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# Relationalism(s) Unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin's Theory of World Politics

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## Abstract

In a spirit of dialogue, this article engages Yaqing Qin's relational theory of world politics in a conversation by trying to relate it to Western theoretical partners outside of his (mainly Anglo-American) individualist and rationalist focus. The central piece of the analysis is Qin's relationalism, which provides the link between different levels of theorizing: as an ontology, it allows us to approach a different *Weltanschauung* or cosmology; as a theory, it purports to understand and explain how politicians act; as a hermeneutic bridge, it allows outsiders to understand the meaning of Chinese foreign policy actions; and as a strategy, it develops Confucian-inspired practical maxims and provides means to assess whether actors live up to them. This article will unpack his relationalism at these levels. It argues that by trying to closely match a single theory at all levels—in itself a highly respectable endeavor from which many scholars regrettably recoil—Qin underutilizes his ontological insights. By trying to provide the underlying inspirations that should help outside observers to correctly interpret Chinese conduct in world affairs, practice is read back into theory so that his relationalism becomes unnecessarily agency-centric and ends up underestimating relations of impersonal and non-conflictual power or domination. The move also forestalls other theoretical solutions arguably more faithful to his ontology, such as social theories of recognition with which it could be in dialogue. Finally, on the level of foreign policy strategy, the article invites exploration of the similarities between the open diplomatic process envisaged by Qin and the Helsinki process, as well as trust or confidence building measures in a system of diffuse reciprocity, as envisaged by (true) multilateralism.

## Introduction

Yaqing Qin's work on relationalism is an invitation. It offers scholars outside China, but not only them, a theory of world politics inspired by Chinese cosmologies. It translates this approach into a language with which to reach out and to communicate. By doing so, such a theory makes itself hospitable for dialogue and mutual learning. Just like Qin himself, I do not take it to constitute a vain attempt to essentialize a specific "Chinese theory

of International Relations,"[1] an exercise I have never found convincing, including with the so-called "English School."[2] There is no single Chinese culture, reducible to a single (Confucian) tradition, and therefore producing a single coherent International Relations (IR) theory. Indeed, even a single tradition can produce multiple theories. Such homogeneity does not exist anywhere, neither in China nor elsewhere. Any culture or intellectual tradition is multiple and heterogeneous.

This said, being socialized in particular environments provides us with a perspective that becomes our starting point in the ongoing academic and political communication.[3] This position is not static, however. It relentlessly shifts—and, indeed, it should do so. After having encountered new knowledge, one cannot step into the same river again, not only because the river changed, but because we did. We all become strangers to ourselves at some point, entangled in multiple processes of translations.

Qin engages in these translations by presenting and also contrasting his version of relationalism with the ones discussed in Western social theory. It is an ambitious project. He at times slides between an observational theory that explains or understands certain events, outcomes, worldviews, beliefs, or other phenomena and a foreign policy strategy that would be logically and ethically consonant with a certain worldview. In the former case, the underlying relational ontology informs a meta-theory, on whose assumptions about the social world a theory is to be constructed; in the latter, the ontology informs maxims for political conduct. Not only this, but the text also uses this reconstruction of a Confucian worldview as a way to make outsiders understand the way Chinese decision-makers may, in turn, understand the world. Given these multiple purposes, relationalism does a lot in the analysis: as an ontology, it allows us to approach a different Weltanschauung or cosmology; as a theory, it purports to understand and explain how politicians act; as a hermeneutic bridge, it allows outsiders to understand the meaning of Chinese foreign policy actions; and as a strategy, it develops Confucian-inspired practical maxims and provides means to assess whether actors live up to them.

In the following, I will unpack his relationalism at three levels of theorizing, namely the level of the explanatory theory itself, that of the underlying ontology that informs this explanatory theory, and, in turn, the level of the suggested foreign policy strategy to which this theory is connected. In my understanding, these levels are particularly salient in the theorizing of IR, at least as it developed in the West (leaving aside for a moment whatever that may precisely mean). IR is this peculiar discipline that constituted itself out of practical knowledge, translating practical maxims and behavioral norms into a scientific discourse.[4] There is hence an intrinsic tradition of linking explanatory theories to policy strategies, and vice versa. At the same time, the sheer diversity of starting points in a world society without final arbiter invites theorizing informed by a pluralism that has been traditionally expressed in irreducible schools of thought, the famous -isms. To the exasperation of perhaps not a few in IR, this pluralism was eventually anchored and conceptualized at the meta-theoretical

[1] As Yaqing Qin and Astrid Nordin rightly write in "Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2019), pp. 601–14, at page 602: "To be clear from the outset, we are not advocating a form of cultural essentialism, strategic or otherwise." See also the discussion in Sinan Chu, "Whither Chinese IR? The Sinocentric Subject and the Paradox of Tianxia-Ism," *International Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2022), pp. 57–87; and Xiaoting Li, "Saving National IR from Exceptionalism: The Dialogic Spirit and Self-Reflection in Chinese IR Theory," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2021), pp. 1399–423.

[2] Stefano Guzzini, "Calling for a Less 'Brandish' and Less 'Grand' Reconvention," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2001), pp. 495–501.

[3] Yaqing Qin, "A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018), pp. 415–34.

[4] Stefano Guzzini, *Realism in International Relations and International Political Economy: The Continuing Story of a Death Foretold* (London, New York: Routledge, 1998); Stefano Guzzini, "The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2013), pp. 521–41.

level during the so-called "Third Debate" of the 1980s and 1990s.[5] Ever since, IR theorists face the challenge (if they acknowledge it) of aligning the three levels in a consistent theoretical effort. Qin accepts the challenge. Relationalism is the answer. Whereas, for instance, Hans Morgenthau uses the concept and analysis of power, and Friedrich Kratochwil uses practices as the central links to provide coherence across the levels of meta-theory/ontology, IR theory, and political strategy,[6] Qin theorizes relationalism as the glue to bind them together.

But the links between these levels can also become problems for any theory, and so also for Qin's relationalism, as this article will argue. The main reason for this is the tension between the attempt to impose necessary coherence and the related, yet not necessary, tendency to achieve this by making single, linear links between the levels. Yet, such links are only straightforward in exceptional cases, as multiple explanatory theories are usually consistent with a single underlying ontology, and multiple strategies with a single explanatory theory (as never-ending debates among realists for the best strategy bear witness). Similarly, and theorizing from the other pole backward, certain foreign policy strategies can be informed by a multitude of explanatory theories. Thus, Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* is, among other things, an attempt to embed a foreign policy of self-restraint, often also called prudence in realist writings, in a constructivist explanatory theory that would provide a more consistent foundation for such a strategy than realism.[7]

By trying to closely match a single theory at all three levels, the main claim of this article, Qin underutilizes his ontological insights. There are other types of theories that would be compatible with his ontology and perhaps even express its commitment in a more consistent way. Indeed, some of the conceptual moves in his general framework of analysis and strategy seem to be in tension with the opportunities offered by the underlying relational cosmology. Inversely, by trying to provide the underlying inspirations that should help outside observers to correctly interpret Chinese conduct in world affairs, practice is read back into theory in a way that forestalls other theoretical solutions.

And yet, this critique is only possible for Qin's initial invitation to follow him on a dialogical journey. In my reading, Qin's theorizing responds to the responsibility of scholars in present-day world affairs for thinking world order ahead. I read his work as an invitation to think together about the daunting tasks of world affairs in which we have to do things together. Using Confucianism is an attempt by Qin to mobilize part of his own tradition in a manner that can both inform an external understanding of a different approach to world order (and to some extent a Chinese one) and be an invitation to all countries to follow a different type of foreign policy, including China. It is an invitation to think in reciprocity and open process, in a dialogue making our own grounds "hospitable" for translation.[8]

[5] For the so-called Third Debate, see Michael Banks, "The Inter-Paradigm Debate," in Margot Light and A. J. R. Groom, eds., *International Relations: A Handbook of Current Theory* (London: Frances Pinter, 1985), pp. 7–26; K. J. Holsti, *The Dividing Discipline: Hegemony and Diversity in International Theory* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985); Yosef Lapid, "The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1989), pp. 235–54; Yosef Lapid, "Quo Vadis International Relations? Further Reflections on the 'Next Stage' of International Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1989), pp. 77–88; Ole Wæver, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate," in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski, eds., *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 149–84.

[6] Stefano Guzzini, "Imposing Coherence: The Central Role of Human Practices in Friedrich Kratochwil's Theorising of Politics, IR and Science," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2010), pp. 301–22; Stefano Guzzini, "Embrace IR Anxieties (or, Morgenthau's Approach to Power, and the Challenge of Combining the Three Domains of IR Theorizing)," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2020), pp. 268–88.

[7] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[8] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *De langue à langue. L'hospitalité de la traduction* (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2022).

I hope I am able to respond in this spirit.[9] Therefore, in turn, I offer some approaches to rethinking relationalism in ways different but potentially compatible with his theory. At the level of explanatory theory, I propose to explore social theories of recognition that are wider than the particular understanding of Hegel, whom Qin sees as representative of Western traditions. Similarly, I draw on similarities between his foreign policy strategy of open process and confidence-building, as inspired by practices at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and a certain conception of multilateralism and European détente policies during the Cold War.[10] These invitations, in turn, are not meant to offer yet another episode of the fruitless claim that "we have been there before"—which we have not. It is adding a perhaps more European voice to the dialogue in the hope that the translations within IR can go on.

The article deals with the three levels in turn, starting from the underlying relational ontology that informs both observational theory and ultimately behavioral maxims.[11] This is necessary because the levels provide different types of knowledge and respond to different logics. Hence, the same term "relationalism" means quite different things. The first section will show the specificity of Qin's relational ontology in his understanding of immanence and the attached ontology of harmony. Rather than seeing relationalism in terms of how relations come before the units of analysis, how processes constitute agents and structures, so to speak, here the one is *within* the other. Not the co-constitution within a relationship is the issue, but that we are already within each other in the first place.

The second section details his observational theory or relational circles, which turns out to be a relatively agency-based approach that, so my claim, unduly neglects theories of impersonal rule or domination. For instance, the theory does not dwell on how these relational circles are established in the first place, or who plays what role in them. Importing family analogies with which relational circles and their context are introduced, Qin's approach ends up justifying relational preference, while neglecting the impersonal biases, material and intersubjective, that dis/empower them and the positional power positions that result from them. Consequently, it risks proposing an explanatory theory that naturalizes and de-politicizes the position of the father in his relational circles.

Finally, Qin's translation of relationalism into a foreign policy strategy stresses the role of open processes and reciprocity, as exemplified by the "comfort principle." He develops a "kinsperson's dilemma," where relational preference may not provide a solution in the management of tensions within and across relational circles. I develop a potential solution, for which, however, I need to side-step parts of his approach. It hopefully honors Qin's underlying concern to make outsiders understand a Chinese take on foreign policy in which national experiences are, however, not simply writ large (just as it is so often in US writings but also in some parts of the English School).

[9]  I hope readers will be lenient with me that, as part of this endeavor of engaging in a dialogue, I have decided to use footnotes for a relatively large set of references, including to my own work, so as to provide context to my argument.

[10]  It may not be fortuitous that recent practice-oriented approaches in diplomatic studies see relationalism, not substantialism, as the typical diplomatic habitus. See Rebecca Adler-Nissen, "Conclusion: Relationalism or Why Diplomats Find International Relations Theory Strange," in Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, eds., *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 284–308.

[11]  This focus on the three theoretical levels follows Qin, but one could also add a methodological level, where relationalism refers to a non-dualist position, not studying "causal connections between separate elements to which they themselves remain 'external' (a view of causality as involving the manipulation of elements and mechanisms to achieve outcomes)," but taking up "a position 'internal' to those elements and explicate things from that perspective (a common aspect of 'interpretive' approaches)." See Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Sujin Heo, "Working on Relationalism," *New Perspectives*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2022): 157–69, at page 163.

## Immanent relationalism and an ontology of harmony

Qin's relational thought differs at least in three components from mainstream Western social science and theory that also deals with relationalism. First, he is less interested in opposing relationalism to substantialism. There has been a recent, and not just Western, concern with trying to de-essentialize many of the units of our analysis and understanding. Instead, a relational analysis sees them always in the making, at least in social reality. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on these processes of constitution, be they concerned with nationhood, foreign policy roles and identities, or other such phenomena. Underlying the analysis is the potential power politics in these processes,[12] which constitute subjectivities (as in a post-Foucauldian approach) or the phenomena's properties and identity more generally: it puts "relations before states."[13] Such intersubjective and constitutive processes are then the initial focus of the analysis. For Qin, this does not resolve much, since we will still find ourselves with such identities once constituted, and those constitutive processes may be simply a refined, because processual and practice-oriented, way of understanding the effects of social structure.[14] Not that anyone has denied this, but for Qin the implication is that we have to think more in terms of some sort of dialectical relation between subjects and these constitutive processes than as preferring one side over the other, even if for merely research-pragmatic reasons.

Second, Qin's relational theory would insist on the immanence of the oppositions *within* each other (p. 116).[15] In his reading of the Western dialectical tradition (here in particular the Hegelian concern with recognition), the two different units co-constitute each other. However, the yin and yang understanding of these dialectics sees them as immanently related, not co-constituted. They are both two and one.

Third, and as a logical implication of this understanding of immanence, whereas the Hegelian tradition sees a struggle for recognition, i.e. a conflictual understanding of how these identities relate to each other (pp. 160ff), an immanent understanding of the dialectics assumes a naturally harmonious relation between agents. Of course, conflicts exist. But the correct understanding of the immanent relation is to recover a harmony intrinsically given by the immanent human and social relations. The dialectics are not resolved through conflict, but through "mutual transformability and accommodation of two different objects, forces, and principles" (p. 161), the "harmony of polarities" (p. 169), or "co-embedded inclusivity" (p. 173).[16] Clearly, immanence makes the difference. It is about a different

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[12] Stefano Guzzini, "International Political Sociology, Or: The Social Ontology and Power Politics of Process," in Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin, eds., *Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 366–75.

[13] The locus classicus is Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (1997), pp. 281–317. In IR, see Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1999), pp. 291–332; and Xavier Guillaume, "From Process to Politics," *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), pp. 71–86.

[14] Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 102, 127. For ease of reading, from now on, I will insert all references to this book within parentheses in the text.

[15] On the 'co-implication' in Daoist dialectics, see also Lily H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), chapter 3. Note that Ling proposes to think this as a form of "trialectics," where the co-implication overcomes the self/other binary and offers new venues for world politics. See L. H. M. Ling, "World Politics in Colour," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (2017), pp. 473–91. See also Tamara Trownsell's plea for a relational understanding of *interconnection* rather than separation as the underlying ontology for IR theorizing, in Tamara Trownsell, "Recrafting Ontology," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022): 801–20.

[16] Hence, the difference seems to be less that the "Hegelian tradition … does not assume that polarities move and become each other" (p. 182), which is perhaps an ungenerous reading of what a synthesis or sublimation can imply. After all, becoming each other cannot mean the erasure of difference, since the insistence on difference and a resistance against assimilation or eradication is what would allow Chinese cosmology to be set apart (see below). And hence, when "becoming each other" is a process that does not erase difference (there is still a yin and a yang, even if combined), the

issue than the relationalism–substantialism debate and is more akin to social theories of recognition, and hence the reference to Hegel.[17]

There are two components, however, on which all these relationist approaches put their emphasis: process and complementarity. Whereas for the relationist approach in Western social theory, all is in the process in that the focus is on constitutive relations, the Chinese theory as developed by Qin thinks process in the way the complementarity and immanence is constantly re-negotiated.[18] Yin and yang seem both the condition for harmony as well as the result of an ongoing process, its internal constitution, so to speak, a harmony that is always in the making. "… [R]elations and actors are processual simultaneities" (p. 117) and "Inclusive harmony of [coexistence/other-existence and self-existence] creates an ideal condition for social life" (p. 128), which is "immanently inclusive, mutually constitutive and having no temporal sequences like causes and effects" (p. 129).[19] "Thus the *zhongyong* dialectics envisages a kind of 'coevolutionary change' … that is processual by definition" (p. 176).

The other component consists in the idea of interactions as complementary oppositions (Hellmut Wilhelm, quoted on p. 179), which displays a canny similarity with the "jazz band" model that G. A. Cohen saw as undergirding some visions of Marxism as well as Rawls' liberalism. One way of picturing life under communism, as Marx conceived it, is to imagine a jazz band where each player seeks his own fulfillment as a musician. "Though basically interested in his own fulfillment, and not in that of the band as a whole, or of his fellow musicians taken severally, he nevertheless fulfills himself only to the extent that each of the others also does so, and the same holds for each of them."[20]

It is therefore perhaps not sufficiently precise to argue that Western cosmology assumes harmony in terms of homogeneity (p. 186), as this is not necessarily the case.[21] "Harmony" is not necessarily "Gleichklang" (unison), but "Wohlklang" (euphony). As the musical metaphor involves, it is made out of a variety of notes and sounds, not a unison. In fact, it is normally used exactly because it is the felicitous combination of different voices and tones. Not every combination will do—but uniformity or homogeneity is surely not required, at times even avoided because literally "a-harmonious" (since it is the same sound and tone, it has no harmony to speak of).

As a result, Qin is surely correct that in prominent Western thought there exists the link between this drive for homogenization and the reduction of difference via conflict. But the whole tradition cannot be reduced to it. According to Qin, the Hegelian tradition is one of struggle, whereas *zhongyong* dialectics, while recognizing the existence of conflict (p. 187), is based on harmony: "…harmony-based transformation is what evolution is oriented toward" (189). Accordingly, it is not the existence of harmony or conflict which is

continuous dialectics where any synthesis is but a temporary passage that creates something new seems very similar to the idea here.

17  Jorg Kustermans (personal communication) rightly points to the fact that underlying this ontology is a virtue ethics, which, as one could add, has also a long tradition in Western thought (and surely elsewhere).

18  This is a development from an earlier sketch of the theory: "Process consists of relations and relations construct process. The core of process is relations in motion and the motion of relations forms the process." See: Yaqing Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory," *Social Sciences in China*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2009), pp. 5–20, at page 6.

19  This refers to the central theme of time and temporality. On the ontological level, this can work. Making an empirical analysis that entirely abstracts from time and sequence is, however, not really possible, and also not proposed by Qin. Without time, process becomes un-intelligible. Given the importance of process for both, this explains the ultimate similarity between the approaches.

20  G. A. Cohen, *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme/Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 122. Cohen may not follow this (he critiques the model), but he still shares the underlying values embodied in the jazz band model.

21  Homogeneity does play an empirical role as a facilitator, but, as we will see below, that is no different from Qin's analysis, and indeed less determinist than the approach presented later in the book where relational circles inevitably privilege one's own family or, if upscaled, civilization. See below.

distinctive, but what is given primacy in the understanding of social change, namely conflict for much of Western thought and harmony for a Confucian cosmology. Such a charge against some Western traditions is corroborated by Jens Bartelson's analysis of war in (Western) international thought as a tradition of "ontogenetic war."[22] This refers to the idea that war is a positive or at least productive historical force (war as the "father of all things"). Such a vision is called ontogenetic, since it produces a self-fulfilling or performative effect in that it brings conflict, indeed war, as the motor of history into being while presupposing it. In this way, Qin finds one tradition, Hegelian dialectics, as family resemblant to Chinese relationalism, while differing in one fundamental component, namely the primacy of conflict.[23]

But this is not to say that all Western thought shares an ontology of conflict. When Qin quotes Dahrendorf, he refers more widely to the (realist) Weberian tradition, also leading up to Foucault, which is however only one of the many Western traditions. Indeed, Dahrendorf reacted against structural functionalism that does not put conflict at the core of social theory.[24] Not all Western social theories are based on such an ultimately political realist ontology. Indeed, *zhongyong* dialectics may well find equivalences in and speak to other Western traditions. Prominent candidates would be social theories of recognition, whether informed by Mead or by different post-Hegelian takes, such as propounded in *The I in We* by Axel Honneth, who has also distanced himself from a political theory primarily focused on domination.[25]

## An observational theory of relational circles

The observational theory translates these ontological assumptions into an explanatory theory, here: a theory of action. Qin's explanatory theory tries to gauge a middle way between a vision of agency that is too atomistic (as represented by rationalist theories) and theories of practice that seem to relegate human agency to habit, as he understands the work of Adler, Hopf, and Pouliot. Understanding agency through relations is meant to avoid the pitfalls of both by making human agency the driving force of change and the main focus of the analysis without, however, falling back into a vision of self-interest that starts from an unencumbered self.

This is not the place to discuss whether the presentation of the logic of habit is charitable to its IR authors. I personally would think that none of them has such an over-socialized vision akin to a version of Max Weber's traditional social action.[26] More important is the question whether there are close parallels in social theory to the logic of relationality. In my view, there clearly are, not least outside the North American core. Qin sees his theory sharing

[22] Jens Bartelson, *War in International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[23] For a different take, see Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[24] For a more recent account of this tradition, see Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Twenty Lectures: Sociological Theory since World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

[25] George H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934); Axel Honneth, *Das Ich im Wir. Studien zur Anerkennungstheorie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), published in English as: Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (London: Polity, 2012). For the critique of domination, see Axel Honneth, *Kritik der Macht. Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), published in English as: Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, translated by Kenneth Baynes (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993). For a debate around recognition and domination, see also fn. 45.

[26] For recent examples of their more nuanced take, see Emanuel Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Ted Hopf, "Change in International Practices," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2017), pp. 687–711; Vincent Pouliot, "Practice Tracing," in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey Checkel, eds., *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytical Tool* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 237–59; Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

some similarities with Hegelian dialectics, as we have seen above, but also with theories of practice in IR. As I already alluded to above, this points to some fruitful exchange with theories of social recognition which are informed by both.[27]

The starting point must be the understanding that the analysis of practices is not something static or simply repetitive. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, initially coined by Norbert Elias,[28] does not refer simply to habit, but to a set of dispositions which inform the understanding and behavioral repertoires with which agents make sense of and act in the various lifeworlds of social fields.[29] These repertoires are not static, since the habitus changes together with practices and the structural conditions of field.[30] For change is immanent in practices: "Actors … reproduce and change by their practice the normative structures by which they are able to act, share meanings, communicate intentions, criticize claims, and justify choices. Thus, one of the most importance sources of change … is the *practice of the actors* themselves."[31] A Bourdieu-inspired approach in IR reserves quite a number of possibilities for agency.[32] But the analysis can never start from the agents, as if they were independent of the habitus and the social field in which they act and which relationally defines the appropriate roles, the value of the capital that defines social hierarchies, and indeed to some extent the identity (both self-understanding and external recognition) of the agent in the first place.

Similarly, Qin's theory of action is centered around this immanence in identity. Qin describes a relationist take on "a social actor's identity [as being] shaped by her relations with specific others and her relational matrix" (p. 121). He insists that this relationality informs that which will count as instrumental rationality (p. 219). This chimes very well with Alessandro Pizzorno's critique of instrumental and individual rationality and his proposed theory of recognition.[33] One needs to think about preferences and interests in terms of the "circles of recognition," to use Pizzorno's term, that constitute (not cause) them in the first place.[34] Reading social theories of recognition would also show how rituals can become stabilizing mechanisms that tend to reproduce the borders of such spheres of recognition

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[27] See also Martin Weber, "The Normative Grammar of Relational Analysis: Recognition Theory's Contribution to Understanding Short-Comings in IR's Relational Turn," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2020), pp. 641–48. Also Emilian Kavalski notes the central role of recognition within communities of practice for theorizing *guanxi* in a (Chinese) relational theory. See Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 78–80, 93–95.

[28] Norbert Elias, *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie*, revised and enlarged version of his habilitation thesis from 1933 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), published in English as: Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

[29] Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980), chap. 3, published in English as: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Oxford: Polity Press, 1992).

[30] For a short exposition in IR, see Anna Leander, "Thinking Tools: Analyzing Symbolic Power and Violence," in Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, eds., *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 11–27; Anna Leander, "*Habitus* and Field," in Robert A. Denemark, ed., *Blackwell: International Studies Compendium Project/Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 3255–70.

[31] Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms and Decisions: On the Conditions of Practical and Legal Reasoning in International Relations and Domestic Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 61, original italics.

[32] Anna Leander, "The Promises, Problems, and Potentials of a Bourdieu-Inspired Staging of International Relations," *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2011), pp. 294–313.

[33] Alessandro Pizzorno, "On the Individualistic Theory of Social Order," in Pierre Bourdieu and James S. Coleman, eds., *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (Boulder et al. / New York: Westview Press / Russell Sage Foundation, 1991), pp. 209–33; Alessandro Pizzorno, "Rationality and Recognition," in Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating, eds., *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 162–73.

[34] Alessandro Pizzorno, "Some Other Kinds of Otherness: A Critique of 'Rational Choice' Theories," in Alejandro Foxley, Michael S. McPherson, and Guillermo O'Donnell, eds., *Development, Democracy and the Art of Trespassing: Essays in Honor of Albert O. Hirschman* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), pp. 355–73, at page 367. For his general approach, see Alessandro Pizzorno, *Il velo della diversità. Studi su razionalità e riconoscimento* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2007).

and their intersubjectively shared common meanings or background knowledge. They are "the regulating mechanism for harmony" (p. 192). The emphasis on gifts in these relations can easily be put into dialogue with social anthropology.[35] In short, shifting from a rationalist theory of action to a theory of social recognition as fundamental for acting and understanding actions, Qin's relationalism clearly goes beyond the dominant instrumental rationalist theorizations in Western social science, and he does so in a way comparable to Western social theory.[36]

In this context, it is, however, remarkable how little Qin's approach to relationalism is interested in theories of impersonal rule or domination.[37] Not that the understanding of the social world is devoid of domination in his theory, but it is as if the focus on harmony sidelines its theorization. When power is discussed, it is largely on the level of agency, informed by, indeed, rationalist approaches, like that of Baldwin or of Keohane and Nye. Given the large absence of structure in the explanation, human agency becomes a crucial component of the theory—yet less by choice than by necessity.

This, however, produces surprising tensions. After all, relationalism was meant to get us away from the atomistic individualism that informs certain types of liberal thought. But rather than embedding the individual in its wider structure, the subject and its identity is *itself* rethought through immanent relations. The focus remains closely connected to this tandem of self and relations, as if this "self-within-relations" and its relational circles were all there is to structure.[38] Of course, the book itself is testimony to the existence of intersubjective structures that inform the very cosmology at hand. But this remains an implicit backdrop. What or who authorizes whom to be at the center of relations, or what makes the contours of that which counts as yin and what as yang, to name just two issues, is left outside the theory. Let me elaborate these points in more detail.

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[35] See the locus classicus in Marcel Mauss, "Essai sur le don," in his *Sociologie et Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1960 [1923–24]), pp. 143–279. See also Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, chapters 6–9. For a recent analysis in IR, see Grégoire Mallard, *Gift Exchange: The Transnational History of a Political Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and Jorg Kustermans, "Gift-giving as a Source of International Authority," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), pp. 395–426.

[36] It is impossible to refer to the large literature on social theories of recognition in a footnote. Still, for the sake of just providing pointers, see, besides the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth quoted above, other prominent proponents include Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance: trois études* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 2004), published in English as: *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), and Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). For a critique, see Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008). In IR, an early proponent is Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); see also Erik Ringmar, "How the World Stage Makes Its Subjects: An Embodied Critique of Constructivist IR Theory," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2016), pp. 101–25. See also Jens Bartelson, "Three Concepts of Recognition," *International Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2013), pp. 107–29, and recently: Maria Birnbaum, "The Costs of Recognition: Global Politics, Religion, and the Colonial History of South Asia," *International Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2023), pp. 323–50. For a further discussion, see Stefano Guzzini, "Ideas and Identity from Rationalism to Theories of Recognition," in Patrick A. Mello and Falk Ostermann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Foreign Policy Methods* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), pp. 21–38.

[37] Viktor Friedmann (personal communication) reminds me "that there is no concept of domination in Confucian relations. Yes, there are hierarchies, but these are not hierarchies of domination. Everyone has their place and their mutual obligations. In this framework domination can only mean not acting according to what the nature of the relation requires, but the relation itself is not a vector of domination, otherwise it would not be a relation, it would be conflictual." This would explain the neglect but beg the question, as domination does not need to be conflictual. See below.

[38] See also his earlier take, where he specifies that "China always put emphasis on individuals in a social group rather than individuals *per se*" (Yaqing Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory," p. 8), which may indeed not move away from a methodologically still agent-based approach to process, however qualified. For a similar critique of Qin's agency-centrism, see Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory*, p. 65.

A first tension is the focus on human agency that unnecessarily leads to a neglect of relations of domination within relational circles. Qin's theory of action is centered around this immanence in identity and the agent's relational matrix. But, in contrast with similar endeavors, Qin's approach, when applied to world order, does not focus on the communicative dynamics of the normative environment (on this see below in the next section). Also, he does not analyze how these relations are plotting people in their roles and could reinforce (or challenge) existing social hierarchies, not least through what Bourdieu calls "misrecognition," namely the way in which subalterns accept the terms of an asymmetrical relation that keeps them in their place by misrecognizing the effectively constitutive capitals for the hierarchy within a field.[39] This shows in Qin's discussion of the phenomenon of power, which takes a full chapter. The chapter refers to agent capacities as understandable through their relational circles. Certainly, he includes a discussion of "structural power," but he reduces it to power resources originating at the systemic level, hence reducing the analysis of structural dynamics to an issue in the levels of analysis (pp. 252 ff.). And so, power ultimately is the "ability to manage relations" (p. 288), and power relations are a process in which the two parties co-empower each other (p. 285). All the focus is on interaction. When Qin refers to gift economies as ways to understand such relations (p. 283), these are a process of reciprocal debt and rapprochement. The relationship is surely "before the actors," but in terms of the rules for the "appropriate" behavior in front of a given person in the specific relation (p. 220). For all his use of constructivism, the identities (father, son, other) are to some extent given prior to the analysis. Despite an ontology to the contrary, they are not emerging properties of the relations.[40]

How these relational circles are established in the first place and which role who plays in them seem to be taken for granted.[41] Yet, gift economies can be highly asymmetrical as in tribute systems, or even in a family. The persistent reference to father–son (not daughter) relations and to the central role of the father seems to assume a given (gendered and generational) hierarchy as self-evident. Now, Qin correctly points to the fact that such an understanding may be considered conservative or status-quo oriented (p. 194). Yet relevant for the present purpose of a theoretical critique is the question whether the theory has the conceptual apparatus to deal with structurally given positional power, "the tacit power of the strong," which starts the analysis of power not from the power holder, but from the

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[39] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language et pouvoir symbolique*, 2nd rev. and enlarged ed. (Paris: Seuil, 2001). First edition published in English as: Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, translated by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). For a more detailed discussion, see Stefano Guzzini, "Power: Bourdieu's Field Analysis of Relational Capital, Misrecognition and Domination," in Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ed., *Bourdieu in International Relations: Rethinking Key Concepts in IR* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 79–92.

[40] This critique has been around for decades in classical post-structuralist and feminist theories that took early constructivist conceptualizations of identity to task for their essentialization of identity (for recent constructivist amendments on identity and process/becoming, see, e.g. Emanuel Adler, *World Ordering: A Social Theory of Cognitive Evolution*). In foreign policy analysis, see, e.g. the classical critique in David Campbell, "Global Inscription: How Foreign Policy Constitutes the United States," *Alternatives*, Vol. XV, No. 1 (1990), pp. 263–286; David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), and Maja Zehfuss, "Constructivism and Identity: A Dangerous Liaison," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2001), pp. 315–48. For early, often feminist, critiques in IR, see among the many (as this is foundational for some feminist traditions): Lene Hansen, "Slovenian Identity: State-Building on the Balkan Border," *Alternatives*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (1996), pp. 473–96; Roxanne Lynn Doty, "Aporia: A Critical Exploration of the Agent-Structure Problematique in International Relations Theory," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1997), pp. 365–92; and Cynthia Weber, "Performative States," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (1998), pp. 77–95. For a more recent and justifiably exasperated critique reminding us that relationality had been around in feminism for a long time, see Marysia Zalewski, "Forget(Ting) Feminism? Investigating Relationality in International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (2019), pp. 615–35.

[41] For an intriguing discussion on how to contrast but also combine Confucian conceptions of relations and roles with symbolic interactionism and role theory, see Chih-yu Shih, "Role and Relation in Confucian IR: Relating to Strangers in the States of Nature," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 5 (2022), pp. 910–29.

receiving end.[42] Judging from the discussion in the chapter, that is not the case. To use Lukes' typology, Qin's theory of action is limited to the first two dimensions of power, both relational in that they are not confusing power with resources, but understand it through effects in specific relations, namely direct coercive power and indirect agenda-setting power. This eschews the discussion of Lukes' third dimension of power, however: "is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?"[43] And it does not take into account the impersonal power politics of constitutive processes, usually so central to relational approaches, in which such identities and interests are constituted in the first place as when agents are attributed certain identities and roles in world affairs.[44] The issue is not that such approaches favor structure over agency, whereas Qin does the opposite. All social theories have to deal with both. But these approaches provide a different take on what human agency entails. Moreover, it is one in principle very similar to Qin's without, however, neglecting the more vertical theory of domination when developing the more horizontal theory of action, exactly because a relational theory inspired by theories of recognition cannot abstract from domination.[45]

A second tension arises from the family analogies with which relational circles and their context are introduced. As mentioned above, Qin had taken Western theorizations to task for their ontology of difference, which almost inevitably leads to conflict and/or assimilation. If dialectical relations construe the other as "antagonistic, negative antithesis of the self, conflict becomes the objective fact and tends to be non-reconcilable" (p. 168). The resolution of such conflict is then "either the elimination or homogenization [or assimilation, p. 168] of the other. Explicitly or implicitly, difference is to be cancelled out" (p. 164). As a result, in the self–other binary structure, peaceful resolution should be possible only among members of the "us" category, and violent resolution should, as always, continue to be an important choice between members of the "self" and the "other" categories (p. 169). And as an evidence, Qin correctly cites the fact that the British followed different norms when signing treaties with actors Britain had different relationships with, namely whether inside or outside the "family of civilized nations" (p. 220). This is surely a justifiable critique, as also postcolonialism has shown. In a certain way, it is also reproduced in democratic peace theory, which sees countries sharing certain values not to go to war with each other, while often feeling free not to reserve this attitude to non-democracies. But this European contemptuous rule through "standards of civilization" has come under massive critique, even in the English School.[46] And it is not necessarily part of all Western approaches to IR. Classical realism sees in the acceptance of diversity or multiplicity (Morgenthau) one

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[42] Stefano Guzzini, "Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis," *International Organization*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1993), pp. 443–48, at page 461.

[43] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, 3rd Edition (London: Macmillan / Red Globe Press, 2021 [1974]), p. 33.

[44] This is a staple good of a certain Foucault-inspired power analysis, which insists in the dual meaning of subjectivation: It refers to the "interpellating" or also constituting new subject positions in a discursive formation, while also subjecting them to the role / subjectivity thus ascribed by them. For a discussion in IR, see Stefano Guzzini, "Structural Power: The Limits of Neorealist Power Analysis," Stefano Guzzini, "Power," in Felix Berenskoetter, ed., *Concepts in World Politics* (London et al.: Sage, 2016), pp. 23–40; Stefano Guzzini, "Power in World Politics," in William Thompson, ed., *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, "Power in International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (2005), pp. 39–75.

[45] See the discussion and critique of Honneth in Heikki Ikäheimo, Kristina Lepold, and Titus Stahl, eds., *Recognition and Ambivalence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). In IR, for a further discussion, see Stefano Guzzini, "Recognition and Domination," *Contexto Internacional*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (forthcoming 2024).

[46] See the discussion in Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of "Civilization" in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) and Barry Buzan, "The 'Standard of Civilisation' as an English School Concept," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2014), pp. 576–94.

of its major advantages compared to other theories.[47] And it is almost a staple good of feminist and post-structuralist scholarship to have deconstructed the binaries according to which a conceptualization of relations could see harmony or cooperation only based on the constitution of a "similar identity and therefore mindset" (p. 228).

Qin contrasts this, what he considers a general Western view, with inter-state relations conceptualized through an analogical leap from families to civilizations. Just like families, they hence become the "natural" relational circle, since relationality is based on "the background knowledge of the communities of practice, of which civilization-based cultural communities are the most spontaneous and the most stable" (p. 205). "The more intimate the relationship is, the more the self is likely to cooperate" (p. 216, see also pp. 300–01).[48] There is, so to speak, an almost natural "relational preference," an assumption not really borne out by the many internecine wars within civilizations. Although the thesis has some immediate appeal, it is far from being self-evident, even for inter-state relations, let alone for civil wars. Raymond Aron, for instance, distinguishes between homogeneous and heterogeneous international orders, the latter being constituted by actors who have a distinct and apparently unbridgeable conception of politics and values.[49] Looking at different intra-European wars, he argues that the heterogeneity most insidious for achieving moderation and peace is the one that grows out of similarity and a shared sense of community, not difference. Hence, precisely because there is a common and shared culture, the limitation of conflict can become difficult. In a more constructivist line, Ted Hopf develops the point that the closer the identities, the potentially more threatening they are. It is the interaction with significant others who are similar that provides a threat to one's identity, as he shows for the intra-communist rivalry between the USSR and China during the Cold War.[50] Sometimes the most threatening other is the one who is so similar as to undermine claims of being the better self of the two, as post-colonial scholarship shows, or indeed, for identifying who the self is.[51]

Hence, as long as we speak about the underlying theoretical assumptions of observational theories, neither do all Western approaches shun diversity and assume assimilation as the only way relations can be harmoniously conducted, nor does closeness and kinship eliminate conflict. Qin's binary tends not only to unduly homogenize approaches for contrasting China and the West but also to underestimate internal tensions in either version of it.

To recapitulate: Qin's approach thus combines a focus on agency with a theory that justifies relational preference, while neglecting the impersonal biases, material and intersubjective, that (dis)empower them and the positional power positions that result from them. Consequently, it ends up with an explanatory theory that naturalizes and de-politicizes the position of the father in his relational circles. Although, as we will see later, the father is

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[47] See e.g. Robert Gilpin, "The Global Political System," in D. B. Miller and R. J. Vincent, eds., *Order and Violence: Hedley Bull and International Relations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 112–39.

[48] In a later publication, this "intimacy principle" has a different meaning. Here, it "hypothesizes that the more intimate the relational circle is, the more it influences your decision" (Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. M. Nordin, "Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought," p. 608). Whereas Qin's book makes a causal and relatively determinist claim about cooperation, this revised, if still causal, claim leaves open the types of influence intimacy may have. This said, in this revised version, the hypothesis seems constitutive rather than causal: circles are not the result of various external properties but constituted by such intimacy, i.e. by the effects of a sort of collective identity.

[49] Raymond Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1962), pp. 110–12.

[50] Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 8.

[51] For an example of this post-colonial take, see the work of Siba N. Grovogui who analyses parallel human rights traditions to the West, yet commonly neglected, as in the Haitian Revolution of 1791 (e.g. Siba N. Grovogui, "Come to Africa: A Hermeneutics of Race in International Theory," *Alternatives*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2001), pp. 425–48), and in his forthcoming work on the previous historical establishment of a polity by fugitive slaves, Quilombo dos Palmares in Brazil (ca. 1605–1694). The latter argument has been developed in Réné Girard, *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), published in English as: *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

invited to always act in a virtuous manner, in Qin's book, the eventual decision on what is virtuous has no outside arbiter beyond the relation. And the very position of who can count as a father is given prior to the analysis. They are just there, identifiable as the core of (given) world civilizations, with much of the rest of mankind relegated to relational context. This vision seems to clash with the underlying immanent ontology which would start from the harmony to which *all* belong. Instead, the framework appears practically reduced to a theory of a Concert of Fathers, which constitutes a very stratified and exclusionary world politics as its default.

There is an equally intriguing implication for yin and yang in such an explanatory theory. Not only is the role and position of the father historically (generationally) given, but with this comes the question of what/who yin is and what/who yang is. In an ontology that cherishes harmonious diversity and complementarity over homogenization and assimilation, one would expect an understanding of yang, the other immanent in yin, and vice versa, that is as limited as possible. Only by keeping oneself as limited as possible, by respecting the potential difference of immanent complementarity of the other, can one preempt the possibility that by simply defining oneself large enough, all diversity is erased. But who defines where yin and yang start or end? Who or what decides who belongs to which civilization or not? Is it the (mutually acknowledged) fathers or an overarching ruler (who is not theorized)? What if actors do not recognize themselves in such homogeneous circles? If "East and West are mutually becoming" (p. 175), who decides what East and West are in the first place? With this move, Qin's explanatory theory does not dispel a lingering tendency to essentialize, a move that his very ontology rejects.

## A foreign policy strategy with Confucian maxims: reciprocity and process

As just seen, the move from the relational ontology to a relational explanatory theory is underdetermined: more than one explanatory theory could fit the underlying ontology. This is even more so when it comes to linking from ontology to foreign policy strategy. The reason is self-evident. Any foreign policy strategy follows moral considerations. Even the allegedly objective or neutral "national interest" is shot through with ethical concerns. If it is defined in a purely utilitarian manner (there are no friends, only interests), then this reflects a certain ethical take that is both self-interested and instrumental. If it is meant to stand in for some common good, then the very definition of that common good is informed by moral values. Any advice in terms of a foreign policy strategy can only make sense with regard to these further values; the strategy is a means to that end. Hence, it is only logical that at this point, moral principles are mobilized. To keep a certain coherence with the ontology, Qin resorts here to Daoism and Confucianism. Virtuous statesmanship is embedded in a vision of harmony as the state of nature achieved through the mechanism of "centralizing," a move to the middle characterized by appropriateness, reasonableness, and auspiciousness (p. 184).

Therefore, the underlying ontology of harmony also expresses a political commitment. Harmony is both the origins and the telos of human agency. The aim of any foreign policy must be to develop over time ever more inclusive relational circles so that a spontaneous order emerges in which rituals enable convergence to the centrality principle (p. 194). Obviously, the world is not harmonious as of yet. Hence, a virtuous foreign policy strategy needs to anticipate ways to allow it to develop in such a fashion. Through gift economies (p. 283) a reciprocal cycle ensues (p. 285) that should draw ever larger relational circles.

The two most important and concomitant mechanisms for this "relational management" (p. 148) are (1) ongoing communication in mutual respect, as exemplified by the comfort principle in ASEAN and, perhaps most of all, (2) a policy that keeps temporalizing, that

keeps diplomacy centered around a process which is safeguarded to stay open. It is a process that seeks future rapprochement, indeed friendship, by avoiding any premature closure.

The comfort principle is more than the mere agreement to disagree, which is how Qin implicitly defines tolerance. The principle stands for the "respect for the position even if all the others do not agree with it. Only after everyone feels comfortable can a decision be made … more often than not it focuses on maintaining the relational process rather than achieving immediate results on finding our common grounds rather than debating over differences, and on taking care of everyone's comfort level rather than imposing a majority decision" (p. 231).

This mechanism is made possible by what Qin, in a later succinct synthesis, describes as the combination of Confucian improvement and Mencian optimality. Confucian improvement, as applied to bilateral relations, rests upon the idea that any self-interest is also other-interest.[52] This is not just to be seen as a static moment, but as a process of ongoing interactions. In my reading, such processes could also include processes of self- and alter-casting, understood as an invitation to reciprocal behavior that can alter the roles and self-understandings of actors in ways for them to become more compatible or complementary.[53] Mencian optimality, as applied to multilateral relations, stands for a mechanism of cooperative reciprocity where the "self-interest is best realised if and only if the community maintains harmonious relations among its members. Harmony here is reasonably and practically defined in terms of maximal cooperation."[54] In this context, it seems important to clarify two central issues, the ideas of reciprocity and of open process.

Reciprocity is central to gift economies and exchanges, and hence, as discussed above, its central role is not coincidental for Qin's foreign policy strategy. Yet, there is one tension between Qin's relational reciprocity and the inspiration from where he takes it, namely the well-known Confucian axiom "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." This axiom is present in probably all main religious contexts (Christians refer to it as the "Golden Rule," which also inspired Kant's categorical imperative). But whereas Qin uses it within particular relational circles, it is not just a specific rule for a specific other in a relational circle; it applies to a "generalized other," to use Mead's famous phrase.

It is interesting to consider how this resonates with John Ruggie's understanding of multilateralism. Instead of simply referring to a nominal definition of the cooperation among at least three actors, Ruggie, developing an idea by Robert Keohane, refers to "diffuse reciprocity" as one of the constitutive factors of multilateralism.[55] It can be exemplified by the workings of the Most Favored Nation Clause, which requires a country that is providing a trade concession to one trading partner to extend the same treatment to all. As a principle underlying the WTO, it is opposed to discrimination and preferential bilateralism. This diffuse reciprocity fits well with a Confucian maxim that is in principle non-exclusionary. But the entire setup of relational preference that Qin sees represented in his relational theory can also work against it, since it is based on preferential treatment, at the risk of undermining the general maxim.

This can also be seen in one major foreign policy problem Qin raises, the kinsperson's dilemma (pp. 313–16). What if a country is put before the situation to choose for an action that would discriminate between others that have the same status in a country's relational

[52] Yaqing Qin, "Diplomacy as Relational Practice," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2020), pp. 165–73, at page 170.

[53] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, p. 346. Indeed, in an earlier study, he makes this connection. See Yaqing Qin, "Rule, Rules, and Relations: Towards a Synthetic Approach to Governance," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2011), pp. 117–45, at page 137, fn. 61.

[54] Yaqing Qin, "Diplomacy as Relational Practice," p. 171.

[55] John Gerard Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1992), pp. 561–98, at page 571; Robert O. Keohane, "Reciprocity in International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1986), pp. 1–27, at page 4.

circles, most dramatically: How does one choose between friends (understood as family members)? Yet, this is a dilemma only to the extent that there is no normative environment outside each and every relational circle. The underlying issue is not whether to choose between impossible preferences for friends; it is allowing generalized values to be used when assessing "evil" or harmonious relations.

Qin is clearly aware of this tension. His treatment of that tension may open up for yet another dilemma, however. He notes that such "co-empowering is not necessarily good, for the two parties that co-empower each other may well be engaged in something quite evil" (p. 284). That produces two positions, neither of which is satisfactory within his approach. If, as the explanatory theory assumes, relational preference comes always first, then Confucian values may not be respected, and all is but a play of loyalties where allies incur mutual debts (as in a gift economy) and will stick together at all costs. This contradicts the ethical stand of the strategy. If, however these ethical values are considered primary, then kinship dilemmas are resolved according to them, because the justification of one's policy in terms of the loyalty owed to a certain co-actor in a close circle of relations is no longer valid if it contradicts Confucian values. This, however, would contradict a diplomacy of open process, since it imposes a non-respect of an actor, even a former friend, in the name of general principles, exactly the kind of universalized reference that makes a rapprochement of diverse actors so difficult. In short, open process sees common values as a potential final goal of diplomacy, a commitment to Confucian values sees them as conditions of diplomacy's very possibility.

To handle this dilemma, it may be fruitful to think of these as values of different kinds, as a short excursion into diplomatic theory may show. The comfort norm of ASEAN, as mentioned above, attends to all different actors' identities and interests, not imposing a majority decision. This is surely a most laudable endeavor (and one often practiced within the EU). But it risks making everyone either dependent on a spoiler or assume that everyone will have to consent at some point in time. What if respect is not shared? What if one believes that one does not to have to respect some more distant actors in the circle and therefore uses instrumental strategic means (see also p. 281 for the possibility of instrumental action in *renqing*)?

This open process can only work if spoilers are deterred or persuaded, i.e. only when a common understanding exists and/or evolves. The early Kissinger insisted that this common understanding is the condition of possibility for diplomacy. Without it, "[d]iplomats can still meet but they cannot persuade, for they have ceased to speak the same language. In the absence of an agreement on what constitutes a reasonable demand, diplomatic conferences are occupied with sterile repetitions of basic positions and accusations of bad faith, or allegations of 'unreasonableness' and 'subversion.'"[56] Hence, diplomacy is most needed, when it is least likely to work, when world politics approaches arms race and war. Diplomacy requires a common language which, in times of crisis, may not exist and only becomes available … through successful diplomacy. In such times, diplomacy pretends to work so as to create the conditions for it to work. This, of course, is the paradox of diplomacy: it is both a fundamental condition and an emerging property of a stable international system. Managing the process, not least through the classical diplomatic usage of ambiguity (p. 148), also to save face, becomes of the essence.

Against this backdrop, the tension between an open process and a commitment to Confucian ethics can be approached by distinguishing procedural and substantial values, where the distinction is itself part of a convention. The substantial common values of the relational circle of world politics are the outcome, but made possible by the mutual acceptance of a Confucian ethics that is seen as a procedural principle of generalized reciprocity, a procedural mechanism that is by definition of flexible substance. Such a procedural principle

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[56] Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 2.

would involve the idea of a general, that is a non-discriminatory and diffuse, reciprocity that constitutes both constraint and openness: a common framework so that not all relational preference would be acceptable, and yet with a certain openness of substance, as its specific content is the outcome of an ongoing communicative process. In this way, one can approach the initial tension by temporalizing the paradox of diplomacy through a trust-building (p. 342 ff.) communicative process.[57]

This constitutes a diplomacy of twofold moderation. On the one hand, the commitment to certain procedural rules of diffuse reciprocity defines the member of the world relational circle: any unilateral procedure and any "evil" relational circle is excluded. This does not mean that actors do not come in with their respective ideas of what exactly diffuse reciprocity implies: the meaning of gifts and exchange itself is negotiated. But for doing so, and that is the second type of moderation, there must be a sense that such negotiation is always in process, never finished. More actors may join, more ideas emerge. In the meantime, the content emerging out of this diffuse reciprocity is taken as the norms against which to judge and discipline the behavior within a potentially infinite relational circle (p. 149). The process is open but not empty.

Accordingly, temporary norms emerge out of the process.[58] It is here where the idea of a gift economy works better than within the explanatory theory. Qin clearly sees their role in building up trust relations through reciprocity, the aim of which is the building up of closer, potentially friendship relations. The aim is relational governance, defined "as a process of negotiating socio-political arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative fashion with mutual trust evolving over a shared understanding of social norms and human morality" (p. 335).

If this reconstruction is correct, then the similarities to the Helsinki process that contributed to the end of the Cold War are striking. Confidence-building measures were meant to put into process a politics of "Wandel durch Annäherung" (change through rapprochement),[59] as the German Ostpolitik called it.[60] Foreign policy was conceived as "Weltinnenpolitik" in the words of German Chancellor Willy Brandt, a "world domestic policy" as an inclusive relational circle.[61] The Helsinki process was a process before

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[57] For an earlier exploration of diplomacy as a communicative and open process, see Friedrich Kratochwil, *International Order and Foreign Policy: A Theoretical Sketch of Post-War International Politics* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1978). Kratochwil argues that in the ongoing conversation of international politics, diplomacy is called upon to find shared translations, eventually establishing a common system of references, while accommodating diverse historical identities. It is helped by the fact that political practice comes with an added, and crucial, time factor through which principled disagreements can be bridged in the course of iterated "conversations."

[58] See also his insistence that it is practices that make rules/norms, not the other way round as in mainstream regime and governance theories. See Yaqing Qin, "Rule, Rules, and Relations: Towards a Synthetic Approach to Governance," p. 126, also in footnote 28.

[59] For Qin's analysis of the process via which actors construct/re-construct identities, applied to the accession of China to international society, see the analysis in Yaqing Qin, "International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China's Peaceful Rise," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2010), pp. 129–153, at pages 147–49. For his warning about the self-fulfilling prophecy of the "assertive China discourse," another process, yet not virtuous, see Yaqing Qin, "Continuity through Change: Background Knowledge and China's International Strategy," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2014), pp. 285–314.

[60] For an early and excellent analyses of the process of Ostpolitik, see the work of Pierre Hassner in "Change and Security in Europe. Part I: The Background," *The Adelphi Papers*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1968), pp. 1–24, "The Changing Context of European Security," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1968), pp. 1–21, "Change and Security in Europe. Part II. In Search of a System," *The Adelphi Papers*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1968), pp. 1–8, and *Europe in the Age of Negotiation. The Washington Papers No. 8* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972); see also Philip Windsor, *Germany and the Management of Détente* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

[61] See Willy Brandt, *Der Wille zum Frieden. Perspektiven der Politik* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1971) for a collection of his major programmatic speeches. For a discussion of *Weltinnenpolitik*, see Dieter Senghaas, "Weltinnenpolitik – Ansätze für ein Konzept," *Europa Archiv*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (1992), pp. 642–52; and Anna Caffarena, "Considerazioni sulla politica interna del mondo," *Teoria politica*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1 (2002), pp. 85–103.

becoming institutionalized in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, later the Organisation for Securtiy and Cooperation in Europe. Importantly, it was not just a question of ever enlarging one's own relational circle of friends, which puts oneself into the center of circles. Its aim was a common political order from the start that embeds the self.[62]

Ostpolitik was based on the idea that no domestic policy is a reserved domain, but always one that already includes the visions of the other. This shows not least in memory politics. In the iconic "knee-fall of Warsaw" in front of the memorial for the Ghetto uprising that Nazi occupation forces had literally reduced to rubbles, the German Chancellor Willy Brandt not only assumed a historical responsibility for past crimes done in the German name; his gesture expressed a re-definition of German identity: Germany's "other" was and is a certain part of its own past. It also redefined what it takes to be considered a strong country, namely one that does not deny but "assumes." Besides signing the non-proliferation treaty, this was a crucial part in the confidence-building architecture of Ostpolitik.[63]

Consequently, a foreign policy strategy for a harmonious world order will try to harness the drive for friendship while curtailing relational preferences that cannot be justified by the diffuse reciprocity that undergirds the Confucian rule. Precisely because the building up of friendly relational circles can be used for something wicked, this needs to be checked. And it cannot be checked if the only reciprocity that would apply is internal to that friendly relational circle. That would simply repeat the usual shortcomings of alliance politics that have marred Western history and accompanied its many wars. Here, the explanatory theory provides a warning that the foreign policy strategy needs to contain.[64] Whereas the stress on human agency (p. 190) was probably unnecessarily overstated for the explanatory theory, it does find all its importance when it comes to the moral responsibility for dealing with this world.

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[62] It seems to me that this strategy is also informed by an ethics of care. See, e.g. Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993); Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2013).

[63] Ostpolitik has informed a series of theorizations in the European peace research tradition. An early path, often proposed by German scholars, connected this strategy to an understanding of political process and procedural norms in deliberation informed by Jürgen Habermas (Harald Müller, "Internationale Beziehungen als kommunikatives Handeln. Zur Kritik der utilitaristischen Handlungstheorien," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1994), pp. 15–44; Thomas Risse-Kappen, "Reden ist nicht billig. Zur Debatte um Kommunikation und Rationalität," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1995), pp. 171–184; Rainer Schmalz-Bruns, "Die Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns – Eine Flaschenpost? Anmerkungen zur jüngsten Theoriedebatte in den Internationalen Beziehungen," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1995), pp. 347–70, synthesized and developed later by Thomas Risse, "'Let's Argue!' Communicative Action in World Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2000), pp. 1–39). For viewing multilateral diplomacy as a legitimation process, see Jennifer Mitzen, "Reading Habermas in Anarchy: Multilateral Diplomacy and Global Public Spheres," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2005), pp. 401–17. See also Peter Niesen and Benjamin Herborth, eds., *Anarchie der kommunikativen Freiheit. Jürgen Habermas und die Theorie der internationalen Politik* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2007). Another line is visible in the Copenhagen School which, through its concept of de-securitization, explicitly theorizes Ostpolitik as a process. See Ole Wæver, "Securitization and Desecuritization," in Ronnie Lipschutz, ed., *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86. Among the many later engagements, see, for instance, Claudia Aradau, "Security and the Democratic Scene: Desecuritization and Emancipation," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2004), pp. 388–413; Lene Hansen, "Reconstructing Desecuritisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply it," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2012), pp. 525–46; and Bahar Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation: The Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015), pp. 52–74.

[64] Some version of realist foreign policy strategy, often subsumed under the principle of prudence, can also be seen as an antidote to realist ontologies of struggle and explanatory theories based on power or security maximization. Precisely because the realist ontology and theory anticipates dire politics, realist diplomacy is called in to moderate its worst effects. The moral basis for this is, however, not part of the theory itself.

## Conclusion: an ongoing process

Yaqing Qin has accomplished an oeuvre that is the result of a long thought process and, as with any inspiring work, it is also the continuation of one. It is an invitation to continuously reflect upon this formidable challenge of meeting ontology, explanatory theory, and foreign policy strategy. As the previous discussion suggested, there are several ways in which this can be done, none without tensions. It is a cosmology that helps to ground a different ontology for IR theory, a theory of action, a way to observe action as understood by the actors embedded in this cosmology, but also a blueprint for actors to live up to its expectations. Its relationalism evokes, in its own way, theories of recognition and an ontology and practice of process. It is both a hermeneutical bridge and a critique of foreign policy, whether Chinese or other, which has not realized the potentialities of a relational management informed by immanent harmony.

In my discussion of his theory, I have pointed to the difficulty of keeping an observational or explanatory theory apart from the hermeneutic bridge that makes Chinese foreign policy meaningful for outsiders. The risk is, as always in these cases, that it is not the explanatory theory that is the starting point. Instead, the worldview of the actors whose behavior is rendered meaningful is abstracted into a theory, almost inevitably reducing the potential of the latter. Whereas a start from ontology would have opened up many explanatory avenues, a rationalization of a particular Chinese foreign policy worldview necessarily restricts them. In IR, this is a well-known problem of the "English School," for instance, which started by extrapolating the British understanding of international society during times of the Empire and Commonwealth into a framework for the understanding of world politics at large, a lineage that later theorists took up and had to revise.[65] Classical realism, too, is informed by the self-reflection of the then hegemonic powers of what constitutes world politics, although the European heritage has often been curtailed to meet the understandings and political needs of the USA, as most (in)famously in *Hegemonic Stability Theory*. These are national understandings of (their own) world order writ global.

It would be a pity if Qin's contribution were to be reduced to such a vision. For this reason, it is important to stress that the relational ontology that he develops allows a wider theorization than his (generous) hermeneutic bridge to outsiders later exemplifies for the reader. Similarly, it would be unhelpful if his repeated attempts to contrast a Western and a Chinese vision of being and politics ended up being primarily understood as a homogenization of the respective cultures, let alone a form of cultural determinism.[66] He targets the IR mainstream, mainly from the rather not-always-too-representative Anglo-American individualist culture (which, moreover, is quite mixed), which he experienced himself. Such simplifications provide a mere rhetorical means, if tricky, for engaging with the argument of the other.[67] Therefore, this article invites, in return, to focus on those parts of the Western tradition that seem more compatible with his relationalism, in particular in IR theory. Referring to different external interlocutors who share, at least in my reading, parts of his quest, I hope to respond to his invitation and offer some paths ahead in the ongoing dialogue any academic debate aspires to.

[65]  Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, eds., *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). For the revisions, see Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Barry Buzan and Laust Schouenborg, *Global International Society: A New Framework for Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[66]  The opening sections of Yaqing Qin, "A Multiverse of Knowledge: Cultures and IR Theories," can be read in this homogenizing and idealizing way, which is undercut by his final sections. After all, if all being is one and its other at the same time, it makes no sense to homogenize, if by this we mean providing a single voice.

[67]  For a critique of the "Global IR" discourse reproducing the boundaries it is supposed to overcome (and for its Anglo-American core bias, excluding even other Western research and traditions), see Audrey Alejandro, *Western Dominance in International Relations? The Internationalisation of IR in Brazil and India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

## Acknowledgements

**Article**