

Review Essay

The World as Viewed from China: Theorising Governance, Leadership and Relationality in the 21st Century

The objectives of this review article are straightforward. First, I examine three influential thinkers from contemporary China each offering us a distinctive perspective of interrelated aspects of China's place in the world in the twenty-first century. Second, I seek to flesh out implications of each of their arguments in terms of the visions they articulate. Finally, I hope to raise some pertinent concerns for students of International Relations (IR) in India based on recent Chinese engagements with International Relations Theory (IRT). In this connection and through the work of these thinkers, I examine strategies that select Chinese scholars have adopted to carve out a global niche for themselves, specifically in the realm of IRT.

To disaggregate the road map further, I begin with the work of Qin Yaqing, whose book *A Relational Theory of World Politics* was published originally in 2012. It was subsequently re-written and translated into English by Qin himself and eventually published by Cambridge University Press in 2018. Two other texts offer us a good sense of Qin's provenance in theoretical terms. His interview appeared in *Theory Talks* in 2011 titled 'Qin Yaqing on Rules vs. Relations, Drinking Coffee and Tea, and a Chinese Approach to Global Governance'. I also rely on a 2018 article in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* titled 'A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories' to bring us up to speed with the latest theoretical inflections and evolution in Qin's thought. In the latter article, Qin contextualises his work in relation to both Tingyang Zhao and Yan Xuetong. The recent work of all these three scholars is also the focus of this account.

The second author and text that draws my attention here is the philosopher Zhao Tingyang's book titled *Redefining a Philosophy for World Governance*. It treads important ground in terms of exploring the ideational underpinnings that might inform China's

embrace of a larger role in the contemporary international system. Zhao offers his readers a lucid conceptual tract on *Tianxia* inviting us to mull over the conditions under which this vision could come to fruition in the twenty-first century. His book belongs to a series on 'Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture' and was translated into English by Tao Liqing and published in 2019 by Palgrave Macmillan jointly with the Foreign Language Training and Research Publishing Company in Beijing. Prior to this, Zhao is also credited with other works including *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of World Institution* that appeared in 2011 with the China Renmin University Press. Zhao's work has often been sharply contrasted to Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis (2018–19: Berggruen Institute). On 7 February 2018, Zhao posed a timely question about *Tianxia* in *The Washington Post* asking 'Can this ancient Chinese philosophy save us from global chaos?'. His answer was a categorical yes.

A final author, I consider in this account, is Yan Xuetong. He is best known for his book *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Along with his collaborators, Daniel Bell and Sun Zhe, this book was published by Princeton University Press in 2011. However, for our purposes here, I turn to his latest book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*, which was published in 2019 by Princeton University Press as part of a series Bell edits titled 'The Princeton-China Series'. Yan, in this more recent offering, promises us an ambitious 'systematic theory explaining the mechanism for a rising state [read China] to replace the leadership of a dominant state [read United States] in an interdependent international system, including both the modern global system and geographically separated ancient interstate systems' (p. xiii). To derive a better sense of Yan's *weltanschauung*, I also return to his 2012 interview on *Theory Talks* titled somewhat mysteriously (particularly in terms of the last phrase) as 'Yan Xuetong on Chinese Realism, The Tsinghua School of International Relations, and The Impossibility of Harmony'. Yan's 2016 intervention on 'Political Leadership and Power Redistribution' and a subsequent 2018 article titled 'Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order', both of which appeared in *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, are also of relevance here.

THE INEVITABILITY OF RELATIONALITY IN WORLD POLITICS

There is much to commend in Qin's *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Let me spell out some virtues of the book. It is premised on a rigorous engagement with mainstream IRT. It does not either caricature or demonise Western IRT, even while engaging its key tenets, expressing its disagreements and pointing to some conspicuous areas of scholarly neglect. Second, it is anchored strongly in a cultural provenance, principally Confucian and Daoist traditions as relates to Chinese history and political thought. Qin is a keen advocate of a cultural approach to IRT and does not believe in the concept

of independent IRT. Theorists for Qin belong to a particular time and place and those interested in a particular theorist, cannot be oblivious to these temporal and spatial inheritances and their influence on their intellectual make-up (Creuzfeldt 2011).

Qin invites all scholars of IR to be aware of the grammar of their 'background knowledge' (drawing on the work of John Searle) as also their specific 'communities of practice' (2018a: 33–42; 1995). His central thesis relates to a relational basis of all world politics and recognition that 'power' and 'authority' as concepts do not make sense when viewed outside the relational prism. He affirms the centrality and inevitability of grappling with human relations. The debt to the Confucian lineage appears in Qin's relational arguments about world politics. He stresses the connections between the family, community and the world. He retains a healthy scepticism when it comes to notions of unproblematised universality. Qin introduces *Zhongyong* dialectics as a distinct methodology in its own right and acknowledges human agency within relational thought. He lays an emphasis on the possibility of the international cooperation premised on trust and eventually posits a synthesis between 'rule based' and 'relational based' normative political orders.

What other key claims has Qin advanced through his writings, which complement arguments in *A Relational Theory of World Politics*? There are number of these, but I shall confine myself to some essential dimensions here. One overall orientation that captures Qin's attitude towards IRT is his plea for 'pluralism' and the idea of the 'multiverse' (2018b: 415–434). He sharply rejects any attempts at 'standardization' (one size fits all) and is conscious of an unequal cultural encounter between Western IRT and others (2018b: 431). He does believe that canonical IRT has a limited repertoire of questions that far from exhaust the content of IRT. He encourages his students to delve into Chinese history to develop a richer cultural understanding of the milieu they belong to, and use that as a basis to recover possible theoretical resources for a more robust and inclusive notion of IR (Creuzfeldt 2011). To reiterate, Qin is invested in some sort of a synthesis between elements of Western and Chinese IRT. He, for instance, does not reject the idea of rationality altogether in his critique of individual rationality. Qin suggests that in relational theorising, 'relationality has ontological priority over rationality' and that 'relational management is the essence of politics' not without its own rationality (2018a: 221, 226).

While Qin is persuasive, I have some quibbles with his argument. First, I think is the ever present vulnerability of cultural determinism. There is always the possibility of assigning too heavy mono-causal weightage to one element over all others, that is, culture. At its worst, relational theory might serve to reinforce simple essentialist claims stemming from a particular cultural context. At its best, the relational theory could alter the way we look at the world based on the cultural lens we use to understand the lineage of ideas and practices better than we currently do. This is, especially, true of contexts that are less familiar to us.

Second, while relational dynamics could be on balance more constructively and yield desirable outcomes, as Qin suggests, what also merits attention is the role of

power in mediating these conversations. Again, Qin is not unaware of these dimensions. We still need to ask if brute material power might distort these conversations substantially to the detriment of the possibility of genuine pluralism. What are some of the other serious impediments to a 'global' IR beyond the ones already gestured to by Qin? Finally, is it possible that collective relational dynamics could end up, in some instances, reinforcing rather than ameliorating protracted conflicts and not necessarily guaranteeing purely beneficial political outcomes? More discussion around these themes could take this conversation forward, especially as it relates to the motivations of China in the twenty-first century, a question I return to later.

THE IDEATIONAL BASIS OF 'WORLD GOVERNANCE'

In *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance*, Zhao seeks to conceptually parse the category of *Tianxia* along with positing it as a model that China could adopt in setting the tone for the twenty-first century 'world governance'. What are some of the pillars on which Zhao's thesis rests? There are three clear chapters that Zhao structures his book around. The first deals with the conceptual basis of *Tianxia* and its lineage; the second deals with the idea of 'a world pattern state' and the final chapter spells out what *Tianxia* means for the contemporary world.

At the outset, Zhao makes a clear distinction between 'international politics' and 'world politics'. The former term, he argues, captures 'the natural primitive nature, rife with conflicts and hostility'. The latter term carries the hopes of the future, 'a new politics that can transcend hostilities'. Rejecting the logic of both imperialism and hegemony, Zhao makes a plea for 'another world outlook' that is 'benevolent' (p. 17). *Tianxia*, in his view, fits the bill because it has the ability to stitch together a complex and diverse international system.

What are some of its essential attributes? According to Zhao, *Tianxia* has 'demonstrated basic properties that are essential for a shared world system: (1) the *Tianxia* system must guarantee that the benefits of joining will outweigh those of staying outside, thus making all states willing to recognise it and join; (2) the *Tianxia* system must ensure that all states are interdependent in interests and that their relationship is mutually beneficial so as to secure a world order with universal safety and lasting peace; (3) the *Tianxia* system must be able to develop public interest, shared interest, and public enterprise beneficial for all states, so as to ensure the system is universally beneficial. In short, the *Tianxia* system must achieve the internalisation of the world, so that it has no externality.' (pp. 6–7). Further, *Tianxia* or the notion of 'all under heaven' is exercised in the real world through a 'Son of Heaven' who alone is 'mandated by Heaven to be its surrogate to govern the whole world' (p. 7).

The two big ideas in the *Tianxia* framework are 'compatibility' and 'coexistence'. In this rendition, 'the purpose of politics is to bring order to *Tianxia*, that is, to achieve

the maximisation of compatibility and coexistence. In this sense, state politics is just a preliminary form of politics, while world politics is truly the ultimate form of politics' (p. 10). Another central claim of the *Tianxia* 'political methodology' is the notion of 'all-inclusiveness'. The intent here is to make possible the 'maximization of cooperation and minimization of conflicts' (p. 17).

There are some other relevant claims stemming from this perspective. Zhao, for instance, rejects 'unilateral universality' that, in his view, was constituted by imperial and hegemonic projects in the past and prefers a 'relational universality'. This is 'a world system that can guarantee universal benefits to all people and to all nations; a world structure that is compatible and co-existential' (p. 46). Another thread that Zhao weaves in relation to his interlocutors in the Western world is recourse to the reasoning and metaphors of game theory. He cites Thomas Schelling in his work and is interested in the idea of averting zero-sum games, which often frames in his assessment the logic of international politics. He is invested in models that go beyond plain 'self-interest' logics and yet, states his philosophy of 'compatible universalism' in rational choice terms. He argues that we can understand this concept to mean 'any value that can be defined by symmetrical relations is a universal value. Obviously, only a rational symmetric relationship can prove to be universal and inevitable and can gain general consent. Any value that cannot be defined by symmetrical relations, only represents personal preferences or the specific values of a particular group' (p. 60). However, he expresses a clear preference for 'relational rationality' over 'individual rationality'. It is the former that can provide the firm basis 'to define universal values and compose a global constitution' (p. 64).

It might be worthwhile asking the question if there are some concepts that are akin to *Tianxia* in other civilisations. Kanti Bajpai and Siddharth Mallavarapu in their co-edited book on *India, the West and International Order*, the first in a multi-volume series on *India's International and Strategic Thought* gesture to the concept of the 'chakravartin' in Hindu political thought and that of the 'caliphate' in the Islamic political thought as potentially parallel claims of political ordering on a world scale (2019: 39–43). While there are internal conceptual differences, there are also overlaps in terms of the ambition and scale of the political projects envisaged.

Consistent with the spirit of Zhao's elaboration, we should be able to ask if *Tianxia* provides us an alternative Chinese political imaginary and eventually practice that challenges the imperial and hegemonic political orderings both of the European and North American vintage. Simply put, does *Tianxia* inaugurate a new language of political rule that is inclusive, benign and in our collective interests? Or does it yet again merely obscure a 'new hegemony', in this historical iteration, Chinese? (Callahan 2008). As of now, *Tianxia* only represents an ideal type. A simple thought experiment would be to reflect on how close or distant contemporary state practice, especially in China, is in the realm of its widening circles of 'relational enmeshment' (to use Qin's terms) in instantiating *Tianxia* for the twenty-first century.

THE IMPERATIVES OF AN ENDURING LEADERSHIP

The fundamental problem identified by Yan for the twenty-first century is the management of a major power transition, that is, a rising China contrasted to a declining United States. While Yan argues that Western liberalism is resilient and is not likely to disappear any time soon, his book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* advances a case for Chinese global leadership premised on a different model of 'humane authority' deriving from the Chinese political thought and more enlightened moments of its own political history. The case for 'moral realism', as a distinct theoretical stance, is clearly articulated in this account (2019). Building on the classical realist legacy of Hans Morgenthau, Yan argues at the outset that it is important to make connection between leadership, morality and strategic preferences (2016: 1–26). He also acknowledges the 'non-linearity' of human history (Creuzfeldt 2012).

Yan provides us with a range of typologies in this book. These include variants of both domestic and international leadership and international norms. Distinguishing between Daoist legacies, economic and political teleologies as well as social Darwinism, Yan argues that each of these strands carry implications for the nature of political leadership. 'Inactive', 'Conservative', 'Proactive' and 'Aggressive' forms of leadership correspond to these various domestic ideological strands (2019: 25–53). When it comes to the international facets of leadership, four major variants are discussed by Yan (2019: 104–125). These encompass 'humane authority' (the most benign), 'hegemony', 'anemocracy' and 'tyranny' (the most malign). A typology of norms is also erected. Once again, a connection is forged between forms of international leadership and specific norm variants. Tyrannical regimes support 'realpolitik' norms, 'anemocratic' regimes support 'coward-bully' norms, 'hegemonic' regimes endorse 'double standard' norms and 'humane authority' models of governance support 'morality' norms. What makes Yan's account particularly engaging are the scores of historical illustrations (both benign and malign) of these phases drawn from the Chinese history as well as other examples from the West (pp. 173–189).

In his 2018 piece alluded to earlier on Chinese values, Yan draws attention to three contenders in the political values discourse in China (pp. 1–22). These include 'official Marxism', 'economic pragmatism' and 'traditional' values. Of these three, he is of the view that 'traditionalism' is in the ascendant and the other two are not as strong; 'official Marxism' is more rhetorical, 'economic pragmatism' persists with economic interests critical to national security, but the original Deng Xiaoping directive of 'keeping a low profile' internationally ceases to be relevant in a changing world order (p. 8). The motivations for this shift may have more to do with the internal dynamics of the Chinese Communist party and its need felt for domestic re-invention in the interests of strengthening political legitimacy. 'Traditionalism' drawing on 'humane authority' or *wang* is linked to 'benevolence' (*ren*) and justice (*yi*). It serves as a basis for 'decision-making'. Yan though rather different from

Qin, is also interested in retaining elements from Western traditions, particularly of liberalism, when he makes the case for some form of political hybridity in the contemporary world. He envisages a possible synthesis between ‘three values of liberalism—equality, democracy, and freedom with the three Chinese traditional values—benevolence, righteousness, and rites’ (p. 10). Such a synthesis does not currently appear to have any real traction in terms of actual thinking or practice within China. To Yan, it is the political value of *wangdao* or ‘humane authority’ that could serve as the basis for an enduring leadership (pp. 48–53).

There are few recurring tropes in Yan’s account of leadership. The first is an intriguing invocation of ‘nonalignment’ as a principle steadfastly held on by China in its external dealings (pp. 35–36). Yan wants this to change. He makes a persistent plea that China must embrace new alliances and, in the process, expand its roster of allies, which will have implications eventually for the acceptability of China taking on a larger role within the international system. Second, Yan has also invested in the idea of security provision, which he argues China must provide to its close allies. Finally, his characterisation of the new world as bipolar (with the United States and China as the two key players) might provide room for further debate. For instance, India’s current External Affairs Minister, Dr Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, in his address on 1 October 2019 to the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C., characterised the world as multipolar. He observed, ‘And so today as the world is getting more multipolar, the West is also getting more multipolar, and that’s a very interesting dynamic when you look at the West’ (Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India).

Another proposition which might be worth reflecting on further, relates to Yan’s characterisation of a changing generational global perception about China. He argues that ‘People in developing countries admire China’s policy of setting clear national priorities that invest greatly in the future and as a consequence, are increasingly open to nondemocratic forms of government. In 2011, almost half of global millennials agreed that the idea of a strong leader was preferable to a democratic parliament and elections’ (p. 130). Yan makes the latter claim drawing on Neil Howe’s article in *Forbes* dated 3 October 2017 on millennials and their changing perceptions of democracy. Ian Bremmer on 13 February 2018 (also in the *Forbes*) echoed a similar sentiment in his piece titled ‘Is Democracy Essential: Millennials increasingly aren’t sure – and that should concern us all.’ While the current global *zeitgeist* appears to echo a preference for new forms of authoritarian populisms, it might still be premature to pronounce that this is indicative of a definitive plate tectonic shift, that is, the world gravitating towards the Chinese model. As Yan himself concedes elsewhere, the jury is not settled on this issue. In his own words, ‘Although it is conceivable that China’s material strength will match or even surpass that of the United States in the next two decades, whether or not China’s political ideology will wield as profound an influence on the international order as has American liberalism remains unclear’ (2018: 1–2).

IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Premised on a close reading of these Chinese engagements with IRT, I am inclined to ask what Indian scholars might learn from this set of experiences. My choice of these three figures and their recent works was not entirely accidental. I stumbled onto Chinese IRT, given my interest in theoretical scholarship in IR within the global South. However, this initial curiosity has led me to discover a fairly substantive and sophisticated body of engagement in contemporary China in this domain. I have merely sought to sample here representative voices of scholars who have carved a global niche for themselves. Notwithstanding some disagreements and questions, I have raised all the three slices of scholarship dealt with in this review article, which have their individual merits.

Qin makes an original contribution in terms of offering a fresh ontology (with epistemological implications) to think about IR from a location that is culturally specific. He is thorough in his engagement with the terms of Western IRT and actively participates in a conversation that goes well beyond the confines of China. He is anchored in the milieu that he treats as 'home'. Qin is open to the idea of a theoretical synthesis drawing on some of the elements from within Western IRT and demonstrates how to blend it with a 'relational' perspective that he develops on his own.

Zhao is a philosopher. There appears to be disciplinary resistance in some quarters within China to accept him in the fold of IR (Creuzfeldt 2012). However, the themes he works on (e.g., world governance), his prolific output and international standing, compel the IR scholars globally to take him more seriously. The enunciation here of *Tianxia* testifies to his immersion in a particular tradition of thinking within China. More significantly, his ability to extrapolate and make these ideas speak to our contemporary world addresses a curiosity around China's rise, its evolving motivations and likely behaviour ahead in shaping a new world order in the twenty-first century.

Yan's account on political leadership is again likely to garner much interest, especially for those seeking alternatives to the political vacuum, created by the retreat of western liberalism. While his pioneering work within the Tsinghua approach has already culminated in an important book named *Ancient Chinese Thought: Modern Chinese Power*, the book under review takes the conversation forward with regards to an important facet, namely, leadership. It does not shy away from presenting itself as an explicit theoretical innovation and straddles the world of global diplomacy and Chinese foreign policy moorings with some finesse. To what extent this is an entirely novel theoretical innovation is debatable?

For an observer of Chinese IRT from the outside, there are three elements that strike me as significant. First, there is a growing critical mass of scholars in China who are invested in theorising IR. Second, there is greater international attention being bestowed on these efforts. Two of the three books I have discussed are from leading international university presses, where Cambridge in one instance and Princeton in the other. Related to this, is the production of a strong journal dedicated to the Chinese study of IR. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, which is published by the

Oxford University Press ‘...on behalf of The Institute of International Relations, Tsinghua University’, is first rate and keeps a steady conversation around these themes with global contributions. Third, the turn to history has enriched Chinese IR. In India, there is a scope to fare better on all these counts.

Given India’s size and global ambition, the possibility of developing a more robust discursive community invested in the study of theorising IR must be welcomed. In terms of both books produced and journals devoted to IR, there is much left to be desired. At this point, there is no Indian journal of global standing devoted exclusively to the study of theoretical questions in IR. I have had occasion to reflect on the conversation between IR and History as disciplines in India (2018: 1–12). There is a fine tradition of rigorous historical scholarship in India, and it would be desirable to bring historically oriented and theoretically inclined scholars of IR in conversation with historians around a set of jointly evolved questions. While the Tsinghua approach is not without its critics, it at least brought together a number of scholars drawing on historical sources within China to pose first order theoretical questions in IR. Without either being imitative or unimaginative, there is something that Indian scholars could learn from here. There is a scope to enliven the associational life of scholars studying IR in India.

All in all, much more concerted thought has to go into creating the institutional conditions to incentivise Indian scholars participating more actively in a wider global theoretical conversation. Taking a leaf out of the Chinese experience, especially over the last decade, in this regard, might prove instructive to brace ourselves for a ‘global IRT’ (Bajpai 2009; Acharya & Buzan 2019). This is a plea advanced not in a spirit of competition between two Asian civilisations as much as enriching the global intellectual palate in theorising IR. Simultaneously, the hope is of equipping ourselves better to contend with an indeterminate telos for the twenty-first century.

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