in advance to have little trust in each other.

Relational governance does need trust as a supporting pillar. As Tu Weiming (a Harvard professor of Confucianism) has pointed out, a well governed international society must be a fiduciary society, which in turn rests upon human morality (Tu, 2008). Such governance not only requires the structure of international institutions and the restrictive roles of rules, but more importantly, it requires pluralism, partnership, and participation of different civilizations, cultures, and communities so that a creative synthesis can be formed through a harmonising process. Furthermore, rules and relations are not exclusively replaceable, but mutually complementary. Their combination, or a synthetic model of governance, is more effective and sustainable.

## Conclusion

The past three decades have witnessed rapid development in international studies in China, and most Chinese universities offer degree programs in this field. Overall, the reverse analogical approach continues to dominate the discipline, and Western IR theories, the three mainstream American theories, realism, liberalism, and constructivism in particular, are still the main sources that Chinese students of International Relations rely on for their conceptual schemata. However, Chinese IR scholars have made great efforts to find something new and different. The three ways of thinking that I have discussed in this paper reflect such efforts exactly and represent a few of the more influential research orientations in China's IR community.

Even a cursory examination reveals the fact that there are commonalities among these efforts. They all go back to traditional Chinese cultural and philosophical thinking for the purpose of ideational and intellectual nutrition. Even Yan, who does not believe there should be a Chinese school or schools of international relations theory, has pointed out the different understanding of world politics of Western IR scholars and Chinese thinkers. Power, for example, has much less of a materialistic connotation and much more moral elements in the texts of ancient Chinese masters.

For Zhao Tingyang, the ancient, holistic Chinese system reflects a better worldview than the Westphalian system. In my own opinion, a Chinese school of IR theory is not only possible, but also desirable for the purpose of knowledge production, and a creative synthesis of ideas of cultures and civilizations that can produce richer knowledge. It is natural, for Chinese civilization and culture, like any other civilization, to have rich resources to contribute to human knowledge. In addition, these resources all take into serious consideration the reality of world affairs today. It is clear that when they go back to the Chinese tradition, their purpose is to find ways and means for today's world. No matter whether we are talking about hegemonic power, the all-under-heaven system or relationality, they are all closely related to the problems we face today. Furthermore, China's rise and the state's relations with the international community constitute a major theme that frequently appears in their discussion.

Of course, they are also very different. Zhao's argument is most revolutionary, for he believes that the *Tianxia* system, which was established in the Zhou Dynasty from 1046 BC to 256 BC, is the best possible system to ensure a genuine worldview. The contemporary international system is inter-state in nature and cannot by definition be called a global system. In this sense, the world is not a world except for in a geographical sense. A change from a narrow, state-centered mindset to a system that is similar to that of the Zhou Dynasty is essential for the world today to deal with its problems. Yan's approach is supplementary in nature, for he and his colleagues have tried to find how to use ancient Chinese ideas to make up for the inadequacies of the American IR theory, especially in the key concepts such as power. By this logic, they champion a hierarchical international system, study strategies for seeking to attain hegemony, and offer prescriptions for China's rise. I am more complementary. I have developed a general theory on relationality, which is the pivotal concept in Chinese society, developed over millennia, and practiced by generations, just as rationality is in Western societies. Furthermore, since the nature of the meta-relationship (or the relation between *yin* and *yang*) is considered to be harmonious, ideas and values from different cultures and civilizations, like streams of water from different sources, can be mutually inclusive and complementary rather than exclusive and conflictual. Traditional Chinese and Western worldviews and values can constitute harmonious opposites, even if they differ significantly. Relationality and rationality, for example, are both human. Relational governance, which is more Chinese, and rule-based governance, which is more Western, can complement each other to create a more effective and humane approach to global governance.

Many Chinese scholars are going further in their studies of global affairs. No matter what Chinese scholars have put forward, it all creates a dialogue with Western IR theory, for what they are probing into is the values and ideas from traditional Chinese culture, and what they are comparing these values and ideas with is Western

IR theory. Zhao studies the *Tianxia* system based upon Chinese practice for its possible replacement of the inter-state one, based upon the Western experience and operating over several centuries; Yan borrows the analytical framework of the American mainstream IR discourse and attempts to add something new by drawing on traditional Chinese thinking; meanwhile, I try to use complementary Chinese dialectics to observe relations in world politics and see how to develop a fiduciary world society. These efforts will hopefully engage Western IR theories in a dialogue, an intellectual dialogue that may well produce more knowledge about global affairs, and an inter-cultural dialogue that reflects a world of plural and pluralistic civilizations with both common and different understandings of the globe, the universe, and the human beings wherein.

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