Reflections on Confucian Cosmology and the Chinese School of IR

As an academic discipline, International Relations (IR) has built its meta-theoretical foundations upon various dualistic meta-narratives (e.g., identity v. difference, center v. periphery, civilization v. barbarism, and so on) and the Newtonian mechanics that pursues linear causation, treating global politics as a closed system of discrete, atomistic actors where their linear inputs are supposed to produce linear outputs. Against this backdrop, this article examines the efforts made by two leading scholars of the Chinese School of IR (hereafter Chinese School), Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing, whose works claim to be informed by Confucianism. In order to see whether and how far Confucian cosmology has served as an alternative meta-theoretical resource to theorize global politics differently. While the potential (and limits) of Confucian cosmology may deserve further exploration in IR, this article finds that it does not constitute the meta-theoretical backbone of their respective theoretical constructs. Rather, their engagement with Confucian cosmology has been marginal, selective, and even contradictory. In addressing the disconnection between Confucian cosmology and theories of the Chinese School, we focus on how they are (un)related.

Confucian Cosmology: A Brief Sketch

Being Confucian, as Tucker (1998: 8-9) puts it, 'implies realizing the ethics of relatedness at the heart of the universe…generat[ing] reciprocal resonances expressed through patterned correspondences with all forms of life'. The best exemplar is a famous motto from the *Great Learning* (*Da Xue*): 'Cultivate the self, regulate the family, govern the state, then harmonize the world' *(Xiu shen, qi jia, zhi guo, ping tianxia)* . It indicates that, through self-cultivation, everyone can contribute to the harmony of *tianxia* or world order in a flexible concentric ripple by being a virtuous human being in various relational roles, such as a family member, a state official, or a global leader.

Under this role-contextual relationality, positive mutual responsiveness is what people ought to do in their encounters with their counterparts and, in so doing, they co-constitute each other and a harmonious *tianxia* emerges out of such co-constitutions. Moreover, maintaining intersubjective reciprocity sustains the dynamics of relationship between humans and nonhuman parts of nature, including non-living things. Confucian traditions orient people to cherish things under their use, , but for appreciating these things' making themselves available to the users.

Although Confucianism's nontranscendent feature and emphasis on human agency often leads to an impression that the pursuit of mutual responsiveness is either between humans or from humans to the nonhumans, it is important to recall the *tian–di–ren* dynamics that the nonhumans are not considered agency-less and have the ability to respond to/reciprocate humans, without which *tianxia* would not be able to maintain or restore its harmony in the mid- to long term. Seen from Confucian cosmology, it is no longer plausible to separate the subject from the purported object and an intimate, non-dualistic unity emerges, While this perspective of relationality remains alien to mainstream IR dominated by the paradigm of positivist science, it is nothing new for such Asian thought as Buddhism and Daoism and compatible with the latest developments in the philosophy of science: as far as quantum physics is concerned, a photon can appear as a particle or a wave in response to what the self-proclaimed neutral scientist wants to see.

Homegrown IR Theorizing by Zhao Tingyang

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It may seem reasonable to suppose that Confucian cosmology can contribute to the development of homegrown IR theory in East Asian societies, at least play a central role in shaping the meta-theoretical foundations of (self-proclaimed) Confucianism-informed theoretical constructs. To what extent has this been the case? It is instructive to start with Zhao Tingyang's theory of *tianxia* system, for the rich meanings associated with this notion 'encompass the cosmological construction, moral belief, and self-identity of the Chinese geo-culture' (Shahi and Ascione 2016: 323). Moreover, he is the first Chinese intellectual who made *tianxia* a buzzword in contemporary IR.

Zhao (2006) argues that world problems cannot be solved by international theory, which is derived from the present international system of nation-states. By contrast, he maintains that his *tianxia* theory is truly 'worldly' because it is all-inclusive, providing a superior alternative to Westphalian international theories characterized by their confrontational dualism. In Zhao's conceptualization, *tianxia* consists of the following physical, psychological, and political components: the earth, *minxin* (people's general will), and a world institution. To materialize his ideal-type worldly world, governance must be grounded on the 'whole world under heaven' by obtaining the 'hearts of all peoples' through a utopia of 'the-world-as-one-family' (ibid.: 30). Zhao considers his *tianxia* system in terms of three structurally uniform levels: family, state, and *tianxia*. Family is treated as the most fundamental (hence universal) ethical institution, for family-ship is the smallest and 'irreducible location of harmony, cooperation, common interests and happiness' (ibid.: 33). In a nutshell, the three-level *tianxia* system can be understood as the reproduction of family at all levels within which political governance and ethical legitimacy mutually reinforce and justify each other.

Spatially and temporally, Zhao sees today's world as a 'non-world' waiting to fully acquire its maturity as a whole, a process to which China can and should contribute as a 'knowledge power'. This comes close to the linear, progressive meta-narrative embedded in the 'civilizing missions' of the 19th century and the mainstream modernization and development theory of the 20th. His emphasis on the use of a world standard to deal with world issues so as to synchronize the physical, psychological, and political dimensions of a harmonious *tianxia* reveals that he is influenced more by structural functionalism in Western social science rather than Confucian cosmology (Shahi and Ascione 2016). It has not been missed out by his critics (ibid.) that the epistemological inclination of his conception is similar to *Vishishtadvaita* ('qualified monism') *vis-à-vis* comparable notions such as *Advaita* (which stresses the globe as an 'already-connected single reality' within which no part holds higher ontological significance) in Hindu philosophy. Zhao's *tianxia* theory thus fails to escape from the dualistic subject-object distinction and ends up reproducing it; trapped in a competitive mode, his analysis is driven by a desire to demonstrate that his Chinese theory of *tianxia* system is truly worldly and more sophisticated than the Western-originated nation-state system. The familiar distinction between humans and nature is similarly maintained in a scheme where the earth is 'out there' to be exploited for a prosperous, anthropocentric

Ironically, Zhao's occasional engagement with Confucian cosmology exposes another inner difficulty of his *tianxia* system. Against the critique that his theory neglects the individual and individual rights, Zhao (2006) resorts to a Confucian ontology of relations. He asserts that individuality does not make sense unless the individual is embedded in social relations and family is the fundamental unit where such relations take place. However, his proposal (family as the building block of the *tianxia* system) means that there is little protection against the adults' abuse of power in relation to the underaged under this potentially paternalistic scheme (Chang 2011).

Homegrown IR Theorizing by Qin Yaqing

Qin Yaqing, arguably the most renowned advocate of the Chinese School, has devoted himself to constructing Chinese IR theory since 2005 (Qin and Lu 2005). He developed 'processual constructivism' in Chinese (Qin 2012) and later translated and expanded it into an English book titled '*A Relational Theory of World Politics*' (Qin 2018).

Qin has acknowledged that his Chinese relational IR theorizing was inspired by the established Anglophone IR scholarship such as Wendt's social constructivism (1999) and Jackson and Nexon's processual relationalism (1999), in addition to the homegrown Sinophone socio-psychological and cultural-anthropological scholarship such as Hwang's Confucian relationalism (2006), Fei's *From the Soil* (1992), and Liang's *The Essential Features of Chinese Culture* (2012 [1949]). His theory-building rests on two core assumptions. First, Chinese culture is different from Western culture (Qin 2018). Second, theory is a socio-culturally bonded intellectual product (Qin 2005). Therefore, a

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Chinese IR theory will definitely emerge. With an essentialist take on cultural identity, the problematic that concerned him was not about IR theorizing *per se.* Rather, it was about how to construct an IR theory with a birthmark of Chinese culture (Qin 2012). Specifically, he identified the subject of Chinese society as Confucian, and relationality as the Lakatosian 'hardcore' of the Chinese School. This move resulted in an epistemological binary, for he associated the West with rationality, and China, relationality (Qin 2009; 2018: ch. 2). Qin then moved on to engage with the relational turn in Anglophone IR, which worked to create an impression that his Chinese relational theorizing was analytically and culturally equivalent (Qin 2012). While he expected the Chinese School's building blocks to be more inclusive (Qin 2006), his juxtaposition of the West and China essentialized and reproduced a binary way of knowing and doing IR, which went against the relational Confucian cosmology. With the urge of crafting an IR theory with Chinese identity, Qin has conceived IR theory in an ideational more than phenomenal, descriptive more than analytical, and literal more than intellectual way, making his *Chinese* IR theory more a rhetorical narrative than a theoretical toolbox.

Unlike Hwang (2006) and Ames (2011) who probe into the relationship between Confucianism and the harmonious aspects of Chinese society in an ethics-sensitive manner, Qin rarely addresses the ethical mentalities and functions of Confucianism in maintaining order and social harmony. Moreover, without clarifying the underlying mechanism of Confucian relationality in world politics, his contribution to IR's relational turn has been obscure at best. Unable to illuminate the tension between 'analytical relations' and 'ethical relations', his theoretical construct not only makes Confucian relations 'fall back to the state' but also fails to pinpoint the essential merits of Confucian relational theorizing. In short, Qin's pick-and-mix approach makes it difficult to tell what 'relations' means in his relational theory of world politics, ontologically and analytically. The way he conceptualizes relations has rendered an encompassing, organic, and normative notion in Confucianism a narrow, anthropocentric, and mechanical slant.

Finally, the wisdom and ethics taught in Confucianism is not only appreciated in and beyond East Asia but also helps to make Chinese civilization a common heritage for human beings. Generations of world philosophers and Sinologists have rejuvenated Confucian thought to meet their contemporary needs, such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Daniel A. Bell. Some IR theorists, e.g. Kang (2010), Katzenstein (2012), and Shih *et al.* (2019), have also recognized the Confucianism-informed interaction patterns among individuals and political entities. Unlike these scholars, Qin has not shown his take on the normative value of Confucianism, even though he was inspired by Hwang's Chinese socio-psychological theory that explicitly deals with ethical relations in Chinese societies. If Qin does not refer to relations in a normative sense as the aforementioned researchers do, a good positivist social scientist might expect him to operationalize relations as a causal variable for specifying how relational world politics works. But his relational theorizing fails to spell out its core research question, and it is unclear as to how to employ its concepts of relations and processes in investigating global affairs. All in all, Qin succeeded in making a catchy brand of the Chinese School of IR by learning from, and speaking to, his Western counterparts (somehow confusingly), but failed to engage with Confucian thought in any substantial detail.

Conclusion: the need to Move from an Identity Strategy to a Feasible Alternative to Mainstream IR

In the burgeoning literature on 'non-Western' IR, homegrown theorists have been eagerly looking for local inspirations for IR theorizing with global implications. While it is indeed imperative to promote ontological parity of IR knowledge production across geocultural sites, many endeavors have not paid sufficient attention to the meta-theoretical foundations of their theory-building, hence running the risk of reproducing same epistemic violence associated with the dominant Western theories. As this article has shown, leading Chinese School theorists have popularized such Confucian buzzwords as relations and *tianxia* in scholarly discourse, which eased the identity crisis of a rising China to some extent (Wang 2013). Yet, careful scrutiny reveals that neither Zhao nor Qin adopts a meta-theoretical framework informed by Confucian cosmology. Instead, they have forced relational, ethical, and endogenous Confucian concepts into their structural, a-ethical, and exogenous 'Chinese' theory, resulting in reproducing exclusion (rather than all-inclusiveness), hierarchy (rather than equity), and binary opposition (rather than interbeing or co-constitution). In a nutshell, Confucianism is enlisted to demonstrate the 'Chinese-ness' of the homegrown theory in question, which, at the same time, derives its 'universality' from the cited Western theories. Nevertheless, a feasible alternative IR theory must go beyond this stage of appropriation and be more self-reflective about what should constitute its meta-theoretical foundations.

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Our finding does not imply that Confucianism is meaningless to IR theorizing or it is impossible for a refurbished processual constructivism or theory of *tianxia* system to yield useful insights to an IR discipline dominated by Western theories and concepts. The task remains as to how to renew both Confucianism and the study of IR according to the needs of our time. As a case in point, Confucian cosmology can readily add to the 'posthuman turn' in IR. It highlights the discipline's long-standing anthropocentric bias, which also underpins most of the ongoing discussions about relationality in IR. The Confucian—and, indeed, Buddhist (Ling 2019) and Daoist (Ling 2014)—quest for mutual responsiveness and interbeing between humans and non-humans are compatible with some posthuman perspectives. In Gunderson and Hollings' complexity thinking (CT)-informed concept of panarchy (2002), for example, the world consists of numerous nested, overlapping, and intersected collections of complex adaptive systems. These systems comprise both human and non-human sub-systems and the collapse of any one of these sub-systems will have serious repercussions for the eco-system as a whole. Confucian cosmology enables us to engage with panarchy while going beyond the rationalist or utilitarian paradigm in the knowledge tradition of science.

Notes

[*] By comparing the contents of Qin's two books on Chinese relational IR theorizing, it is clear that the newly composed part is Chapter 8 'Power and Relation'.

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