

Book Review

A Relational Theory of World Politics

Yaqing Qin, CUP, April 2018 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, April 2018), 412p., Online ISBN: 9781316869505, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316869505>

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Ku-Hung-Ming, in his cult book *The Spirit of the Chinese People*, stated that when Chinese children start school, the first sentence of the first book they are given begins “the nature of man is good”. This belief in the innate goodness of man is the complete opposite of Western belief, and therefore mainstream International Relations theory.

Indeed, if one were to take an introduction to International Relations (IR), one of the first discussions encountered would be whether the essence of the human being is good or not—in general, the discussion’s conclusion will be ‘bad’, or will have failed to reach an absolute decision; never, however will it conclude with ‘good’. In his *Religion of Good Citizenship*, Hung-Ming states that there existed a war for Chinese civilization too, but for Chinese, being on the alert or being on a knife-edge with the expectation of war is extreme. Inasmuch as, the spirituality and spiritual values such as justice, politeness and peace underlie quintessentially the Chinese civilization.

This vision and spirit, described a hundred years ago, stand out against mainstream IR discourse. As Qin strikingly claims, there is no non-Western IR theory (p.24), and no non-Western scholar should use their own culture and cultural resources for social theory construction. Thus, knowledge production will be diversified and different theories will emerge from different cultures.

In *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, Qin examines the question of how we understand the world. The concept of relationality is the focal point of the book, which consists of three sections. The first establishes the theoretical background, culture and social theory; the second section mainly concentrates on the relation and relationality, and the third part provides a reconceptualization of the power, cooperation and governance.

Throughout the book, Qin constantly makes references to mainstream American theories such as structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism and structural constructivism, and compares them to relational theory. His approach is to combine mainstream IR discourse and traditional Chinese dialectics. Because he believes that by cultivating the metaphysical components of the theoretical hard core, different social theories stemmed from different cultures are not mutually exclusive—on the contrary, they nourish each other, and thus lead to the diversification of the IR theory. He proposes “a relational theory of World politics” that centres on the relationality concept. By taking Chinese understanding as a reference point, Qin proposes relational theory, placing relationality, which is inherent to Confucian cultural communities, in the centre of IR world. The relational theory makes three main assumptions: interrelatedness, identities of social relations, and process. Interrelatedness refers to the world as being composed of continuous events and ongoing relations. Social relations shape the identities and roles of social actors. Process is also a key concept in relational theory that is about ‘becoming’—for instance globalization, global governance, cooperation, conflict etc. All of these are processes. Harmony is a state of nature, Qin argues, which leads the writer to reach Chinese dialectics.

The second part of the book focuses on this area: *zhongyong* (the center of harmony/doctrine of the mean); and the *yin yang* diagram in which *yin* and *yang* co-exist together, affecting and transforming each other. So, he argues, there are polar forces, but the relationship between them is based on complementary interaction and inclusive harmony. Unlike Hegelian dialectics, in the Chinese school, there is no thesis-antithesis, but rather co-theses.

In this world of relations, nothing is found in isolation. Neither can humans, as key relators, exist in isolation. This is what the author calls co-identity—there is no absolute or independent identity in a relational environment, because social actors act in a relational context. Considering the definition of relational theory, since social relations shape identities and roles of social actors, this, then, is an outgrowth.

In social relations, networking, doing/taking action, and relating to one another are very important. Rather than denying the rational individual, instead, Qin, as he so often does when outlining his argument, argues that social actors are rational because they are relational in the first place (p.xvii). Based on the ‘human’ experience, the author then explains the friendship, cooperation and conflict among the states. All in all, the author does not refute Western-centric understanding; rather he stresses complementarity, reminding us of Pierre Bourdieu’s inter-paradigmatic complementarity.

Chapter Seven is particularly significant to consider, because here the writer talks

about the logic of relationality and logic of practicality. Relationality comes from practice, a critical point in distinguishing Confucianism and the individualistic Western world. In recent years, if one follows discussions about the theory of IR, one will have come across issues such as practice versus relational theory, and the role of theory in international practice theory. This section provides an excellent insight into how Chinese practices stabilise—or destabilise—the world.

The main weakness of Qin's book is its repetition, and long explanations of the assumptions within mainstream IR theory. Furthermore, as a reader, one might expect more by way of an exploration and scrutiny of the Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions for developing IR theory. The author highlights the differences and different cultures; however, other cultures dominated by Confucianism could be explored more. There are some references to other cultures, like the Japanese Tokugawa system, but this is definitely insufficient.

Overall, this book makes a considerable contribution to the global IR literature, which is still considered immature, and will be well received by its intended audience: academics and IR students with a background knowledge of IR theory. The book also provides a reference for those who wish to understand China's role in IR theory.

Bio

Özge Taylan graduated from Gazi University, Department of International Relations. She earned her LL.M. at International Law: Rights and Responsibilities degree from University of Sussex, UK. Currently, Taylan is a Ph.D. candidate in Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University and faculty member at Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University. Before joining Yildirim Beyazit University, she worked at Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Economy. She also served as a Visiting Scholar at Yonsei University/South Korea in 2017. Her research interests include International Political Economy, development studies, and East Asian studies.