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International Theories with Chinese Characteristics: A Critical Review of Main Arguments of the “Chinese School” of IR

Yue LI

Abstract

Since Acharya and Buzan proposed ‘Why is there no non-Western international theory?’ in 2007, IR theory scholars have paid more attention to sources from different backgrounds other than those just in the Eurocentric world. The main branches of International Relations theory (IRT) are rooted in Western philosophy and history, as Qin noted in 2011. However, they should not be the only foundation of IRT. IR scholars have tried to find other perspectives to develop IRT because contemporary international relations are too complicated to explain solely based on the mainstream IR theories derived from Western tradition. Among the theories of different perspectives, the theories of Chinese IR scholars are growing the fastest. What kind of theories are they? How can these theories contribute to current IR theories? To figure out these questions, we will explore Chinese IR theories’ specific concepts, meanings, and logic.

Three prominent scholars’ theories will be introduced in this paper according to the influence and creativities – *Tianxia*, Relational Theory, Moral Realism. We should not see Chinese IR theories as a total ‘non-Western’ perspective because they are not isolated from mainstream IR, but studying and talking with ‘Western’ theories. In some sense, it demonstrates that Chinese IR theories share some common elements with mainstream IR. For example, Qin Yaqing, who proposed a relational theory, has a profound study of mainstream theories, especially on Wendt’s Constructivism; Yan Xuetong, who created Moral Realism, was also a supporter of Realism. Their theories are all rooted in traditional Chinese philosophical logic, but hold similar conceptions and methodologies of current IR approaches. For instance, Yan’s Moral Realism can be seen as another different perspective of Realism; Qin’s part of Relational Theories adopts the methodology of Constructivism; there are also some connections between *Tianxia* society and Bull’s International Society.

1. Introduction

As domination of the disciplinary discourse, Mainstream Western International Relations Theories (IRTs) – Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism are adopted to explain behaviors of international actors, but are limited in their ability to explain those issues in Asia. Realists believe that power is the only factor that dictates one state's attitude towards another. However, they cannot explain why regional organizations develop quickly or why states cooperate. This is especially the case in economic dimensions such as: the European Union (EU), ASEAN, etc. Liberals give a theoretical work on economic governance, but they cannot grasp why some states still take unilateralism as the principal of external politics based on liberalism. According to liberalism, globalization should have been extending continuously throughout the world. However, contrary to this belief unilateralism has spread like with the rise of Trump and his government. Constructivists insist that identity has strong relativity with social activities. While this is a new view of international relationships, it fails to provide a causal mathematical mechanism. Therefore, there is still some place to create or develop IR theories. Except for what we referred to above, Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism belong to American approaches to IR theories; the British school is also famous and being studied well. However, both American schools and British schools lack an Asian perspective on international affairs.

Under this theoretical background, it seems necessary to study other perspectives. In this paper the Chinese school is selected as one of the Asian perspectives to analyze. I will examine the following questions: (1) What are the commonalities and differences within the three well-accepted Chinese IR theories? (2) What are the commonalities and differences between the Chinese IR and mainstream IR theory? (3) What does the meaning of the Chinese IR School have towards global international relations theories?

Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan initiated a project asking the question “Why is there no non-Western International Relation theory (NWIRT)?” in 2007. Although Acharya also put forward the concept of “Global IR,” he stresses the significance of IR's evolution toward an inclusive discipline and “recognizing its multiple and diverse foundations” (Acharya 2014). In the dimensions of Global IR, as opposed to mainstream IR theory, it should focus on the importance of the histories and civilizations of non-western states. Due to these proposals, it may be deemed necessary to find perspectives by extracting them from many diverse cultures. Moreover, it gives the Chinese IR school a rationalization to develop IR theories with Chinese characters. Since then, some scholars have been interested in what drives theorizing (Kristensen and Nielsen, 2013) and researching of the comparisons of English and Chinese Schools of International Relations (Zhang 2000; Wang and Buzan 2014; Williams 2021). An essential external motivation is that emerging powers need supportive theories to calculate other actors' potential responses and reactions and thus develop their own foreign strategy (Nele, 2012). As an emerging power, China needs to develop a theory to explain its external actions.

Another perspective on studying motivations of states the social dynamics of the attention space as a key factor through the micro-sociological lens of intellectuals seeking attention and prominence (Kristensen and Nielsen, 2013). There are three reasons to introduce theories from Chinese perspectives on IR: (1) Learning a new kind of logic from a different cultural background can help IR scholars to understand different actors' behaviors; (2) As a potential leader, China's way of thinking about the world cannot be neglected whether it is in a cooperative relationship or is a competitor; (3) Observation on the development of Chinese IR theories would be a reference for other cultures to develop their own theory.

In addition, many arguments emerging and developing by Chinese researchers are: 'what kind of' and 'how' Chinese IR should be built (Liang 1997; Song 2001; Qin 2005). At first, the realization of defining 'theory' has changed since the era of Mao. 'Theory' can be seen as formulated by political leaders (Chan 1997) and focused on foreign policy rather than global politics in general (Noesselt, 2012). Nevertheless, it changed the focus of global governance (Zhao, 2009) and theorizing after a new task was informally proposed – construction of Chinese School (international theories with Chinese characters) after the Shanghai's conference in 2004 (Yu, 2005). In the dimension of what Chinese IRTs are, scholars often argued about developing IR with Chinese characteristics (Liang 1997).

"In the practice of global co-governance, the ultimate goal of harmony can be achieved only by promoting the doctrine of global moderation (*Zhong Yong*). Therefore, moderation and harmony are the principles that should be followed in the construction of global society ... Seemingly contradictory things can be coordinated through the extension or transformation of space, time and role."¹

It is said that the doctrine of Zhongyong is a vital source for Chinese School scholars to develop an international theory with Chinese characters. Similarly, there is also a turn away from policy-linked Maoist-Marxist ideas and towards ancient Chinese philosophy (Nele 2015). China shares similar 'international' circumstances with the European society before the Peace of Westphalia. The primary resources of IR philosophies are provided and selected within the periods of the Spring (770-476BC) and Autumn and the Warring States (475-221 BC), specifically the elements of Confucian-Mencian. Based on these philosophies, 'moral leadership' (Yan, 2008) has been adopted as a critical conception of theory; the *Zhongyong* Dialectics have been taken as a methodology for theorizing in Relational Theory (Qin 2018) and *Tianxia* (Zhao 2019). 'Cultural realism' (Johnston 1998) also mentioned that "elements of Confucian-Mencian culture as part of the auto-communication among China's political and intellectual elites"² and Chinese characteristics give some new perspectives on international relations, constructure of world order, etc. However, there are still some questions remaining. Some scholars criticize that no systematic

1 Zhengliang, Yu. "Construction of Chinese Theory and Chinese School of International Relations." *Journal of Shanghai Jiaotong University* 13.4 (2005).

2 Noesselt, Nele. "Revisiting the debate on constructing a theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics." *The China Quarterly* 222 (2015): 440.

“Chinese” IR has developed so far. “Functional dimensions of theory formulation should be differentiated. Current Chinese IR mostly plays a role in two dimensions of national identity building and symbolically stabilizes political rule.”³

Above all, there are still some shortcomings and tasks in developing Chinese IRTs, but the ‘Chinese School’ is growing with the development of the Chinese economy and their increase of soft power. However, some scholars criticize that the “Chinese School theorists stray into normative and often jingoistic logic”⁴; “it shows us China’s global positioning ambitions” (Nele 2015); “*Tianxia* ... a proposal for a new Chinese hegemony” (Callahan, 2008). In addition, the content from Babones (2017, p4, p6) indicated that “deeper understanding will not necessarily produce a good empirical theory.” As representative scholars of the Chinese School – Zhao Tingyang, Qin Yaqing, and Yan Xuetong – their theories are usually researched and criticized that “drew on more recent historical episodes but never on China’s modern history.”⁵ Summarily, theories of Chinese schools lack scientific logic, modern historical studies, and some legitimacy as a discipline of IR.

To find the answers to the questions above, we will take three steps to analyze them. Firstly, a formulation of how the IR discipline developed and where it is developing towards will be given. This will be the first part of this paper, since making clear the motivations and reasons of the discipline of IR can help us understand the position and definition of the Chinese School. With the academic status and description of the Chinese schools cleared, the real meaning of building a school for China and Chinese scholars will be introduced to resolve the first question that was posed. Secondly, the core factor of how far theories of the Chinese school can go depends on its main contents including: ideology, theoretic methodology, explanations of ideas, etc. and how it relates to mainstream IR. Therefore, different scholars’ exploration of commons and divisions among theories with Chinese characteristics is the key to acknowledging their values. Thirdly, like the Chinese School, the English school is also rooted in traditional resources while pertaining to the world order, but the difference is that the latter has been accomplished. Therefore, to see the possibility of the development of Chinese IR, we will study analytical commonalities through making comparisons between the two sides. Finally, the most significant query of whether Chinese IR can reflect modern Chinese history or not will be discussed in this paper.

3 Noesselt, Nele. “Revisiting the debate on constructing a theory of international relations with Chinese characteristics.” *The China Quarterly* 222 (2015): 443-444.

4 Babones, Salvatore. “Taking China Seriously: Relationality, “*Tianxia*,” and the “Chinese School” of International Relations.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. 2017: 11.

5 Wang, Jiangli, and Barry Buzan. “The English and Chinese schools of international relations: Comparisons and lessons.” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7.1 (2014): 38.

2. Existing IR approaches in China

It has been said that "the origins of the Chinese School are found in the discussions of the development of IR and IR theory which emerged in China around the end of the 1980s."⁶ According to Wang's summarization from 1986 to 2000, theoretical pioneer scholars advocated for and promoted the building of the Chinese School (Wang 2014). They contributed to the development of Chinese IR theories, even though most research is related to initiatives they are less concerned with theoretical contents of IR. Unlike other approaches, Chinese IR theories develop as the presupposition of confirmation of the label of Chinese School. Yan never criticized Chinese Scholars for not considering the school's naming before conception (Yan 2011). This kind of path is characteristic of China since, according to the meaning of 'theory' in Chinese, theory should be confirmed and used to guide actors' behaviors.

There are three main approaches to IR theory in China: classical (i.e., Marxism), traditional, and integrative (School of *Xueheng*) approach. As a theory accepted by government officials, Marxism is the foundation for the government's legitimacy and the most popular political theory studied by most Chinese scholars and students. Therefore, all Chinese policies should fit with Marxism, and the thoughts of leaders is also explained through Marxism. However, traditional, integrative, or combined approaches are currently more popular among scholars researching international affairs, world issues, etc. For instance, *Tianxia* of worldview by Zhao Tingyang – an influential philosopher on Chinese IR; "Relational Theory" of Qin Yaqing as a core theory; in addition, "Moral Realism" (morality of leadership) combined ancient thoughts of Mencius with IR's methodology by Yan Xuetong – a leader of the *Tsinghua* approach. Besides, looking through Chinese diplomatic policy or speeches, Confucian culture is reflected in some keywords. For example, 'Responsibility of great power' (reflecting the morality of leadership), 'Harmonious society' (a "harmonious society" is based on the Confucian logic that "harmony is most valuable"⁷), etc. Therefore, the logic of traditional Chinese philosophy as indigenous resources contributes to developing a discipline of Chinese IR. However, as Qin (2007) said: "Chinese IR is a new theory incommensurable to the existing theories,"⁸ and he also argued that Chinese IR lacks a theoretical hard-line and then proposed a world politics with relationality as the hard-line (Qin 2016).

While full of Chinese characteristics, it does not mean that there is no similarity with mainstream IR theories. In the sense of the metaphysical component, there are some similarities. For example: Morgenthau believes that the essence of state activities is the pursuit of national interests, which is fundamentally consistent with the logic of Xunzi's theory of Inherent Vice that believes human nature is evil

6 Wang, Jiangli, and Barry Buzan. "The English and Chinese schools of international relations: Comparisons and lessons." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7.1 (2014): 6.

7 Tinagyang, Zhao. "A political world philosophy in terms of all-under-heaven (*Tian-Xia*)." *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (2009).

8 Qin, Yaqing. "Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?" *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7.3 (2007): 314.

so behaviors need to be guided by acquiring education. Confucianism and some other concepts, like the worldview of *Tianxia* and the ideal of ‘*Datong*’, etc. are essential resources for the Chinese School. One of the Chinese IR theories is a reflection of those concepts – *Tianxia* theory by Zhao Tingyang. It will be introduced precisely and the reflecting logic will be analyzed and contrasted with mainstream IR. This way we will know the value of Chinese IR and can better understand where the Chinese School should stand in the discipline of IR.

3.1. A *Tianxia* perspective by Zhao Tingyang

---- *Tianxia* (All-under-heaven)’ as a political world philosophy

The definition of the term *Tianxia* (天下) has been developing and sometimes changing in different historical periods. The Chinese character of *Tianxia* first appeared in the Classic of Poetry. There is a poem: “All the lands under the sky belong to the King, and all the humans under the sky are the King’s people.”⁹ What it refers to is the political system. The ‘All-under-heaven’ system (天下体系) was developed during the Zhou dynasty since the King of Zhou was facing a question about domination. Before the Zhou dynasty the Shang dynasty ruled. The Shang rulers were regarded as the judges of people’s fate and demanded obedience (Wang, 2012). This was not a stable structure of government. The King of the Zhou dynasty took different approach to his system of government *Tianxia*. Externally, the King of Zhou divided the territory according to the distance of kinship, and the hierarchical family system was built to maintain the stability of domestic order. It is this that shows a China-centric world with a hierarchical system.

Unlike historical definitions, modern *Tianxia* -ism focuses on global governance issues and is often borrowed by scholars to develop IR theories with Chinese characteristics. The most famous scholars are Zhao Tingyang, a philosopher who developed *Tianxia* theory. He has given some explanations on conceptions of *Tianxia*. It is summarized that *Tianxia* means: (1) all lands under the sky geographically; (2) a universal agreement in the hearts of all people psychologically (民心); (3) a political system for the world with a global institution.¹⁰ A *Tianxia* respectively indicated that we should see the world (*Tianxia*) as a unit instead of a state. It means that “an ideal world should not be the current international system with an independent, sovereign, well-defined political unit but supposed to be an entirety,”¹¹ as Zhao criticized that the present world is a non-world. Zhao argued that the most significant unit is the world, rather than the nation-state from Western IR theory.

According to Zhao, “all-under-heaven is a cosmopolitan universal philosophy,

9 Translated from the Chinese poem: “溥天之下，莫非王土，率土之濱，莫非王臣。”

10 Tinagyang, Zhao. “A political world philosophy in terms of all-under-heaven (*Tian-Xia*).” *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (2009): 9.

11 Ibid.

though not a utopia.” In his essay published in a magazine – “Exploration and Free Views,” in 2019, he argued that *Tianxia* is a contopia (not a utopia) - a shared world that may come true and an alternative solution to solve the political conflicts. Furthermore, the *Tianxia* system implied ‘an ascending order - from families to states and then to all-under-heaven’¹² (家-国-天下) and Zhao provides ‘Confucian equilibrium and Confucian Improvement’ as strategies for harmony (Zhao 2019).

Tianxia is provided by Zhao Tingyang as a new political conception to redefine the world and many scholars argue. A brief sketch is given here. First of all, the world is an all-inclusiveness (無外) world where it aims to implement the internalization of the world (Zhao 2016). He believes that “nothing and nobody should be excluded under an internalized world-system,”¹³ and a dominating world-system is rejected. Secondly, it presupposes the principle of coexistence in an alternative system, and relators work within a network of relational existence. Thirdly, two fundamentals of relational reasonability and universal compatibility give contributions to this auto-harmonizing world. In terms of relational reasonability, it asks for the maximization of mutual harm and mutual benefit among relators (Zhao 2015). It is the so-called “Confucian equilibrium.” Refer to Confucian equilibrium, it was quoted from Zhao’s descriptions as follows: “(1) given any two players X and Y, harmony is a reciprocal equilibrium in which X and Y share their fortune to such an extent that X benefits if Y also benefits, and loses if Y loses; (2) X attains fulfillment if Y attains fulfillment, to such an extent that the promotion of Y’s fulfillment becomes X’s dominating strategy, to promote his fulfillment and vice versa.”¹⁴

A Confucian equilibrium is a set of strategies aimed at harmony. Each of the *n* number of players share their fortune with the world government where policy is made. That has the property where each player’s choice is his best response to the choices of the *n*-1 other players. It is a ‘cooperative game,’ and a similar logic leads to diplomatic principles such as ‘win-win,’ ‘harmony society,’ etc. It takes the world as a non-zero-sum game. Compared with Nash equilibrium, Confucian equilibrium initiates to create a cooperative, hospitable world, and is more an idea rather than a method.

There is also some criticism and commentary of Zhao’s *Tianxia* system. Concluded by Qin Yaqing positively, three positive ideas can be reflected in the design and the philosophy (Qin 2007): (1) a holistic approach, which is different from a dualistic view of the two opposites; (2) *Datong* (great harmony), a worldview of ‘unity of the nature and the human’, is aiming at a harmonious whole; (3) order – the governance and authority was termed ‘*Lizhi*’ (礼制) which is based on five social relationships (father-son, emperor-minister, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife and friend-friend) and four social bonds (propriety, righteousness, honesty, and a sense of shame). Qin even developed his relational theory based on

12 Ibid: 13-15.

13 Ibid: 10.

14 Ibid: 15.

part of *Tianxia* philosophy. He has also considered Chinese cosmopolitanism (Shan Chun 2012) or an alternative global IR methodology (Acharya 2017). In addition, some criticisms and rethinks have more value in studying. Zhao borrowed brilliant ideas from ancient Chinese philosophers and “used Western philosophy in logical argumentation.”¹⁵ There were shortcomings of double standards when he analyzed Chinese and Western cultures (Zhang 2007, Xu 2013). Scholars have also argued that the motivations of *Tianxia* are “working to recenter Chinese understandings of the world order as a patriotic activity.”¹⁶ While we learn lessons from these criticisms, three misunderstandings should be pointed out: “(1) to not see *Tianxia* as a Chinese system but an attempt to introduce Chinese and philosophy into the IR theory; (2) to not equate *Tianxia* with the Chinese tributary; (3) ancient Chinese philosophies are not the entire basis of the theory even though there is some core Confucian value.”¹⁷

In conclusion, the theory of *Tianxia* is a Chinese utopia of building a harmonious world with a hierarchical system based on a mix of ancient Chinese philosophies and Western philosophies. Zhao gives an assumption by redefining ‘empire’ and lays stress on the importance of family relationship.¹⁸ “All-under-heaven is nothing but the greatest family, a world-family.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Zhao pursues a more effective and powerful international government than the United Nations and aims at a global society of peaceful ‘order’ (治) but not current ‘disorder’ (乱). As a philosopher, Zhao Tingyang provides a new logic of rethinking about international society government even though there are still flaws in his system. Meanwhile, some supporters continue arguing and developing theories from different aspects. Qin Yaqing, as one of those supporters. He has a more positive view of building a Chinese School.

3.2. A Relational (*guanxi*) Respective by Qin Yaqing

A Relational Theory of World Politics was published in 2019 by Qin Yaqing. He argues that the development of IR as an academic discipline in China has moved from pre-theory to a theory-learning (or theory-deepening) stage. Qin gives us a brand relational perspective of world politics in this book. There are three phases: (1) different background knowledge of cultural practices or matters in social theory construction, including ontological and epistemological theories; (2) compared with individualism and rationality, the identity and logic of relationality are created as a replacement with mainstream IR theory; (3) In the term of cooperation and

15 Bijun, Xu. “Is Zhao’s *Tianxia* System Misunderstood.” *Tsinghua China L. Rev.* 6 (2013): 106.

16 William A. Callahan, *Tianxia, Empire and the World: Soft Power and China’s Foreign Policy Discourse in the 21st Century*, (Working Paper 2007), <http://www.bicc.ac.uk/files/2012/06/01-Callahan.pdf>

17 Bijun, Xu. “Is Zhao’s *Tianxia* System Misunderstood.” *Tsinghua China L. Rev.* 6 (2013): 102-106.

18 There are three level structure of Chinese hierarchical system: “*jia-guo-tianxia*” (family, state, world) and the family relationship as a core of observation of the world from a Confucian perspective. According to Zhao, “family relationship is the minimal and irreducible location of harmony, cooperation, common interests and happiness” and it’s also the foundation of political legitimacy.

19 Zhao, Tingyang. “Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept ‘All-under-Heaven’(*Tian-xia*).” *Social Identities* 12.1 (2006): 34.

governance, a relational power formed from Confucian approaches matters (Qin 2019). In an earlier period, Qin held a positive attitude on establishing the Chinese School and had a solid education of IR theory.

Qin introduced a new concept – relationality into IR discipline, which has been embedded in the long practice of Confucian communities. A relational world refers to “a Confucian world of all being related to, interdependent on, and inclusive of all.”²⁰ Chinese society is called a “relational” society (人情社会) where a nexus of relations exist and matter everywhere. In this term, it seems that a theoretical core is designed with Confucian characteristics by Qin. As Qin argued that background knowledge of cultural practices matters in social theory (Qin 2011). Confucian thoughts have profoundly influenced him. What we need to analyze is a unit of relations, and all actors who are bound together. In his first part of the theory, Qin stressed distinctive characteristics of a relational worldview from that of Western societies. The former views the world from the perspective of the interdependence (coexistence) of members in the community. Still, the latter has a worldview of independence of individual actors (Qin 2018). Qin also assumes that “the world is a universe of relatedness”²¹ where relators (actors in relations) coexist with relational identities.

Rational relation interprets actors’ relationships as maximizing their self-interest at the lowest cost. Qin believes that this relationship is not appropriate since the common social facts are not shared between China and Western countries. “If culture is defined in terms of background knowledge and if background knowledge provides different angles for observation of social facts, it is crucial to explore cultural resources for innovation in social theorizing.”²² It is puzzling why members can become coexistent in a community or how they can interdepend on each other. It assumes that “the relationship is the core of coexistence.”²³ It includes three layers: kinship, partnership/friendship, a strangers’ world (Qin 2018), and each social relator existing in those three-layered relational circles takes part in social activities. Meanwhile, in the process of practice, “the identity of actors is shaped and reshaped by her relations and others and her relationship with social context.”²⁴ At this analytical level, the methodology of Relational Theory belongs to Constructivism even though Qin bends over backwards to create a distinctive approach from mainstream IR theories. In his opinion, unlike mainstream IR - a conflictual relationship, framed in Hegelian Dialectics, the relational theory is formulated in *Zhongyong* (中庸) Dialectics.

Zhongyong Dialectics “interpret the basic state of the relationship between the two polarities as harmonious,”²⁵ while Hegelian dialectics see conflict as the nature of such a relationship. Qin focuses on three elements of the *Zhongyong* Dialectics:

20 Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2018: 114

21 Ibid: 107.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid:150.

25 Yaqing, Qin. “Continuity through change: Background knowledge and China’s international strategy.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7.3 (2014): 285-314.

inclusivity, complementation, and harmony. It is explained by three points: “(1) a meta-relation: two interacting items, objects, or forces are immanently inclusive and therefore inclusively related; (2) meta-relationships: two interacting items, objects, or forces complement each other, cogenerate through transforming process; (3) harmony is the basic state of all relations.”²⁶ Based upon *Zhong* Dialectics, the logic of relationality argues that relatedness is an essential move of social action and ruled by two dimensions: intimacy and importance. In a word, it is stated that the essence of governance is the management of relations, which refers to power as the ability to manage links. As Qin argued: “diplomacy is a typical example of realizing one’s interest through making, maintaining, managing relations with others.”²⁷

Qin explores three kinds of cooperation in a relational world: kin selection, reciprocity (Confucian improvement), Mencius Optimality - “harmonious human relations that provide the best possible situation for one to realize one’s self-interest”²⁸ (*tianshi dili renhe*). However, it seems impossible for relational governance to realize this since the elements of relational governance are relation, morality (cornerstone for governance), and trust (guarantee of good governance) (Qin 2018). Firstly, there are three concepts critical to understanding the logic of relationality: (1) states are “relators in international relations, relating and being related,”²⁹ (2) relational circles are formulated from various relationships of a relator and “indicate the degree of self’s relationships with others, constituting her relational sphere of influence”³⁰; (3) The relational context is constituted by the totality of the relational circles of all relevant relators. In conclusion, the essence of international governance refers to governing relationships of states. Secondly, Qin’s arguments about the issue of morality and trust are insufficient, and we can study from a system of five virtues, including *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, *xin* (仁義礼制信), which were established to maintain the governance in a hierarchical world.

Furthermore, the realization of trust requires the actor to be a *junzi* (君子) who is a virtuous person. In this dimension, an authoritarian government and a qualified leader are crucial factors for keeping morality and building a trust system. However, in an anarchical society, it is impossible to have a central government. Therefore, according to the theory of relationality, we should focus on dealing with various relationships among states.

Relational Theory is a brand new but highly acknowledged idea in the Chinese School of IR theories. Though there are still some flaws pertaining to making good governance, there are some common connections of cultural background between Zhao’s *Tianxia* and Relational Theory. Nevertheless, Confucian theories are being redefined and developed constantly by different scholars, such as Yan Xuetong, whose theory – moral Realism borrowed from the Confucius - Mencius philosophy.

26 Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2018: 170-194.

27 Ibid: 316.

28 Ibid: 311.

29 Ibid: 208.

30 Ibid: 208.

3.3 Moral Realism

In the process of the indigenization of China's International Theory, it is acknowledged that Yan and his *Tsinghua* School contribute to the development of IR with Chinese characteristics. Firstly, he is familiar with Chinese political thought from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period (770-222BC). Those are critical theoretical resources for his political assumptions. Meanwhile, the other feature of his research is that he also "puts emphases on hypothesis testing, causal analysis, objectivity, and verifiability."³¹ His recent book "Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers" provides an ideal type of leadership, a crucial concept of Moral Realism. Before introducing Moral Realism, Yan's theory also argues whether "a synthesis of traditional Chinese thought and modern IR theory"³² is feasible to conduct IR research. Yan holds a positive attitude, "he believes the scientific method can be applied to the analysis of ancient Chinese thought."³³ However, there are some criticisms about his studies in ancient thought. Yan prefers to view *Xunzi* from a 'scientific methodology' perspective but sometimes "failing to see that many of *Xunzi*'s remarks are ideological in character and thus cannot be subjected to a modern scientific reading."³⁴ Yan seems to be a radical realism scholar. In his book, he gave many public speeches and positively suggested that China should be the next hegemon state after America.

Yan made a combination of Realism and morality to explain why rising states could replace the dominant state. In his opinion, "leadership capability of different states can never be the same, which explains the law of differential growth in states' national capability."³⁵ In terms of power, there are two terms in Chinese – *quanli* (power) and *Quan Wei* (authority). The former means "legitimate coercive rights or duty," the latter means "prestige or popular trust."³⁶ According to his moral theory, morality influences power, capability, and authority so that "strategic credibility is distinguished with international power, the lowest level of international morality."³⁷ Thus, is the "the prerequisite to establishing international authority."³⁸

As *Xunzi*'s philosophy is the foundation of moral Realism, it is said that perfect governance is *Nesheng waiwang* (sage inside and humane authority outside). The 'wang' is called *wangdao* (humane authority). Yan criticized that "humane authority requires consistency between a leading state's domestic ideology and the political values it pursues abroad. But, the present Chinese government is conflicted in this

31 Zhang, Feng. "The *Tsinghua* approach and the inception of Chinese theories of international relations." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5.1 (2012): 73-102; Yan, Xuetong. *Ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power*. Princeton University Press, 2013: p.199.

32 Zhang, Feng. "The *Tsinghua* approach and the inception of Chinese theories of international relations." *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5.1 (2012): 80.

33 Ibid: 81.

34 Ibid: 87.

35 Xuetong, Yan. *Leadership and the rise of great powers*. Princeton University Press, 2019: 192.

36 Ibid: 16.

37 Ibid: 21.

38 Ibid: 24.

regard, and thus the Chinese leadership of the next generation bears moral realist expectations.”³⁹ A humane authoritarian leadership can increase the capability of the state inside and improve its international strategic credibility. However, it requires a high moral standard of international leadership. In the mechanisms through which states change international norms, an authoritative leadership should take an example of imitation but not be forced to make changes in international norms. Focused on analyzing the transformation of the international system, Yan criticized that neither current China nor America is a leader of humane authority yet. It he has also mentioned that today is “a new bipolar world”⁴⁰ with a lack of global leadership and “mainstream values and strategic credibility.”⁴¹

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I will answer the three initial research questions: (1) what are the similarities and differences of the three well-accepted Chinese IR theories, (2) what are the similarities and differences in Chinese IR and mainstream IR theory; (3) what significance does the Chinese IR School have to global international relations theory. First, the common feature of the three theorists is that their theoretical foundations are rooted in ancient Chinese philosophy. For this reason, it is called international relations theory with Chinese characteristics. In addition, Zhao’s *Tianxia* and Qin’s Relational Theory also share some common characteristics: (1) the system of ancient Western Zhou is recognized, and the elements of the family relationship are absorbed into the theoretical framework; (2) the motivation behind establishing theories is to build “a Chinese IR school” for providing a new perspective on IR with Chinese characteristics; (3) both theories lack a scientific methodology to analyze international affairs and test their hypotheses. However, unlike the Zhao and Qin theories, Yan insists that the label of the Chinese school itself is irrelevant, and theories should be formulated more naturally. He also emphasizes that a social scientific method is necessary to test his theory. After testing and analysis, the theory should be revised based on the resulting empirical data.

Second, most Chinese IR scholars agree that Chinese IR theories do not intend to distinguish their own theories from mainstream IR, but, complement it. From the standpoint of GIR (Global International theory), both Chinese and mainstream IR are essential for enriching the diversity of international relation theory. However, when it comes to the differences between them, there are some points that require explanation. As Acharya stated, “Chinese IRTs confirm the need for IR to look beyond its Western-centric narrative, and enrich the diversity of IR as a field of study, while also expanding the historical basis of the theory, ... they need

39 Ibid: 53.

40 Ibid: 197.

41 Ibid: 203.

to claim the status of universal theories.”⁴² It is significant for GIR to establish and develop Chinese IRTs, but it is simultaneously faced with making a universal theory. As analyzed above, we should look at the three theories from the three aspects when comparing the differences: (1) An ideal society is proposed by Zhao Tingyang where everybody can coexist in a shared world. He sees the world from a Confucian perspective and states the importance of the family relationship. It seems that we could compare *Tianxia* with the English School, which emphasizes world theory and international society, despite the former being too narrative to be a mature theory yet. (2) A relational theory represents a new perspective that views the relatability of the world with a dynamic process. This is different from other IR theories. Meanwhile, there are similarities between Relational Theory and Constructivism since they both focus on the theory’s process and the cultural background. (3) Moral Realism shares a common worldview with the Realism of mainstream IR in some dimensions since Yan states that power, military, and authority are crucial to international relationships. According to Yan, leadership with excellent realistic power and an authoritative reputation could probably become the next benign leading state.

None of the aforementioned theories are antithetical to mainstream IR, they are complementary. Because the core of their theoretical thinking is derived from ancient Chinese philosophers, their theories are comparable. I propose that further debate take place on whether the three theories can be integrated to become a combined theory of the ‘Chinese school.’

Third, concerning the question “what significance does the Chinese IR School have for global international relations theory,” I argue that there are three reasons it’s significant for the development of GIR theory: (1) the emergence of the Chinese IR School provides a new perspective to view and analyze international affairs and gives an example to develop the theory of IR full of regional characteristics; (2) the development of the Chinese IR School shows the potential for confident GIR scholars; (3) the shortcomings of Chinese IR theories is arousing scholars to explore further and find out more theoretical sources and methods of analyzation. Besides, the most meaningful things lie in building a better international society with more freedoms and allowing more states to have their voices heard.

42 Acharya, Amitav. “From heaven to earth: ‘cultural idealism’ and ‘moral realism’ as Chinese contributions to global international relations.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 12.4 (2019): 494.

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