

## Student Feature - Theory in Action: Asian Perspectives on a 'Chinese School'

Written by Pichamon Yeophantong

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/27/student-feature-theory-in-action-asian-perspectives-on-a-chinese-school-of-ir/>

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG, JUL 27 2019

**This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.**

In China, the construction of a Chinese school of IR theory has become a national preoccupation that resonates strongly with China's global aspirations. At a time when the Chinese government is emphasising the country's rich cultural – namely, Confucian – heritage in official rhetoric, Chinese IR scholars are increasingly turning to ancient Chinese political thought for insights that transcend both time and geography.

*China's Foreign Relations: Theories & Approaches*

*The Chinese School of International Relations: Myth or Reality?*

<http://www.allazimuth.com/2017/01/21/the-chinese-school-of-international-relations-myth-or-reality/>

Although having been in development since the late 1920s, early attempts to build a Chinese school can be traced back to the late 1950s, when the focus of academic debates began to earnestly shift from learning from the West to rejecting Western IR and developing a distinct Chinese IR approach. This shift crystallised with the rift in Sino-Soviet relations during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, whereupon the Soviet Union's approach to IR was officially denounced within China. The late 1980s saw a clearer division emerge between Chinese scholars who favoured Western IR approaches and those who pushed for IR theory with Chinese characteristics. Maoist scholars like Liang Shoude argued for the rejection of Western theories and the development of a Chinese model instead. Subsequent debates in the early 2000s largely centred on the hegemonic status of Western IR. Here, the notion of establishing a Chinese school replaced the more ideologically driven objective of theorising with Chinese characteristics.

*Confucianism*

<https://asiasociety.org/education/confucianism>

The Chinese school project thus came to be defined not only in opposition to a 'prejudiced' IR discipline, but also in light of the challenges faced by China as a rising power within an American-dominated, globalising world (Wang and Han 2016, 54). It is in this way that Chinese IR perspectives draw upon Western IR theories, while being equally coloured by Maoist-socialist ideas, ancient Chinese political thought and China's own experiences in navigating the international terrain.

*The Tian-Xia System from a Metatheoretical Perspective*

<http://www.diskurs-zeitschrift.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/hueckel.pdf>

According to Qin Yaqing (2016), a theory of 'relationality' postulates that states as social actors base their actions on

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the nature of the relations they have with others. The logic of relationality thus dictates that 'an actor tends to make decisions according to the degrees of intimacy and/or importance of her relationships to specific others' (Qin 2016, 37). This logic is founded upon ancient Chinese philosophy that emphasises the importance of respecting, and behaving in line with, the hierarchy of relationships (e.g. between the emperor and heaven, king and subject, father and son) to social and even cosmological stability. But of particular significance here is the relationship between the two opposite forces, *yin* and *yang*, which is seen to govern all other relationships. The existence of *yin* is seen as dependent on *yang*, which effectively makes them two complementary halves of a whole. This notion of inclusivity – that 'each of a pair is inclusive of the other' (Qin 2016, 40) – is central to the concept of *Zhongyong* ('the Middle Course'), which suggests how opposites give rise to positive interactions, rendering harmony, not conflict, as the state of nature. The theory of relationality is one that seeks to explain how contradictions can coexist and also how their coexistence is necessary to functioning relationships. Considering how world politics operates on the basis of ambivalent relationships, where a state can be perceived as an ally one moment and a threat the next, relationality becomes a useful theory.

*Taking China Seriously: Relationality, Tianxia, and the "Chinese School" of International Relations*

<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-602>

Take, for example, the relationship between China and the Philippines. Political ties between these two countries, while longstanding, have been frayed due to their competing territorial claims over a chain of islands and atolls in the South China Sea, which are believed to hold valuable gas deposits and strategic importance. As both countries have become ever bolder in their attempts to assert ownership over the islands, tensions have flared. In 2016, the Philippines won an arbitration case that concluded that China has no legal basis to claim historic rights to the South China Sea. The Chinese government strongly rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling. Speculations soon emerged of a coming military conflict between the two countries. Yet, no military conflict occurred. Despite animosity on both sides over this issue, economic relations between China and the Philippines continue to grow.

*The South China Sea Dispute Explained (from the Chinese perspective)*

From the perspective of relationality, both political tension and economic cooperation constitute the Sino-Philippine relationship. Applying the *Zhongyong* concept, one can assume that conflict is *not* unavoidable within this relationship. If anything, military conflict would constitute an aberration to the status quo – something that is costly to both sides. Such a prospect could thus serve to compel China and the Philippines to seek out new avenues for conflict resolution and cooperation as a means to restore balance between the oppositional forces within the relationship. Shortly after the arbitration ruling, Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte articulated his desire to negotiate directly with China on the South China Sea issue, even proposing joint resource development in the contested waters and urging the Chinese government to assist the Philippines with infrastructure development. A Chinese white paper (2017) published after the ruling, while reaffirming China's claims in the South China Sea, reiterated Beijing's commitment to settling the dispute via negotiation and consultation.

*Relationality, Tianxia, and the Chinese School of International Relations*

Via a relationality perspective, we can expect that harmonious contradictions will continue to characterise the Sino-Philippine relationship, as cooperation between the two countries persists despite tensions. This is an important demonstration of the value of the Chinese school as it runs contrary to what mainstream IR theorists, who ground their analyses of interstate interactions in a conflictual state of international anarchy, would lead us to expect.

*Is There a 'Chinese School' of IR?*

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[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141577/wp188\\_noesselt.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141577/wp188_noesselt.pdf)

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