



The Construction of International Relations (IR) Theories in China: Challenges and Perspectives

A Construção de Teorias de Relações Internacionais (RI) na China: Desafios e Perspectivas

La Construcción de Teorías de Relaciones Internacionales (RI) en China: Desafíos y Perspectivas

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Enviado em: 14 de agosto de 2024

Aceito em: 03 de dezembro de 2024

DOI: 10.5752/P.2317-773X.2024v12n2p48-65

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the debates among Chinese scholars regarding the development of Chinese International Relations (IR) theory. Using a qualitative analysis of key theoretical texts and related scholarly discussions, we trace the trajectory of Chinese IR thought from the 1950s to the present, highlighting major intellectual shifts and the challenges Chinese scholars face in establishing a distinctive Chinese School of IR. We find that this movement is driven by several factors: (i) the dominance of Western models, which limits interpretations of international politics and China's role within it, (ii) the need to revive classical Chinese political thought to interpret contemporary global issues, and (iii) China's political and economic rise, which demands innovative theoretical thinking to address this ascent. To better illustrate the Chinese concepts of IR theories, we further analyze three prominent Chinese IR theories—Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* Theory, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism, and Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory—by assessing their contributions and limitations. Our findings indicate that, despite ongoing criticisms and challenges, Chinese IR theories have made meaningful progress in challenging the Western-dominated IR paradigm and diversifying global IR community.

Keywords: International relations theory, Chinese school, Moral Realism, *Tianxia*, Relational theory

RESUMO

Este artigo revisa os debates entre estudiosos chineses sobre o desenvolvimento da teoria de Relações Internacionais (RI) na China. Utilizando uma análise qualitativa de textos teóricos fundamentais e discussões acadêmicas relevantes, traçamos a trajetória do pensamento chinês em RI desde a década de 1950 até o

presente, destacando mudanças intelectuais significativas e os desafios enfrentados pelos estudiosos chineses para estabelecer uma Escola Chinesa de RI distinta. Identificamos que esse movimento é impulsionado por vários fatores: (i) a dominância dos modelos ocidentais, que limita as interpretações da política internacional e o papel da China dentro dela; (ii) a necessidade de reviver o pensamento político clássico chinês para interpretar questões globais contemporâneas; e (iii) a ascensão política e econômica da China, que exige novas abordagens teóricas para entender e orientar esse crescimento. Para ilustrar melhor os conceitos chineses nas teorias de RI, analisamos três teorias chinesas proeminentes: a Teoria Tianxia de Zhao Tingyang, o Realismo Moral de Yan Xuetong e a Teoria Relacional de Qin Yaqing, avaliando suas contribuições e limitações. Nossos resultados indicam que, apesar das críticas e desafios em curso, as teorias chinesas de RI têm feito progressos significativos em desafiar o paradigma ocidental dominante em RI e em diversificar a comunidade global de RI.

Palavras-chave: Teoria de relações internacionais, Escola chinesa, Realismo Moral, Tianxia, Teoria Relacional

RESUMEN

Este artículo revisa los debates entre académicos chinos sobre el desarrollo de la teoría de Relaciones Internacionales (RI) en China. Utilizando un análisis cualitativo de textos teóricos clave y debates académicos relacionados, trazamos la trayectoria del pensamiento chino en RI desde la década de 1950 hasta el presente, destacando importantes cambios intelectuales y los desafíos que enfrentan los académicos chinos para establecer una Escuela China de RI distintiva. Encontramos que este movimiento está impulsado por varios factores: (i) el dominio de los modelos occidentales, que limita las interpretaciones de la política internacional y el papel de China en ella; (ii) la necesidad de revivir el pensamiento político clásico chino para interpretar cuestiones globales contemporáneas; y (iii) el ascenso político y económico de China, que requiere enfoques teóricos innovadores para comprender y abordar esta transformación. Para ilustrar mejor los conceptos chinos en teorías de RI, analizamos tres teorías prominentes de RI en China: la Teoría Tianxia de Zhao Tingyang, el Realismo Moral de Yan Xuetong y la Teoría Relacional de Qin Yaqing, evaluando sus contribuciones y limitaciones. Nuestros hallazgos indican que, a pesar de las críticas y desafíos en curso, las teorías chinas de RI han logrado avances significativos al cuestionar el paradigma de RI dominado por Occidente y al diversificar la comunidad global de RI. Palavras-chave: Teoria das relações internacionais, escola chinesa, Realismo Moral, Tianxia, teoria relacional.

Palabras clave: Teoría de las relaciones internacionales, escuela china, Realismo Moral, Tianxia, teoría relaciona

1 INTRODUCTION

Producing International Relations (IR) theories outside Europe or the United States undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges faced by non-Western IR academia. As a rising power with a prominent role in global politics, China has undertaken efforts to construct its own IR theories. In this paper, we critically review the scholarly debates surrounding this initiative and the inherent challenges it faces, focusing on the last five decades of theoretical development by Chinese scholars. We examine how these theories aim to bridge local Chinese thought with global applicability, a process that involves both embracing Chinese historical ideas and responding to Western dominance in IR theory.

Our analysis relies on a comprehensive review of primary theoretical works and influential scholarly discussions, assessing both the motivations and critiques that underpin Chinese IR scholarship. We highlight that China has experienced a period of growing awareness among local scholars regarding the necessity and benefits of producing local IR theories with global appeal. Motivations behind this process include resistance to Western theoretical models, a desire to incorporate classical Chinese philosophy into modern IR frameworks, and a need to address China's unique role in the global order. In this context, we discuss the three main theoretical contributions that were part of this movement – Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* Theory, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism, and Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory. These theories, each drawing upon distinct aspects of China's intellectual heritage, aim to enrich IR theory and offer alternative perspectives on China's international role.

In exploring these contributions, we also address significant critiques. While parochialism—a localized, culturally specific perspective—is tolerated in non-Western theories, Chinese IR theories face challenges when perceived as exceptionalist, implying a superiority that can be contentious within the international IR community. We argue that while parochialism may be more easily accommodated, the perception of exceptionalism may raise suspicion and distrust regarding China's foreign policy aspirations.

Nevertheless, despite some pessimistic views suggesting that Chinese IR theories may struggle with government influence or over-reliance on heterogeneous traditional ideas, our analysis finds that China's IR scholarship has made notable strides. It has effectively contested the West-centric paradigm, inspiring other regional IR schools and adding valuable diversity to global IR debates.

This paper is divided into four parts. First, we review early developments in Chinese international thought since the 1960s and the evolving awareness within Chinese academia of the need for a unique IR theory. Second, we discuss the motivations behind China's theoretical efforts. Third, we analyze the three main theoretical contributions from Chinese IR academy. Finally, we reflect on the challenges and inspirations emerging from this movement, situating it within broader global IR scholarship.

2 THE EVOLUTION OF IR THEORY STUDIES IN CHINA

There is an ongoing debate among Chinese scholars about whether IR studies existed in ancient China. Geeraerts and Jing (2001) argue that during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC) and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC), various intellectual schools were already studying and discussing interstate relations. At that time, China was made up of over a hundred small states, and their leaders used strategies like *hezong lianheng*³ to handle their external affairs. Academic works from that era, such as *Zuo Zhuan* (Commentaries of Zuo Qiuming)⁴ and *Guo Yu* (Discourses of the States),⁵ were written even before the Peloponnesian War, which is considered the origin of Western international relations. On the other hand, Zi Zhongyu (1993) holds that international relations in China only began in the 19th century with the invasion of Western

3. *Hezong lianhen* () refers to strategic alliances formed either by weaker states banding together against a stronger one or by aligning with a powerful state for protection and advantage during the Warring States period in China. It is similar to modern balance of power tactics like soft balancing (Paul, 2018) and balance of threat (Walt, 1990).

4. *Zuo Zhuan* () is an ancient Chinese historical text that provides a detailed commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals, offering insights into the political and military events of the period from 722 to 468 BC.

5. *Guo Yu* () is an ancient Chinese historical text consisting of speeches and discussions from various states during the Western Zhou to the early Warring States period, providing valuable insights into the political, social, and cultural aspects of the time.

countries. In her view, ancient Chinese concepts like *Tianxia* (all under heaven) and *Chengbang* (city-state) referred to political relationships that do not resemble those of modern nation-states. She emphasizes that pre-modern China's political system was more regional and did not operate on a global scale as we understand international relations today.

Despite these differing perspectives on how long IR has existed in China, most Chinese scholars agree on one point: ancient Chinese culture plays a crucial role in shaping the worldview of Chinese leaders and their foreign policy. They believe it would be unwise to overlook the cultural and historical traditions of China when considering its approach to international relations (Qin, 2006; Yan, 2014; Yan, 2012).

3 1950-1980s: IR-RELATED STUDIES UNDER IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE.....

In contemporary China, IR is still considered a young academic discipline. Before the 1980s, IR studies in China were related to foreign affairs and international politics, as IR had not yet emerged as an independent discipline. In 1953, Renmin University in Beijing established the Department of Foreign Affairs, which was later expanded to become the School of Foreign Affairs in 1955. By 1965, under the guidance of the central government, IR research was allocated to three main universities based on geopolitical and ideological lines: Peking University (Beijing) focused on national liberation movements in the developing world, such as Africa, Latin America, and Asia; Renmin University (Beijing) concentrated on the international communist movement in socialist states; and Fudan University (Shanghai) specialized in the politics of Western capitalist states (Noesselt, 2012; Zhang, *et al.*, 2014).

During this period, IR research was mainly conducted by state-affiliated political elites with a strong ideological orientation (Guo, 2017). Marxism-Leninism was used as the overarching framework for the interpretation of international politics, even after Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated (Noesselt, 2012; Wang, 2009). Theoretical research predominantly focused on political concepts and strategic thought that could guide real-life policies, such as Mao's theory of Intermediate Zones and the Theory of Three Worlds (Qin, 2007; Song, 2001).

According to Wang Yiwei (2009), Chinese IR studies at that time pursued two main objectives: first, to promote the superiority of socialism while critiquing capitalism, and second, to analyze the experiences of other communist countries and movements, including practices like propaganda and public opinion monitoring. This focus reveals that, before the 1980s, IR studies in China followed a top-down approach initiated by the government. The primary purpose was to justify the strategic thinking of national leaders and to legitimize the newly established regime, rather than to foster knowledge production or develop independent academic schools of thought. As a result, most IR-related work during this period consisted of internal reference materials or government reports, with few academic publications. Although several think tanks dedicated to international studies were established, IR research in this era largely fell short of international academic standards (Qin, 2011; Zhang, 2012).

4 1980s -1990s: LEARNING FROM THE WEST

By the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping initiated the Reform and Opening-Up process in the late 1970s, marking the beginning of IR as an independent academic discipline (Zhang, 2012). This reform provided two key conditions for IR studies. First, the intellectual liberation accompanying the reforms was pivotal for Chinese academia. The shift in China's foreign policy framework from "proletarian interests" to "national interests," coupled with reduced ideological rigidity, created a relatively open academic environment which provide Chinese scholars with independence and freedom to explore Western theoretical approaches (Grachkov, 2019; Qin, 2009). Second, as China began to embrace a market economy and eventually sought to join multilateral international organizations, Chinese officials and scholars recognized the value of intellectual engagement with the global community, "speaking the same language" to better integrate with the world.

As the opening of the political environment started, Chinese scholars embarked on an unprecedented process of learning and importing Western (predominantly US) IR theories into their academic institutions. This included translating IR theory books or journals and incorporating IR into university curricula (Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2012). A significant portion of the translated academic works on Western IR theory was published during this period. Notable examples include Stanley Hoffmann's *Contemporary Theory in International Relations*, Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War*, Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, Morton Kaplan's *System and Process in International Politics*, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye's *Power and Interdependence*, and Karl Deutsch's *The Analysis of International Politics*. Wang (2009) describes this as a "learning-and-copying" phase in the history of Chinese IR. Western IR perspectives were introduced by a younger generation of Chinese IR scholars who had studied Western languages and had spent years studying at universities in the United States or Europe (Noesselt, 2012). In this phase, a romanticized view of the West prevailed and Western concepts and theories were widely accepted as an authoritative framework to approach international questions, especially among young Chinese scholars who would adopt Western views without considering Chinese perspectives and ideas (Wang, 2009). Thereby, Maoist ideas and Marxist-Leninist ideology were gradually replaced by traditional Western IR approaches like Realism and Liberalism (Noesselt, 2012; Wang, Buzan, 2014), and the guiding principle of internationalism with class struggle was replaced by rationalism centered on national interests (Wang, 2009).

By the late 1980s, IR was gradually accepted as an independent academic discipline in China, distinct from its previous role of defending and interpreting the official foreign policy. This period witnessed an increased importation of Western IR theories, characterized by the translation of Western works into Chinese, the adoption of Western theoretical approaches, the emergence of more critical and independent perspectives, and a growing awareness of the importance of methodology (Wang, 2009; Zhang, 2012).

5 1990s TO 2000s: INCREASING AWARENESS AND DEBATES ON CHINESE IR THEORY

With China's growing influence in the international arena, Chinese scholars have recognized that traditional Western IR theories fail to adequately explain China's position and motivations. This discrepancy is largely due to the "China threat" discourse, which suggests that China's rising economic, military, and political power would eventually threaten global stability and the existing international order. In response, Chinese scholars rejected the "China threat" narrative and instead promoted the concept of China's potential for a "peaceful rise" (Wang, 2009). At the same time, as China's IR academic research became more mature and independent, scholars began to question the universality of Western IR theories and to emphasize the critical role that culture plays in the construction of IR theory (Qin, 2019). The ideas of constructing IR theories with Chinese characteristics thus gradually emerged.

An important milestone in this awakening process was the first Pan-Chinese IR Conference held in Shanghai in 1987, where the idea of developing IR theory with Chinese characteristics was formally introduced for the first time. At this conference, Huang Xian, a senior official from the Department of International Affairs Research of the State Council, emphasized that IR theory research should "*be based in China, address the world, and analyze the objective development laws of changes in the international political landscape from a Chinese perspective*" (Noesselt, 2012). The term "Chinese characteristics" echoed Deng Xiaoping's formula of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," highlighting China's ambition to pursue an independent path not only in domestic politics but also in international affairs (Noesselt, 2012).

From this point onwards, discussions about the construction of Chinese IR theory became a significant focus in Chinese IR research. Debated questions include whether China needed to develop its own IR theories, what these theories should look like, and how to develop them (Zhang, 2012). During the discussion, a "clash of visions" emerged between scholars of different generations (Chan, 1999). Proponents of developing Chinese IR theories were mostly older scholars, who usually displayed a more conservative and nationalist view, while those with reserved attitudes towards this idea were generally younger academics with liberal views, and many of them had a Western education background (Chan, 1999).

Criticism of constructing Chinese IR theory can be summarized into three main points. First, opponents argued that emphasizing Chinese characteristics was premature and unjustified, given that IR studies in China were still in their infancy and Chinese scholars were still learning (Su; Peng, 1999). Second, they contended that any IR theory should be universal rather than local and that a Chinese-specific IR theory might become overly ideological (Su; Peng, 1999; Zhu, 2003; Zi, 1993). Third, they were concerned that this parochial approach could harm China's image in the international academic community (Chan, 1999; Grachkov, 2019).

Despite the criticism, the enthusiasm and ambition of senior scholars were still highly influential. According to Qin (2011), many Chinese

scholars were dissatisfied with merely learning and imitating imported theories, particularly from the United States. Su and Peng (1999) refer to the phenomenon of most IR theories being produced in the US as “academic ethnocentrism.” They believe that the persistence in advancing the development of Chinese IR theory was driven by anti-colonial sentiments in academia and was both a justified and significant decision.

Alongside this debate, the world gradually witnessed China’s rise. By the turn of the century, Chinese IR academics had largely reached a consensus on the importance of building a Chinese IR theory (Grachkov, 2019; Wang; Buzan, 2014; Zhang, 2012). The ambitions and efforts of Chinese IR scholars also gained support from central officials, who recognized the role of IR academia in guiding China’s diplomatic thinking and strategies.

Qin (2011) notes that while the idea of developing Chinese IR theory gained popularity in the early 1990s, it was not until after 2000 that discussions began to focus on how to construct it, which involves questions of approaches and methods. Inspired by the English School of IR, Chinese publications from the late 1990s began to use the term “Chinese School” to capture China’s approach to IR theory (Qin, 2011). This implies that, by that time, Chinese scholars were prepared to develop a comprehensive set of ideas, theories, methodologies, and perspectives based on the Chinese context in the IR field.

6 JUSTIFICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING CHINESE IR THEORIES.....

In the previous section, we noted that Chinese scholars have different understandings of the nature of theories. Older academics often had a dichotomous view of IR theories: they are either Western bourgeois IR theory (seen as “wrong”) or Marxist-Leninist IR theory (seen as “right”) (Geeraerts; Jing, 2001). Most young scholars and some senior scholars believe that IR theory should provide a scientific framework for analyzing international politics, which requires theory to be objective and value-free. This approach aligns more closely with Western concepts of theory. Other scholars sought a middle ground by classifying different types of IR theory based on their function: the general theories, those that aim to be universally applicable, and the practical theories, those that are designed for specific contexts (Geeraerts; Jing, 2001). This approach has expanded the discussion on developing a Chinese IR theory, contributing to its growing popularity in China.

One of the most enthusiastic proponents of building the Chinese school of IR, Qin Yaqing, discusses two possibilities and one inevitability of this initiative (Qin, 2006). He argues that the rise of the Chinese School of IR is highly possible because, first, social theories are always culturally constructed and would inherently reflect the societies from which they originate. Second, China had sufficient social resources to provide the foundations for the development of Chinese IR theory. At the same time, he believes that China’s rise in the world will inevitably fuel the emergence of the Chinese school in the IR field, given that China will have growing interactions with the international system which can provoke numerous debates from this process. Qin (2006)’s reasoning for constructing the

Chinese school of IR has been widely accepted as the most comprehensive and convincing justification for this academic initiative. We will provide detailed interpretations of each point in the following.

The first possibility Qin proposes concerns the epistemological basis. Building on Robert Cox's idea that "all social theory is for someone and some purpose," Qin (2019) holds that any social science theory that derives from practice rather than a priori rationality is, at best, limited in its universality. Since contemporary IR theories are based mainly on the Westphalian state system, Qin compared this practice with the historical contexts of East Asia, asserting that Western IR theory cannot adequately explain the actions and intentions of non-Western countries like China (Qin, 2019). A typical example is the ancient tributary system in East Asia, which maintained regional orders through hierarchical relations between China and its neighbor states and it differed significantly from the contemporary international system shaped by European expansion history (Guo, 2017; Wang; Buzan, 2014). Thus, Qin's primary justification for the Chinese School of IR is that Western-derived IR concepts do not fit certain aspects of Chinese history, culture, and political practice and that inappropriate application of Western theory to the Chinese case can lead to misunderstandings about the country (Qin, 2006).

Sixteen years after his article on the necessity and inevitability of the Chinese School of IR, Qin (2020) argued that the construction of Chinese IR theory is a crucial component of the initiative to create a global IR discipline (see also Acharya; Buzan, 2010). He highlights the importance of pluralism in IR theory development and argues that China, the most prominent rising power, should challenge Western centralism in this field (Qin, 2020). Other scholars also agree with this claim, as they believe that developing Chinese IR theory or even building a Chinese School based on its cultural and historical context can provide China with theoretical frameworks and analytical tools to better present itself to the world (Noesselt, 2012; Wang & Buzan, 2014), and at the same time dilute the Western bias dominant in IR theory (Grachkov, 2019).

The second possibility Qin (2006) points out for constructing Chinese IR theory is the abundance of Chinese cultural resources. According to the scholar, three aspects of Chinese culture and thought can be employed as theoretical insights to construct Chinese IR theory: 1) the ancient Chinese thoughts, particularly the Confucian worldview of *Tianxia* and the tributary state system, 2) the revolutionary practices and theories that influenced China's pursuit of modernity from 1840 to 1949, and 3) the ideas and practices from the reform and opening-up process since the late 1970s. Later on, Qin (2008) added three approaches to reviving Chinese political thought to construct its IR theory: (1) the classical approach that explains Chinese leaders' international strategy and diplomatic thinking through classical Marxist theory; (2) the traditional approach that uses traditional Chinese philosophy to examine the current world system and order; and (3) the integrative approach that combines Chinese and Western theories to explain the world and China's experience within it.

The final justification for constructing Chinese IR theory, deemed inevitable by Qin (2006), concerns China's rise. Qin (2005) considers the

challenge China faces in integrating into the international system as an identity crisis. He reasoned that, historically, China's worldview was based on the tributary system, where hierarchy, not anarchy, was central to the system. However, a series of revolutions that took place in modern China have overthrown the traditional hierarchical framework that used to be a fundamental principle of the Chinese IR worldview. Additionally, the state sovereignty framework, centered on the idea of anarchy, was established based on the Westphalian system and had grown to receive global acceptance as the standard way to understand the world system. These changes have posed a crisis for China's hierarchical worldview. China has since been striving to integrate itself into the anarchic international system. At the same time, Qin pointed out that China's rapid development, social transformation, and fundamental changes in ideas require it to resolve this identity crisis. This can generate domestic debates that will eventually give rise to a Chinese School of IR (Qin, 2005).

Apart from Qin's reasoning, other scholars also discuss the necessity for China to construct its IR theory. The most imperative reason, according to these scholars, is related to how China can interact with the world. Over the past decades, China has risen to become the world's second-largest economy, and its influence over the global order has become increasingly significant in the 21st century. Along with its rise, there have been growing suspicions about whether China poses a threat to the world (Yan, 2014). Many scholars believe that Chinese academia has a dual responsibility. On the one hand, they must establish China's position as a major power in the global international system and develop theories to explain the potential changes China might bring to the world. On the other hand, they need to safeguard national interests, legitimize the one-party system, neutralize international perceptions of China as a threat, and enhance its soft power and public diplomacy (Noesselt, 2015; Qin, 2007, 2008; Wang; Buzan, 2014). All of these provide a solid foundation for the emergence of the Chinese School of IR.

Given this context, which calls for indigenous Chinese thought in IR theories, what are the main innovative theoretical contributions in recent years, and where do they originate?

7 THREE MAJOR CHINESE APPROACHES TO IR THEORIES: ZHAO TINGYANG, YAN XUETONG AND QIN YAQING

Since recognizing the need to construct Chinese theories of International Relations (IR), many Chinese scholars have been actively exploring alternative theoretical frameworks. Among the most systematically developed and globally recognized theories are Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* Theory, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism, and Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory. These theories share several common characteristics: they are rooted in traditional Chinese culture, engage in dialogue with Western IR theories, and, while developed from the Chinese historical context, strive to maintain a capacity for generalization as scientific theories.

7.1 *Tianxia* Theory

Tianxia (all-under-heaven) is a traditional Chinese worldview. It has been studied by Chinese historians and philosophers for centuries and has been recently revived by Zhao Tingyang to better adapt it to the 21st century (Noesselt, 2015). According to Zhao (2019), the concept of *Tianxia* can be interpreted in three ways, each from a different perspective. From a geographical perspective, *Tianxia* refers to all lands under Heaven or the entire physical world; from a socio-psychological perspective, *Tianxia* refers to a world that everyone recognizes and adheres to, a psychological world defined by the hearts of all people; from a political perspective, *Tianxia* refers to a political world defined by a global system. Thus, the concept of *Tianxia* encompasses the physical world (land), the psychological world (the collective feelings of the people), and the institutional world (a global system).

Although the *Tianxia* system derived from the inter-state system of the Zhou Dynasty nearly 3,000 years ago, Zhao Tingyang believes that many of its philosophical concepts are still relevant for understanding today's global system. The core ideas of *Tianxia*, as summarized by Zhao (2019) in his recent book, include two main points. First is the holistic vision. In modern IR theory, the highest political unit is defined to be each sovereign state, while in *Tianxia*, the highest unit of analysis is the entire world. Second is the non-exclusivity principle. The order within the *Tianxia* system is based on the concept of the family, viewing the human community as an integrated whole akin to a family where individual interests are expected to give way to collective harmony. Unlike the dualistic view prevalent in Western thought, which separates “self” from “other,” *Tianxia* envisions an extension from “self” to “other,” thereby avoiding conflicts (Qin, 2007).

Zhao argues that applying this principle to the global system would be an effective way to resolve inter-state conflicts and maintain world harmony, potentially surpassing Immanuel Kant's idea of “perpetual peace”⁶ and achieving a higher level of peace. He also points out that the real issue facing the international system is not so-called “failed states,” but rather a “failed world” characterized by chaos and disorder. This disarray stems from Western theories that emphasize the nation-state as the central unit of analysis and action. Zhao (2019) contends that China's *Tianxia* theory, with its foundations in ancient Chinese thought, offers a remedy for this critical deficiency.

One reason the concept of *Tianxia* has gained special recognition in China is its focus on the country's role in constructing the international society, which is particularly significant for an increasingly powerful China. Many scholars have described *Tianxia* as a “utopia” or an idealized vision of the world from a Chinese cultural perspective—an ideal world where order is based on morality and selflessness (Noesselt, 2015) and where differences are transformed into unity (Callahan, 2001). According to Callahan (2008), Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system represents an idealized version of China's imperial past. It inspires both scholars and policymakers in their visions for the future of China and the world, providing a theoretical justification for Beijing's peaceful rise.

6. Immanuel Kant's idea of “perpetual peace” is a philosophical concept proposing that lasting peace can be achieved through the establishment of republican governments, international cooperation, and the rule of law.

7.2 Moral Realism

Professor Yan Xuetong and his team at Tsinghua University represent another group of academics who built upon ancient Chinese political theories to analyze China's foreign policy and political strategies (Wang & Buzan, 2014). Instead of focusing on a single concept, Yan offers a more comprehensive insight into the pre-Qin philosophies in his book *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (2011). In this book, he demonstrates the way ancient philosophers like Confucius, Laozi, and Han Feizi approached the concept of "humane authority,"⁷ and explained the potential mechanism through which these ancient thoughts can be applied to contemporary international relations.

7. Humane authority () refers to a Confucian concept of governance that emphasizes benevolence, moral integrity, and the welfare of the people as the primary responsibilities of rulers.

Built upon the perspective of pre-Qin thinkers, Yan (2011) proposes some interesting theoretical points that can be considered alternatives to today's IR theories. The first notion is that the international system is hierarchical rather than anarchical. According to Yan's reasoning, a hierarchical international system exists as a natural order and differentiation among states based on power, influence, and capabilities. One example he provides is the voting structure in the United Nations, where the weights of votes are not equally distributed among all state members. The second point addressed the consequences of different systems. Yan argues that, unlike an anarchical system where conflicts are inevitable due to the lack of central authority, states' behavior can be better constrained by the order in a hierarchical system. However, Yan also believes that while absolute equality among states would lead to violent conflicts, absolute hierarchy can result in tyranny where the strong oppresses the weak. He thus advocated that the combination of both—equality and hierarchy—is at its best to maintain the international order. Lastly, Yan highlighted the leadership role of dominant states to maintain moral norms. In Yan's view, states with more powers and capacities should assume moral responsibility by leading by example and ensuring that their actions contribute to the overall harmony and stability of the international system.

Zhang (2012) labels Yan Xuetong's approach to International Relations (IR) theory as "Moral Realism." Essentially, moral realism combines considerations of morality with the pursuit of power. As Yan Xuetong aligns himself with Realism, which emphasizes the centrality of power in international relations, his concept of moral realism operates within this framework. However, given that his theory was also influenced by Xunzi and other pre-Qin philosophers who underscored moral values, Yan's version of moral realism focuses mainly on political power—the government's capacity to govern and wield its moral influence—rather than solely on economic or military might in achieving global order. This perspective sets him apart from Western Realists.

Like many other Chinese IR approaches, Yan's Moral Realism has a strong orientation towards the practical operation of politics. Yan himself acknowledges that the central issue of his approach is studying how a rising power replaces the leading power (Yan, 2014). By claiming this, he assumes that international politics is a succession of hegemonies and that China is next in line to replace the United States as the global hegemon.

Yan not only advocates for China to achieve global hegemony but also to resemble the humane authority of ancient times, which would distinguish itself from the “hypocritical hegemony”⁸ of the United States (Yan, 2011). This requires China, as has been similarly proposed in Zhao Tingyang’s *Tianxia* theory, to assume responsibility to provide better leadership—where the role of morality is essential—to the international society.

8. Yan (2011) believes that United States’s current act is “saying that all states are equal while in practice always seeking to have a dominant international status”.

7.3 Relational Theory

Qin Yaqing’s Relational Theory is another scientifically grounded and globally ambitious theory developed in China (Grachkov, 2019). In his book, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (2016), Qin uses ancient Chinese metaphysics, logic, and philosophy to explain the dynamics of world politics. The idea of “relationalism” discussed in the book is rooted in Confucian cultural communities, serving as a counterpart to the Enlightenment concept of Rationalism (Qin, 2011).

There are three central ideas in Qin (2019)’s Relational Theory. The first idea is relational ontology. In the traditional Chinese worldview, the universe is seen not as a collection of isolated objects and individual entities, but as a web of continuous events and relationships. This perspective is often referred to as the “Confucian cosmos” (Qin, 2016). Applying this to the world of IR, relational ontology suggests that international relations should be understood as a network of interrelations rather than as interactions between independent, self-contained actors. This contrasts sharply with the Western ontological perspective, which typically views the world as composed of discrete, autonomous entities—such as nation-states—that act independently and sustain themselves without necessarily relying on others.

The second idea is that the epistemological basis of Relational Theory is formed by the *zhongyong* dialectic.⁹ In this view, meta-relationships are conceptualized through the traditional notions of *yin* and *yang*¹⁰. While the West might interpret these categories—*yin* and *yang*—as dichotomous (thesis and antithesis), the Confucian philosophy perceives them as complementary and interdependent (co-theses). In Relational Theory, the *zhongyong* dialectic, which integrates inclusion, complementarity, and harmony, is seen as the best way to analyze relationships between agents in the IR world (Qin, 2016).

9. The *zhongyong* dialectic (中庸), rooted in Confucian philosophy, emphasizes moderation, balance, and the harmonious integration of different elements. It is a principle that advocates for finding a balanced path that avoids extremes, seeking harmony in relationships and interactions.

The last basic idea of Relational Theory is relational logic. According to this logic, relationships shape identity, identity defines interest, and interest guides behavior (Qin, 2019). Qin (2009) describes this dynamic as “relationships in motion”, suggesting that the interactions between states are part of an ongoing process where relationships are developed, and a state’s identity is established. For example, how China interacts with the United States and other countries helps shape its identity on the international stage. However, Qin (2009) believes that this process is not static. As relationships evolve and change, so too do the identities and interests of the states involved. This means that states must continuously adjust and readjust their identities and interests in response to the changing nature of their relationships. Based on this perspective, a state’s interest calculation—deciding what a state’s goals and priorities should be—cannot be separated from the process of

10. According to Qin (2016), Meta-relationships represent all relationships in the world. Yin and yang () are two complementary forces that together form a balanced whole, illustrated by the cosmological diagram, which represents the fundamental Chinese understanding of the universe’s dynamic balance.

interaction with others (Qin, 2009). Qin (2016) distinguishes this relational logic from the Western concept of “rational choice,” which is rooted in individualism where decisions are assumed to be made based on self-interest.

According to Qin Yaqing, Relational Theory is not intended to replace Western IR theories that are based on the assumption of rationality. Instead, Qin (2016) advocates for a mutually inclusive and balanced combination of rationality and relationality, suggesting that integrating both perspectives could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of international relations. Qin also asserts that while the concept of “relationality” is deeply embedded in Confucian cultural communities, its intellectual value extends beyond its cultural origins, given that it can offer valuable insights in a global context and enrich the study of IR (Qin, 2016).

These three major theories draw from traditional international relations frameworks while incorporating elements of Chinese philosophy and providing a Chinese perspective of international order: The *Tianxia* system contrasts with the state-centered international system; Relational Theory challenges the logic of individual rationality, and while Moral Realism is rooted in a realist framework, it uniquely integrates moral factors that neo-realism excludes (Qin, 2019). Table 1 compares the three Chinese IR theories with Realism and Liberalism in terms of five dimensions.

Table 1 - Comparing three Chinese IR theories with Realism and Liberalism

Theories	TianXia Theory	Moral Realism	Relational Theory	Realism	Liberalism
Key Actors	World community (“All-under-Heaven”)	Hierarchical states with “humane authority”	States and relationships between them	State as the central actor	State as central actor, but other social actors matter
Level of Analysis	Holistic	Hierarchical and moral-political structure	Relational (interactions and relationships)	Structural and materialist	Structural and materialist
Theme	A harmonious world order	Hierarchical order and moral leadership	Evolving identities through relationships	War between states	Cooperation between states
Epistemology	Holistic, collective understanding	Moral responsibility combined with power	Zhongyong dialectic (yin-yang harmony)	Separation of subject-object and search for scientific truth	Separation of subject-object and search for scientific truth
Ontology	the entire world	states with a moral hierarchy	Inter-states relations	Rational states seeking power	Rational states that cooperate

8 CHALLENGES TO THE BUILDING OF THE CHINESE SCHOOL OF IR.....

8.1 Debates on the existence of a Chinese school

Over the past 40 years, significant progress has been made in developing IR as a discipline in China, along with notable achievements in

constructing Chinese IR theory. However, the Chinese School of IR has not yet fully materialized, and several challenges remain for its proponents. Four aspects must be taken into consideration in this regard.

Firstly, no consensus has been reached regarding the use of the “Chinese School” label among Chinese academics. Yan Xuetong (2011) critiques the label, arguing that such labels are typically assigned by others and that theories are usually named after their central arguments or creators, not countries. Yan also highlights the absence of a singular, dominant idea within Chinese IR theory that would justify the use of the “Chinese School” label. Similarly, Wang and Buzan (2014) argue that the label is unlikely to endure due to the emergence of diverse theories within Chinese IR, which reflect various elements of Chinese history, culture, and philosophy. They anticipate that these theories will eventually acquire more specific names, leading to the obsolescence of the “Chinese School” designation. Conversely, Pang (2003) views the label as a broad, generic term applicable to IR theories developed within the Chinese context. Despite differing opinions on the label, scholars are focused on advancing the Chinese IR theory itself rather than its name.

Secondly, theory building is a challenging task. Noesselt (2012) notes that despite ongoing debates among Chinese scholars, no systematic IR theory with distinct Chinese characteristics has been developed. Qin Yaqing attributes this to the absence of a “hard core” within the Chinese paradigm. He argues that, like any scientific theory, a robust Chinese IR theory requires a clearly identified theoretical problem (Qin, 2005, 2006, 2020). Many Chinese scholars, however, have yet to fully recognize the importance of this central issue in theory construction. Current IR research in China remains focused on theory testing and foreign policy interpretation, rather than addressing a foundational “hard core” (Qin, 2005, 2008).

In addition to theoretical challenges, methodological issues also hinder the development of Chinese IR theory. Since Chinese scholars only began to recognize the importance of methodology at the turn of the 21st century, and many still lack comprehensive methodological training (Grachkov, 2019). As a consequence, current Chinese IR scholars propose discussions and theories mainly focusing on solving immediate issues rather than planning long-term academic strategy, which blurs the line between scientific theory and real-life policy and hinders independent theory building (Zhang, *et al.*, 2014). This has raised suspicion that Chinese IR academia is still not totally independent from the government, which may make it difficult to achieve the value-free principle that is essential to a scientific discipline. Kim (2016) argues that the development of Chinese IR theory, or the Chinese School, is primarily a political project serving China’s political interest in foreign issues. This situation is exacerbated by some Chinese scholars’ attempts to align the Chinese School with the ruling party’s ideology (Lu, 2024). Wang and Buzan (2014) suggested that, to address these concerns, Chinese academics should focus on acquiring rigorous scientific methodologies to ensure their theories are independent of ideological influences from the government.

Finally, another concern, as pointed out by Lu (2024), is the lack of sufficient interaction with the Western IR community. Since the current Chinese School prioritizes scientific knowledge creation, dialogue with

Western theories is critical due to limited feedback within the Chinese IR community and occasional ideological reorientation attempts by some Chinese scholars. However, this process is fraught with challenges, mostly due to the language barriers that hinder effective communication and understanding, as well as ethnocentrism on both sides that complicates mutual acceptance and integration of diverse perspectives. Western theorists often evaluate the Chinese School through the lens of their own theories, and Chinese scholars sometimes exhibit cultural essentialism, leading to a reluctance to seriously consider each other's viewpoints. This lack of interaction impedes the Chinese School's ability to advance and refine its theoretical contributions in the global IR landscape.

8.2 Criticism of current Chinese IR theory

Despite Chinese scholars' awareness and effort to create IR theories with generalization values (Grachkov, 2019; Guo, 2017; Ren, 2020; Yan, 2011), existing Chinese IR theories are mainly criticized based on parochialism and exceptionalism.¹¹

11. Exceptionalism is the tendency to present the characteristics of one's own group (society, state, or civilization) as homogenous, unique, and superior to those of others (Acharya, 2014).

Scholars observe that Chinese IR theory formulations rely heavily on traditions and give culture a more prominent role in IR compared to Western perspectives (Kim, 2016; Wang; Buzan, 2014). This can problematically essentialize and fixate the existence of Chinese culture, which is fluid, multiple, heterogeneous, and hybrid (Hwang, 2021). Wang and Buzan (2014) point out that China has at least two histories with competing structures: the Warring States period was an anarchic system while the tributary system was a hierarchical one. Theorists drawing on traditional sources from different historical periods can result in contradictory answers. Chu (2020) and Babones (2017) worry that Chinese scholars may employ ancient Chinese thought based on an inaccurate and arbitrary reading of history. Building theory on a rigid notion of China as an essentialized, singular, timeless entity may reinforce the East-West dichotomy and marginalize dissenting voices to the Sinocentric narrative (Chu, 2020). Additionally, over-reliance on traditional culture can generate other concerns. Kim (2016) believes that it is still questionable to what extent historical facts can resemble today's world and whether today's China is comparable to the one in the ancient period. These inquiries are still under active discussion by Chinese and international academia.

Parochialism is not uncommon in theory construction. For example, Western IR theories have been criticized by Eurocentrism for decades (Noesselt, 2012, 2015; Wang; Buzan, 2014). However, even though Chinese academics aim to counteract the Eurocentric dominance by introducing frameworks based on Chinese contexts into global IR debates, some worry that this approach might end up replacing the Western hegemony with a new Chinese hegemony (Chu, 2020; Hwang, 2021; Noesselt, 2012, 2015). Kim (2016) believes that China's claim of peaceful rise is a form of exceptionalism claiming that China would be different from any other great power in its behavior or disposition. The tributary state system presented by *Tianxia* theory, as well as the ideal leader guided by moral norms proposed in *Moral Realism* raised scholars' suspicion that Chinese academics advocate a new

hegemony that reproduces China's hierarchical empire for the twenty-first century (Acharya, 2014; Carrozza; Benabdallah, 2022; Chu, 2020; Kim, 2016).

In summary, although there are many challenges ahead, China's first step in building a Chinese School of IR theory is still inspiring. Such prospect lies in its rapid advancement in recent decades, the growing number of scholars working on the topic, and China's political and economic rise that brings more academic interactions with the international community (Kim, 2016; Wang, 2009). According to Noesselt (2012), all these factors create extremely fertile ground for any fortunate and timely seed of Chinese IR theory to germinate, blossom, and proliferate. Despite criticisms, the international IR community is optimistic about the prospects of Chinese IR theory and how it can contribute to the decentralization and pluralism of truly global IR.

9 CONCLUSION

In this article, we have explored the evolution of International Relations (IR) theory in China, highlighting the growing recognition within the Chinese academic community of the need to develop IR theories with "Chinese characteristics." We examined the factors driving this shift, as well as the key theoretical contributions made by prominent Chinese scholars, including Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* Theory, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism, and Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory. We also addressed the challenges and prospects associated with establishing a distinct Chinese School of IR.

Our analysis reveals that the diversity within the Chinese academic environment presents substantial obstacles to creating a unified and distinctive Chinese perspective in IR theory. Key challenges include the persistent dominance of Western models in explaining international politics, the complexities of adapting classical Chinese political thought to contemporary issues, a lack of methodological training that affects the development of robust and systematic theories, and insufficient dialogues with Western IR communities. Additionally, emerging Chinese theories often face criticism from Western academia for perceived parochialism and exceptionalism. With a dual identity as both a rising global power and a developing country, Chinese IR theory centering its own perspectives may create new layers of epistemic hegemony (Carrozza; Benabdallah, 2022). This highlights a critical issue: the need for Chinese IR to avoid merely replacing Western dominance with a China-centric approach.

Nevertheless, China's effort can still be seen as part of a broader academic resistance to Anglo-American-centrism, Eurocentrism, and Western-centrism (Hwang, 2021). Several positive developments in the Chinese effort stand out. Notably, Chinese scholars exhibit a significant awareness of the need for theoretical innovation—a trait not as evident in other non-Western academic communities, such as those in India and Latin America (Behera, 2007; Guimarães & Estre, 2021; Mallavarapu, 2009). Unlike their Western counterparts, who often focus on theoretical construction in foreign policy, Chinese scholars aspire to create theories with universal applicability. This ambition contrasts with the more

state-centric theoretical models seen in India or Brazil. Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate within Chinese academia about whether to generate new concepts from historical experiences or to adapt and refine Western theories to address local needs.

In conclusion, while establishing a distinctive Chinese School of IR presents significant challenges, the increasing awareness and proactive efforts among Chinese scholars are promising. The potential for theoretical innovation is substantial, and lessons from other regions can provide valuable guidance. By navigating these complexities and integrating their historical and cultural perspectives, Chinese scholars can contribute meaningfully to the broader field of IR and advance the development of a uniquely Chinese theoretical perspective.

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