

# Relational IR Theories with Sinophone Characteristics

Written by Emilian Kavalski

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EMILIAN KAVALSKI, DEC 3 2023

It is all, but impossible to overlook the proliferation of relational perspectives in International Relations (IR). It seems that any and every topic, issue, and framework of inquiry is getting its relational overhaul (Benabdallah 2020; Fierke 2022; Jackson and Nexon 2019; Kavalski 2018a; Kurki 2020; Nordin et al. 2019; Pan 2018; Qin 2018; Shih et al. 2019; Shimizu 2019; Trownsell et al. 2022). While a consolidated relational grand theory of IR is yet (and, perhaps, unlikely) to emerge, many of those awaiting its arrival have already ascertained a “relational turn” (Kavalski 2018b; Pan 2020) in the discipline, while others have gone as far as proclaiming a “relational revolution” (Kurki 2022) in world affairs. This proliferation of relational conversations has recently gained the attention of the International Studies Association – the main professional association for IR scholars around the world – whose 2024 annual convention is squarely aimed at “Putting Relationality at the Centre of International Studies.”

In the meantime, however, owing to the absence of a unifying theory of relationality “differing [if not bickering] about difference” (Trownsell et al. 2021) seems to have become the underlying motif of many relational conversations. Thus, at the basic level of theoretical construction, the glue that binds the fragmented relational research agenda is the assertion that despite its alleged preoccupation with “relations,” the study of world politics has instead tended to prioritize the actors involved. In this respect, the relational claim that the world is shaped by continuous interactions among diverse forms of life and matter calls for the consideration of alternative ontologies that go beyond the limitations of the substantialism dominating the IR mainstream. As such relationality in IR represents a “family of theories united by an emphasis on the theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions, and other kinds of relations” (Jackson and Nexon 2019, 2).

It is noteworthy that despite the amplifying cacophony of relational voices, troubling the Eurocentric underpinnings of IR theory has become a distinguishing feature of relational attempts to expand the realms of what is feasible, conceivable, and possible. In fact, the attentiveness to relationality emerges as one of the central defining features of the diversity of perspectives and voices propagating the worlding of IR. Relational perspectives intend a meaningful contribution to the pluralization of the study of world affairs. Relationality in this setting reflects a complex and mercurial plurality of visions, whose interactions disrupt mainstream attempts to press-gang the messy, multiple, and interpenetrating histories, identities, experiences, and knowledges into the service of Self/Us–Them/Other binaries that hold sway over IR’s substantialist purview (Chen and Shimizu 2019; Ling 2014a; Tickner and Querejazu 2021).

The contention here is that much of the current interest in relationality has been spurred by distinct Asian – and, in particular, Sinophone – debates about the continuing grip of Eurocentrism over the explanation and understanding of the world (Ling 2014b). The following sections outline the main interlocutors of the Sinophone contributions to relationality. It has to be acknowledged that the selection of the adjective “Sinophone” is not coincidental. As it will be explained, some proponents of Sinophone relationality have been associated with the development of distinct “national” schools of IR in reaction to the Anglophone dominance of the mainstream (Jackson and Nexon 2019; Kavalski 2018c; Nordin et al. 2019). Attempting to avoid the association of some strands of relationality with new dichotomies in the field, this study has chosen adjectives reflecting vernacular idioms in order to emphasize the distinct linguistic traditions on which the specific proponents of relationality draw for their inferences.

### Sinophone relationalities

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While there have been a significant number of relational approaches and perspectives – especially, in feminist and critical IR theory – it was the resonance of the “processual relationalism” developed by Jackson and Nexon (1999) among Asian scholars, which seems to presage the current relational surge in IR. Developing in parallel with the growing international attention to China’s rise to global prominence, many relational approaches appear to have distinct Asian flavours as a result of the exposure, attention, and affordances provided by the so-called “global shift to the East” in world affairs (Walton and Kavalski 2017). Some proponents have asserted that while the commitment to relationality appears to be a novel move for the Eurocentric IR mainstream, Asian intellectual traditions have long been defined by a deep commitment to relationality (Cho and Kavalski 2015; Ling 2014b; Shimizu 2019). Consequently, this has made them uniquely positioned to furnish insights to the global field of IR (Pan and Kavalski 2022). At the same time, the perceived inability of the disciplinary mainstream to abandon its substantialist commitments have motivated some Asian IR scholars to address this deficiency (Qin 2016; Ling 2017; Pan 2021; Seo and Cho 2021).

As it would be explained shortly, while there is no single and coherent “Sinophone” outlook on relationality, there are certain characteristics that appear to be shared by many of its interlocutors. To begin with, almost all of them are purposefully troubling the Eurocentric emphasis on autonomous individuals and materialism, while stressing the importance of communities and non-material factors – such as emotions, culture, everyday practices, and the locatedness of interactions (Horesh and Kavalski 2014). By challenging binary logics, such relational moves are seeking to pluralize the sites, genres, and practices of theorizing (Fisher-Onar and Kavalski, 2022). Connected with this move has been the active introduction of Asian concepts, ideas, and histories to the narratives of IR as part of a project for reclaiming lost heritage and local sources of wisdom and learning. The disclosure of multiple relational ontologies helps uncover the complex, eclectic, and non-objective blend of cultural universals and culturally-specific patterns of multiple social entanglements underpinning the dynamics of global life.

It needs to be acknowledged at the outset that Sinophone perspectives have spawned one of the most prolific and diverse fields of relational IR approaches. A feature that binds these perspectives is their explicit indebtedness to Sinophone thought and ideas – especially, Confucianism or Daoism as well as the notions and practices either of *tianxia* or *guanxi* (or both) (Huang and Shih 2016; Ling 2014b; Pan and Kavalski 2018; Shih 2024). It has to be reiterated, that at least partially, this move has been motivated by the articulation of a “Chinese” school of IR intent on asserting the exceptionalism (and inherent superiority) of Chinese culture. As such, it is alleged that the recourse to vernacular cosmological traditions has been “marginal, selective, and even contradictory” and has led to fissures within Sinophone relational perspectives forcing some of them into “reproducing exclusion (rather than all-inclusiveness), hierarchy (rather than equity), and binary opposition (rather than interbeing or co-constitution)” (Lin and Chen 2020). Other scholars have pointed out that regardless of their ideational lineage, Sinophone relationalities are invariably embedded in a hierarchical structure of interactions (Kavalski 2023; Shimizu 2021). The roles available to actors are already presupposed prior to the dynamics of social interactions and, thus, “how to relate with others is inherited from past experiences and accumulated knowledge, and each actor is expected to follow the rules and norms drawn from the lessons” (Shimizu and Noro 2023, 384). In this respect, in lieu of the transformative potential of relational thinking, some Sinophone interlocutors appear to merely replace the substantialist structure of Westphalian actors with the substantialist structure of hierarchical roles.

Such criticisms have been particularly explicit with regard to two of the main proponents of Sinophone relational perspectives – Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing. While both aver that relational thinking transcends the binary frames of substantialism in IR, their commitment to “Chineseness” seems to impede their endeavour (Shih 2022). The issue is “how to respect difference (pluralities) without being trapped by it (fragmentation)” (Ling 2019, 35). However, despite (or, perhaps, because of) such inconsistencies and flaws, Zhao’s and Qin’s work is at the heart of Sinophone relational perspectives. The following sections will therefore outline the relational frames proposed by Zhao and Qin.

## The *tianxia* relationality of Zhao Tingyang

Zhao Tingyang has become the main intellectual advocate for the notion and practices of *tianxia* (usually translated as “all-under-heaven”). According to Zhao (2021), it is misguided to treat the concept of *tianxia* as a shorthand for a *Pax Sinica*. In fact, he goes as far as stressing explicitly that the all-under-heaven system is conceptually distinct

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from the Chinese tributary system (*chaogong tixi*). Thus, while the modern Chinese state is imbued with “the *tianxia* spirit” it nevertheless transformed it “into a state spirit, changing a world structure into a state structure and consequently turning China into a ‘world-structured’ country” (Zhao and Tao 2019, 22). In this respect, the suggestion is that the contemporary Chinese state is not necessarily the preordained leader of a global relational *tianxia* order; instead, leadership is embedded in the ongoing practices of acceptance and recognition and is “open to any qualified candidates who best know the Way (*dao*) to improve the happiness of all people universally” (Zhao 2006, 31).

For Zhao, *tianxia* represents a global relational ordering principle. His point is that the Westphalian world order of sovereign states presents the “international” as the anarchic stage for zero-sum games of incessant conflict and contestation. The outcome of such framing is the prioritization of the most beneficial unilateral strategy (the maximization of individual national interest) rather than the most beneficial mutual interactions (the minimization of mutual harm) (Zhao 2021). Zhao therefore proffers “methodological relationalism” as a cure for the substantialism of the IR mainstream. Methodological relationalism volunteers a “universal approach to understanding and explaining human actions and values in terms of relations rather than individuals (independent agents, subjects, or monads)” (Zhao 2015, 49). This is an approach that advocates an inclusive global outlook “through the world” rather than “of the world,” which shows predilection for perspectives only from a certain part of the world (Zhao 2009, 6-8). At the same time, methodological relationalism has a normative slant, as it insists on providing “a better horizon to discover solutions to the problems of conflict, as well as a more reasonable and feasible approach to deal with problematic situations of the multiversal world and the multicultural society with peoples of different hearts” (Zhao 2015, 49).

The key unit of analysis in this relational framing is the Earth. From this perspective, all other international actors – be they nation-states, international organizations, etc. – are located inside the main unit of analysis and as such they need to develop meaningful interactions through which they can share its space and cohabit productively. The notion and practices of *tianxia* outline an ontology of coexistence premised on mutuality and consideration. The irruptive dialogicality of Zhao’s ontology of coexistence echoes the dynamics of “relational calculation,” whose basic consideration is “never demand too much; always leave room for the unknown; and, most important, always take others into consideration (briefly, never maximize self-interest)” (Zhao 2015, 50). Thus, in contrast to the conflictual interactions between the Westphalian self and its many others, the *tianxia* system proposes “politics of harmony for a world in which relations prevail far and near among nations, as opposed to hostile differentiation between self and others. In a world with no enemies, harmony becomes possible” (Zhao 2009, 14).

In this setting, Zhao (2015, 49) reads the *tianxia* system as an instance of a relational world politics premised on harmonious interactions embedded in global “familyship.” Such an idealized (if not, utopian) global vision which does not expect nor strive for uniformity promotes a “multiverse of compatibility” through interactions (Zhao 2015, 62). Hence, in contrast to Western modalities of cosmopolitanism redolent with imposing universalizing normativity that should “apply to all individuals,” *tianxia* offers a set of principles that would “apply to all relations” (Zhao 2015, 62). The relational flavour of this move is associated with the convivial, yet dissonant cross-pollination of values, narratives, and practices in the study of global life. International actors are not just isolated entities moving about in the vacuum of world affairs; instead, they are entangled in and produced by multitudes of relations among and across many different spatio-temporal contexts. In this respect, actors (and their agency) have effects only to the extent that they are in relations with others.

### The *guanxi* relationality of Qin Yaqing

Probably, the most prominent Sinophone account of relationality in IR is associated with the work of Qin Yaqing. The concept and practices of *guanxi* (translated as either “relations” or “relationality”) provides the foundational wherewithal for his relational theory of world politics. As Qin (2011, 52) acknowledges, *guanxi* is the pivot of “social relations, of relational management, and of relational governance.” Qin’s point of departure appears to have been his frustration with the processual relationalism proposed by Jackson and Nexon (1999). In particular, he takes issue with their inability to problematize the “Western rationalism” underpinning the monological knowledge production of substantialism in IR (Qin 2009, 14). For Qin, this flaw not only constrains the endeavours of Jackson and Nexon (1999), but leads them to promulgate an equally Eurocentric, isolated (and isolationist) “relations-for-relations sake”

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approach as that of the substantialism they seek to debunk (Qin 2018). As such, Qin's relational theory of IR seeks to furnish a comprehensive understanding of the world as a complex network of relationships, in which each actor is defined through the contextual roles enacted in the ongoing process of relations with others.

Qin's key claim is that relations are part of, constitutive of, and reflective of a broader context of interactions. The suggestion is that "the IR world is a universe of interrelatedness" (Qin 2016, 35). It is amidst such radically social embeddedness that "meanings" are produced through the practice of interactions. This perspective urges the reconsideration of global life as a "complexly related whole" whose dynamics are embedded in and emerge from the contingent figurations and whose social vitality is "defined by the fundamental relatedness of all to all" (Qin 2016, 36). This interactive framing provides "an open becoming with unlimited possibilities" in which relations gain their "own life through the unfolding and dynamic relations among actors" (Qin 2016, 37). The point here is that while global life is a "complex network of flowing relations," it is the Confucian family ties that provide a meaningful framework for the governance of their relational webs. In its ideal type, the Confucian family reflects "the best of all possible relations, such as love, harmony, mutual aid, and reciprocal obligations" that furnish a utopian archetype of social interactions (Qin 2018, 72).

The suggestion is that relational actors do not seek to merge into a homogenous international society, but aspire for the dialogical management of their differences through interaction so that these do not lead "to conflict and disorder, but on the contrary, can add up to stability" (Qin 2016, 39). Qin's proposition is that in such a dynamic context power itself is relational. Rather than a material possession or an equation of capabilities, power becomes a contingent reflection of intersubjective and circumstantial relational practices. As a result, the capacity to act transpires as a function of the ongoing ability of social actors to adapt, manage, and navigate the multiplicity of flows animating their "relational circles; an actor is more powerful because she has larger relational circles, more intimate and important others in these circles, and more social prestige because of these circles" (Qin 2016, 42). In this setting, both "relations are power" and "relations always influence [enlarge and/ or constrain] the exercise of power" (Qin 2009, 16-18).

The crucial inflection is that in contrast to substantialism where actors actively seek influence (in the sense of power *over* others), relational perspectives stress the resilience of relations by reinforcing the strength of ties through ongoing commitment to and active participation in interactions. Such logic of relationality is informed by what Qin calls *zhongyong* dialectics. Usually translated as "taking the middle course," *zhongyong* provides the epistemic foundations for engaging global life, premised on the realization that polarities are immanently inclusive of each other, mutually constitutive, and complementary (Qin 2016, 58). The relational logic of Qin's *zhongyong* dialectics seeks to offer a comprehensive engagement with the overall context of interactions by embracing its complexity. The messiness and unpredictability of interactions suggests that the relational totality constitutes a social context, which shapes and is shaped by, enables and is enabled by contingent moments of interactions.

## In lieu of a conclusion: disclosing relationality beyond the West

The relationality disclosed by the Sinophone accounts of Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing seeks to contribute meaningfully to the decentring of IR by outlining feasible post-Western and global modes of inquiry. In this setting, the mechanistic (and nearly clockwork) features of the substantialist imaginaries of the mainstream disclose a normalization of oppression evidenced by the control, domination, and exploitation of various others – be they human (indigenous, non-Western, gender, and other vulnerable communities) or non-human (nature, species, and objects) (Cudworth et al. 2018; Kavalski 2020). By drawing attention to the ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure, and order, amongst the diversity of roles, form, and matter implicated in, enacting, and enabling global life, Sinophone relational approaches intend openings that make it possible to flee the substantialist partitioning of the world.

Thus, by moving away from the substantialist universe of IR, Sinophone relational approaches amplify the call for emancipatory ethics and politics, while advocating negotiated socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative manner (Chen 2012; Cho 2015). Inhabiting a relational universe reveals not only the interdependence between international

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actors, but also their mutual implication in each other's interactions and roles as well as the overwhelming embeddedness of these relations in the world. By eliciting such registers of worlding mutuality, Sinophone relational approaches advocate the ethical and political promise of transcending the expected by engaging creatively with the contradictions, challenges, and opportunities of an entangled and unpredictable global life. The kind of IR which they engender is one that thrives on the conscious exploration and encounter with the interstitial and relational.

In this respect, Sinophone relational perspectives seek to contribute meaningfully to the disclosure of modes for understanding, explanation, and encounter that are not only attuned, but also able to sustain complexity, foster dynamism, encourage the cross-pollination of disparate ideas, and engage the plastic and heterogeneous processes that periodically overwhelm, intensify, and infect (while all the time animating) the mercurial trajectories of global life. The interlocutors of Sinophone relationality in IR insist that rather than being fearful of analytical crossroads and the unexpected (and unintended) encounters that they presage, IR should embrace the uncertainty attendant in the journey beyond the substantialist ontology of the world. In contrast to the dualistic bifurcations that dominate IR imaginaries, the encounter and engagement with relationality both illuminates and reminds the study of world affairs that the complex patterns of global life resonate with the fragility, fluidity, and mutuality of global interactions. In the context of ongoing and contingent mutual co-constitution, any occurrence does not exist merely in isolation (as a stand-alone event) but reflects a nexus of innumerable interactions which imbue one another in the shifting tapestry of global social relations.

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