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.

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.

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/

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

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?
Student Feature - Theory in Action: Asian Perspectives on a 'Chinese School'
Written by Pichamon Yeophantong

https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141577/wp188_noesselt.pdf

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