Towards Guanxi? Reconciling the "Relational Turn" in Western and Chinese International Relations Scholarship

Siyang Liu
Prague University of Economics and Business

Jeremy Garlick
Prague University of Economics and Business

Fangxing Qin
Prague University of Economics and Business

Abstract

In recent years, the "relational turn" in International Relations (IR) theory has attracted extensive attention. However, the limitations of the substantialist ontology of mainstream (Western) IR theory means that it encounters difficulties and dilemmas in interpreting the evolving international system. Against the background of the rapid development of globalization and regional integration, the reality of world politics is constantly changing, and increasingly shows obvious characteristics of interconnection and high interdependence. In this context, there is insufficient research comparing the Western and non-Western versions of the "relational turn". Relational ontology may be able to provide a bridge between Chinese Confucian philosophy, Western philosophy, Western sociology, and mainstream western IR theories capable of generating productive synergies. However, there are major theoretical and cultural obstacles to be overcome if a reconciliation of the Western and Chinese versions of relationalism is to be achieved.

Keywords: Relationality, guanxi, relational ontology, Confucianism, international relations (IR) theory

Siyang Liu, PhD candidate, Department of International and Diplomatic Studies, Prague University of Economics and Business and Associate Professor, Department of Social Science, Hebei GEO University. Email: siyang.liu@vse.cz. 0000-0002-8283-0256.

Jeremy Garlick, Associate Professor, Department of International and Diplomatic Studies, Prague University of Economics and Business. 0000-0001-5358-9267.

Fangxing Qin, PhD candidate, Department of International and Diplomatic Studies, Prague University of Economics and Business and Lecturer, School of European Languages and Cultures, Beijing Foreign Studies University. 0000-0002-8386-022X.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the "relational turn" of international relations (IR) theory has attracted much attention. IR scholars have begun to evaluate whether relationality can provide a new space for the development of constructivist ontology in IR theory.[1] At the same time, because of the proposal that a truly global IR is needed,[2] the discussion of non-Western versions of relational theorizing has become increasingly relevant.[3] Both Western and non-Western IR scholars have participated in the discussion of global relational theory. Most notably, Chinese scholars such as Qin Yaqing have begun to work on relational theory based on traditional Chinese culture.[4] In other words, as Paes and Linares point out, the discipline of IR "has progressively taken on the relationality implicit in its name", and relational perspectives other than the Western one "have also emerged from other geo-linguistic traditions. A dialogue between two of the most well-established perspectives on relational theorizing, the Anglophone and the Sinophone, appears".[5]

So far, this dialogue about relational theory between the West and the non-West is preliminary. The discussion is limited to each side's own cultural conditions, and scholars only have a deeper understanding of the relational concepts and logic with which they are familiar. The discussion does not delve deeply into the degree of acceptance and integration of theories of non-Western relationality with respect to mainstream (Western) IR theory, let alone the comparison of Western and non-Western relational theory. Yet this state of affairs is easily understandable when one takes into account the fact that the discipline of IR has always been Western-centered.[6] Two decades ago, the historical judgment was made that IR was "an American social science",[7] and "at the new millennium … the US academic community still dominates the discipline".[8] The debate about relational theory has only become a dialogue between Western and non-Western theories in a truly globalized sense more recently.[9]

In this setting, the preliminary formation of global research does not mean that Asian and Western academic circles have a unified and clear understanding of the notion of the "relational turn" or "global relational theory". Furthermore, the impact of relational theory on the ontology and epistemology of IR theory in the post-Western era, and whether non-Western relational theory contains a basis for acceptance and integration by mainstream IR theory, have not been fully explored.

Thus, by drawing on these debates, the main focus of the article is to try to explore the commonalities and differences of the "relational turn" in theoretical IR debates in China and

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[1]   David M. McCourt, "Practice Theory and Relationalism as the New Constructivism," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (2016): 475.

[2]   Amitav Acharya, *Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

[3]   See Astrid H. M. Nordin et al., "Towards Global Relational Theorizing: A Dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone Scholarship on Relationalism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2019): 570-81; Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, "Reclaiming the Social: Relationalism in Anglophone International Studies," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2019): 582-600; Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. M. Nordin, "Relationality and Rationality in Confucian and Western Traditions of Thought," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2019): 601-14.

[4]   Qin Yaqing, "Relationality and Processual Construction: Bringing Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory," *Social Sciences in China* 30 (2009): 5-20.

[5]   Lucas de Oliveira Paes and Lucia J. Linares, "Letter from the Editors," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 5 (2019): 569.

[6]   Homeira Moshirzadeh, **"**The Idea of Dialogue of Civilizations and Core-Periphery Dialogue in International Relations," *All Azimuth* 9, no. 2 (2020): 221–27.

[7]   See Stanley Hoffman, "International Relations: An American Social Science," *Daedelus* 106 (1977): 41–60.

[8]   Steve Smith, "The Discipline of International Relations: Still an American Social Science?," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 2, no. 3 (2000): 374.

[9]   Deepshikha Shahi, **"**Foregrounding the Complexities of a Dialogic Approach to Global International Relations," *All Azimuth* 9, no. 2 (2020): 163–76.

the West. The first two sections review the formation of the "relational turn" and "relational theory" in the Western and Chinese traditions. The second section points out the present inadequacies of the dialogue between East and West. It discusses the ontological dilemma faced by mainstream Western IR theory in explaining the real world in its full empirical complexity, pointing out that the tension between reality and theory pushes Eastern and Western IR scholars to reflect on the ontological assumptions of mainstream theory.[10] The last section reflects on the prospects for unifying Western and Chinese relational theory, concluding that there are many obstacles to overcome if the seemingly incompatible and contradictory assumptions underlying the two strands of relational theory are to be somehow brought into ontological and epistemological alignment.

2. The Relational Turn in Anglophone IR Theorizing

In Anglophone IR theory the "relational turn" is inspired by the broader social sciences. Since the 1950s, relationalism has become an important research topic in the field of social science and has contributed to the so-called "relational turn" in IR theory. Indeed, it was the "relational turn" of sociology scholars against substantialist thinking that inspired IR scholars to turn to relationalism. Philosophical and sociological theories such as pragmatic philosophy and practical theory thus provide an ontological foundation for relational research in IR.

Transactionalism in Dewey's pragmatic philosophy shows that "systems of description and naming are employed to deal with aspects and phases of action, without final attribution to 'elements' or other presumptively detachable or independent 'entities,' 'essences,' or 'realities,' and without isolation of presumptively detachable 'relations' from such detachable 'elements'".[11] Thus, it is possible to draw the conclusion that "the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction".[12] Individuals or structures can be understood "as dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes ... in which it makes no sense to envision constituent elements apart from the flows within which they are involved (and vice versa)".[13] In other words, relations are inherently transactional and inseparable from the processes within which they are nested. Relationalism thus stands in opposition to a substantialist (realist) philosophy which perceives actors as discrete entities bouncing off each other like billiard balls and remaining effectively unchanged by the interaction.

Bourdieu's theory of practice has exerted great influence on the development of Western relationalism. Bourdieu opposes substantialist theory and advocates relationalism. For Bourdieu, "le réel est relationnel" ("the real is relational").[14] The notion of the relational is so central to Bourdieu that he preferred to speak not of his "theory" but rather of a "system of relational concepts".[15] He claims that "what exist in the social world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals",[16] but objective

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[10] For a full discussion of the shortcomings of mainstream IR theory and the need to incorporate complexity thinking and analytic eclecticism in a pragmatic, syncretic theoretical-methodological framework, see Jeremy Garlick, *The Impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative: From Asia to Europe* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020), Chapters 2 and 3.

[11] John Dewey and Arthur F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1949), 108.

[12] Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 287.

[13] Emirbayer, "Manifesto," 289.

[14] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 97.

[15] Willem Schinkel, "Sociological Discourse of the Relational: The Cases of Bourdieu & Latour,"*The Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (2007): 712.

[16] Bourdieu and Wacquant, *Invitation to Reflexive*, 97.

relations. Ignatow and Robinson explain that "Bourdieu defines a field as a network or configuration of relations between social positions in which positions and their interrelations are determined by the distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital".[17] In other words, in his view, all actions of an actor are carried out in a certain field, and the field is a network or a configuration of objective relations existing between various positions. In this way, the world and the actors are interdependent in the world of relations. However, Bourdieu believes that the mutual influence and construction of the field and actors still have a certain degree of objective independence. This means that even Bourdieu's thought reveals traces of the influence of Western substantive thinking.

Emirbayer argues that "the key question confronting sociologists ... is the choice between substantialism and relationalism".[18] Inspired by his work, the seminal work of Jackson and Nexon is regarded as the beginning of the "relational turn" in Western IR, since it reveals the shortcomings of substantialism.[19] The majority of IR theories are based on a positivist-based, state-centric substantialism. As far as the ontology of IR is concerned, we can try to "think of ties before subjects since it is often useful to do just that", although "we are accustomed to thinking of subjects before ties".[20] To study IR without substances and their variable attributes, Jackson and Nexon propose a processual/relational approach that focuses on four key concepts: processes, configurations, projects, and yoking to world politics. However, they explain in full neither what the term "relationalism" signifies nor the theory that "relations precede the state".[21] Nonetheless, their "processual/relational" research approach emphasizes that the process of relations operation plays an important role in state behavior. At the same time, Jackson and Nexon link the concept of 'relations' primarily to the legitimacy of discourse among actors.

Subsequently, Colin Wight[22] identified four levels of social structure from the perspective of relational philosophy: the level of material exchange (resources, material endowments); the level of cross-subject activities (rules, norms, systems, etc.); social relations (classes, identities); and intersubjectivity of actors (identification, etc.). According to Wight, the relations between the various levels of the structure constitute the overall structure of the social world. Due to the complexity and diversity of its multiple structural relations, current IR is gradually evolving into global social relations.[23] That is to say, actors are situated in a processual relationship based on practice. The structure of international relations is in a dynamic state of continuous generation and development, and because of the diversity of the social world, the structure does not exist and develop in isolation but rather appears as a manifestation of multiple structures.

McCourt addresses the significance of relational theory to the development of constructivism by proposing a "practice-relational constructivism".[24] Aiming at the limited ontology of American constructivism, he contends relationalism and practice theory "tackle a set of unhelpful dichotomies", such as "agency versus structure", "ideationalism versus

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[17] Gabe Ignatow and Laura Robinson, "Pierre Bourdieu: Theorizing the Digital," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no.7 (2017): 952.

[18] Emirbayer, "Manifesto," 282.

[19] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H Nexon, "Relations before States: Substance, Process and the Study of World Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 3(1999): 291-332.

[20] Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States," 304.

[21] Jackson and Nexon, "Reclaiming the Social," 587.

[22] Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology.* Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), doi:10.1017/CBO9780511491764.

[23] Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations*, 296-9.

[24] McCourt, "Practice Theory and Relationalism".

materialism" and "constitution versus causation". He identifies the necessity of a turn to relationalism and practice theory to expand the ontology of constructivism. Doing this productively reopens the ontology which has been unduly narrowed in much constructivist theory, explaining that "the value of practice theory and relationalism is to keep IR scholarship sensitive to the social and cultural contexts in which international politics takes place".[25] However, although the "theory of practical relations" is based in social constructivism, not all practical and relational theories are suitable for constructivism.[26] The debate on the categorization of relational theory and the relationship between relational theory and constructivism thus remains to be further explored.

Uniquely among non-Chinese scholars, Kavalski offers a broader understanding of relationality in contemporary IR theory which incorporates elements taken from Chinese thought.[27] He argues that "relationality suggests modes for understanding, explanation, and encounter that are simultaneously attuned and open to the contradictions, challenges, and opportunities of a dynamic and unpredictable global life."[28] He analyzes the ontology of relations from the perspective of values, narratives, and practices, positing that "normative agency emerges in a community, not in a vacuum."[29] Connecting relationalism to the Chinese concept of *guanxi* 关系, 'relations'), Kavalski argues that it "is the relational (rather than the rule-based) nature of *guanxi* that backstops the dialogical outcomes of its effects."[30] That is to say, the state and its national interests do not really exist. It is the continuous dialogue between states that forms the state. By engaging with the phenomenon of relationality, he points out that the effects of relationality are foreshadowed by engagement with the Chinese concept of *guanxi*. This invokes the complexity of global life and showcases the novel and meaningful opportunities generated by relationality for innovations in IR theorizing.

The theoretical significance of these discussions of process and relations lies in the exploration of a new research space beyond what has previously been covered in Western IR theory and practice. However, most Western IR scholars who have worked on relationalism tend to return, consciously or unconsciously, to substantialist study of international phenomena. For example, in an empirical article, Jackson applied "relational constructivism" to explain the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's formation. From this paper, it can be seen that Jackson's "process" is concerned with identifying how actors legitimize their actions through discourse. The author's discussion is actually more about the study of entities than relations between actors.[31] Jackson's approach is roughly similar to linguistic constructivism, and does not completely focus on the analysis of processes in relations. This lack of connection between the implications of relationalist theory and its application to empirical studies, evidenced by the tendency to fall back on substantialist analysis, is typical of Western approaches to relationalism in IR.

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[25] McCourt, "Practice Theory and Relationalism," 475.

[26] Jackson and Nexon, "Reclaiming the Social," 582.

[27] See Emilian Kavalski, "Guanxi or What is the Chinese for Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 18, no. 3 (2018): 397-420; Emilian Kavalski, "The Guanxi of Relational International Affairs," *Chinese Political Science Review* no. 3 (2018): 233-51; Emilian Kavalski, "Chinese Concepts and Relational International Politics," *All Azimuth* 7, no.1 (2018): 87-102.

[28] Kavalski, "The Guanxi of Relational International Affairs," 247.

[29] Emilian Kavalski, "The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China In Context," *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (2013): 262.

[30] Kavalski, "Chinese Concepts," 96-7.

[31] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, "Relational Constructivism: A War of Words," in *Making Sense of International Relations Theory*, ed. Jennifer Sterling-Folker (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 139-55.

3. The Rise of Relational Theorizing in Sinophone IR

Since the 1990s, the globalization of the academic study of international relations has generated a budding consciousness in China of the implications of Western theoretical innovation for Chinese IR scholarship. Alongside this new awareness, scholars have begun to examine the possibility of generating "homegrown" theories based on traditional Chinese philosophy, culture and values. Consequently, and as a key part of the development of IR studies in China, Chinese scholars have made significant progress in relational theory research. Crucially, the Confucian concept of *guanxi* (in the sense of social relations) has been used by scholars such as Qin Yaqing and Feng Zhang as the foundation of an emerging school of relationalist theorizing containing characteristics derived from Chinese philosophy.[32]

Based on the experience of Chinese society over thousands of years, *guanxi* is generally given a central position in Chinese conceptions of society derived from both the practical activities of people and the theories of scholars. The concept has a layered and fluid framing since the term possesses a very rich range of meaning and a polymorphous character. As an illustration of the latter, *guanxi* has been translated into English in various ways: as an intricate and pervasive relational network, as particularistic ties, as friendship, but also as connection, exchange, and even social capital. However, no single definition can summarize the whole picture of *guanxi*. Although possibly confusing to non-Chinese, the concept's multifariousness grants it a flexibility which has made it useful as "an enabling platform for contingent innovation".[33]

G*uanxi* is embedded in Chinese culture. Ancient Chinese thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius repeatedly emphasized the concept as it provides a means for reconciling differences in interests between self and others. In the modern era, the research of Chinese sociologists – led by Fei Xiaotong – demonstrates that in marked distinction from the individualist-based society in the Western world, traditional Chinese society is relations-based.[34] In Western society individuals are independent of each other like bundles of straw standing in a field, held together by social contracts and organizations. In contrast, the social structure of China can be imagined as a stone dropped into water from which ripples form: everyone is the center of the circle from which their social relations are launched, and each circle and each ripple are connected by specific relations.[35]

However, in the study of the social sciences, including international politics, the concept *guanxi* is generally so frequently used that it is not given any specific theoretical meaning. Yet, as Kavalski realized, *guanxi* is "… one of the words which make up the Chinese term for 'International Relations' – *guoji guanxi* … In this respect, it should appear surprising that there has been so little attention to the meaning and content of the terms that go into the making of the Chinese phrase for IR."[36]

It was only when Chinese IR scholars such as Qin Yaqing put the term into the framework of modern IR theory and Chinese experience that the meaning of *guanxi* and Chinese relationality in IR was re-discovered.

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[32] Works using elements taken from Chinese approaches to relationalism include: Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Feng Zhang, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[33] Kavalski, "Guanxi or What," 403-4.

[34] See Xiaotong Fei, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[35] Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction," 7-8.

[36] Kavalski, "Guanxi or What," 400.

In fact, the concept of *guanxi* has been incorporated into theorizing in many academic fields in China. The complex texture of the term can be understood from its wide use in the literature on business administration, organization studies, intercultural communication, psychology, and sociology.[37] These fields offer "a huge repository of information about the meaning and practices of *guanxi*".[38] However, it is Chinese scholars of IR who have put *guanxi* and relational theory on the research agenda in the sense of disciplinary innovation in the past two decades, since they have advocated the establishment of a theoretical system incorporating elements of both Chinese and Western relationalism.

The most systematic research achievement in Sinophone research into relationalism in IR theory is Qin's relational theory of world politics.[39] Qin's thinking about relationalism is embodied in a series of assumptions called the "*guanxi* world." He argues that "at the metaphysical level, the world is conceived as being composed of continuous events and ongoing relations rather than substantial objects and discrete entities".[40] The basic unit for observing the world is the relationship. This is obviously different from the atomic ontology of Western mainstream IR theory. In the *guanxi* world, the most important relations are the *guanxi* between people or between human actors. Individuals are no longer entities independent of each other and independent of the external environment, with their own attributes, as understood in individualistic societies. Accordingly, "[t]he *guanxi*-oriented view holds that an individual's life is not complete and that it can only have meaning through its connection to others. Without others, the attributes of the individual lose their meaning."[41]

In other words, the *guanxi* world does not deny the existence of individuals but emphasizes that the identity of individuals is formed in social relations, and the meaning of individuals can only be expressed in social relations. Therefore, unlike the western IR universe under the influence of "ontological substantialism", which is "composed of discrete and self-subsistent actors", in the view of *guanxi*, "the world represents itself always as a complexly related whole"[42] – a *guanxi* world.

In Qin's relational theory, the basic analytical framework of relational theory is processual constructivism. He proposes "[a] relational theory of world politics with relationality as the metaphysical component of its theoretical hardcore. It conceives the IR world as one composed of ongoing relations, assumes international actors as actors-in-relations, and takes processes defined in terms of relations in motion as ontologically significant".[43]

"Relationality" is thus defined as the core of the process, while "process" – defined as relations in motion – plays a crucial role and constitutes a driving factor alongside rationality in IR. In other words, the process consists of complex and interrelated dynamic relations. It is also the space-time domain of the operation of relations and the key to practical activities. To maintain the process is to maintain relations, as a result of which identity is also constructed. In this way, process plays a crucial and irreplaceable role in socialization.[44] Thus, although the concepts of relations and process here are ostensibly drawn from Chinese Confucian

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[37] For instance, in the field of psychology there is Kwang-Kuo Hwang's *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations* (New York: Springer, 2012).

[38] Kavalski, "The Guanxi of Relational International Affairs," 234.

[39] Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*.

[40] Qin, "A Relational Theory of World," 35.

[41] Qin Yaqing, "Rule, Rules, and Relations: Towards a Synthetic Approach to Governance," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 2 (2011): 117-45.

[42] Qin, "A Relational Theory of World," 36.

[43] Qin Yaqing, "A Relational Theory of World Politics," *International Studies Review* 18, no.1 (2016): 33.

[44] Qin, "Relationality and Processual Construction," 8.

culture, Qin's relational theory is also clearly influenced by elements of constructivism in Western IR theory.

Another strain of relational theory that draws on Confucian culture is Chih-yu Shih's "balance of relationships" theory. Upon observing the interaction between great powers and small states, Shih discovered an interesting problem: great powers do not necessarily suppress small states as the realist theory of balance of power based on strategic political and military alliances predicts. He therefore posits a "balance of relationships" theory, which "draws on Confucianism and compares Confucian self-restraint with liberal self-restraint".[45] Shi's emphasis on Confucian culture means that his approach is "different from the mainstream IR theory that only manages calculable and apparent national interests".[46]

Shih's balance of relations theory rests on the ontological assumption "that relations precede the state".[47] Unlike Western realism, which argues that the international system is anarchic and states' behavior is driven by a self-help imperative based on national interest,[48] balance of relations theory "conceptualizes relationality as the prevailing condition, alongside anarchy, that defines international politics."[49] Shih explains that this "relationship-driven system neutralizes the absolute concern for power that exists under realist projections of international anarchy".[50] The international community is regarded as a loose group, and the relationship between members inside and outside the group is not fixed but changes. "Relationship" means that if the state cannot connect its own existence with the approval of others under the condition of anarchy, it will be difficult to survive. Since "[t]he size of a country ceases to be a primary determinant of expected behavior",[51] relations become an important factor. Relationships are conceived "as a process of mutual constitution"[52] in which identity is generated intersubjectively.

Empirical evidence shows that in the Confucian concept, the Confucian constituency neither likes challenging authority for system stability nor does it approve of authoritarian control to maintain a harmonious system.[53] Shi points out that "[e]vidence likewise suggests that if the systemic identity is weak, the constituency of relations and balances shows higher support for inclusive, not enforcive, leadership to restore governability".[54] That is to say, when long-term interests conflict with short-term interests, short-term interests (such as political, economic, military, and cultural demands) should give way to ambiguous but fundamental long-term interests (harmonious order). In other words, the primary mechanism of Shi's balance of relations theory is the mitigation of power relationships in favor of cooperation and dialogue. On the basis of bilateral communication, concessions, agreement, and reciprocity are reached. Thus, unlike Qin's theory based on multilateral relations, Shih's balance of relations theory is based on a Confucian interpretation of bilateral relations.

Zhao Tingyang is another representative promoter of the "relational turn" in Chinese IR.

[45] Chih-yu Shih, "Relations and Balances: Self-Restraint and Democratic Governability under Confucianism," *Pacific Focus* 29, no. 3 (2014): 351.

[46] Chiung-Chiu Huang and Chih-yu Shih, *Harmonious Intervention: China's Quest for Relational Security* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 6.

[47] Chih-yu Shih et al., *China and International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2019), 8.

[48] The most well-known exposition of self-help in the anarchic international system is Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

[49] Shih et al., *China*, 21.

[50] Shih et al., *China*, 10.

[51] Shih et al., *China*, 10.

[52] Shih et al., *China*, 1.

[53] Shih, "Relations and Balances," 351.

[54] Shih, "Relations and Balances," 351.

He proposes a theory of "Tianxia" (all-under-heaven) based on his philosophical research into traditional Chinese culture.[55] "Tianxia" theory utilizes a "home country-world" analytical framework based on the principle of coexistence. This is very different from Western realism, which posits anarchy in the international system and conflict between countries. Zhao frames his theoretical approach as "international relations dominated by social relations, which is not premised on conflict opposition, but the establishment of long-term relations.".[56] Tianxia theory thus emphasizes "taking coexistence instead of existence as the basic problem of ontology".[57] Only in forming social relationships can people determine the meaning of their own existence and the existence of others. In the international sphere, this principle of co-existence is applied to nations instead of people.

Research based on relationalism and traditional Chinese culture is also represented in the work of other scholars. L.H.M. Ling, a Chinese American scholar, draws on Taoist ideas of dialectics and criticizes Eurocentric approaches to world politics. She analyzes important issues such as the relations of "self-other" in international affairs. She argues that "Daoist dialectics offer a relational perception of world politics, emphasizing the complementary and contradictory relationships between actors."[58] Based on the concept of traditional Chinese *guanxi*, Emilian Kavalski proposes going beyond the dichotomous cognitive model of "hegemon-challenger" in regarding China's rise as a socially negotiative practice.[59] Ling Wei conducts an empirical study into the regional practice of relational theory.[60] Dingding Chen analyzes the new relational model of great power between China and the United States.[61] These IR scholars put concepts with Chinese ingredients such as "process", "balance of relationships" and "Taoist dialectics" at the core of their relationalist approaches.

Thus, in developing relationalist theory based on Chinese culture and philosophy, the work of numerous scholars is expanding the discipline's horizon, in the process laying a foundation for a possible synthesis between Western and non-Western theoretical perspectives. However, as the following section will demonstrate, there are many obstacles – philosophical and cultural, ontological and epistemological – to such a reconciliation.

4. Towards *Guanxi*? Attempting to Reconcile Western and Chinese Relational Theorizing

The attempt to transcend the substantialist ontology of mainstream IR theory (which is entirely Western in origin) is the common starting point of Western and non-Western relationalism. However, in seeking to employ relationalism to break through the constraints of substantialist ontology, Western scholars draw more on Western sociology and philosophy, while Chinese scholars draw more on traditional Chinese culture and philosophy. In this context, the further exploration of Chinese relational logic brings the possibility of new developments in IR

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[55] See Zhao Tingyang, "The Theory of Universal Existence: Interpersonal relationship and Mind," *Philosophical Researches* 8 (2009): 22-30; Zhao Tingyang, "To Deepen Enlightenment: From Methodological Individualism to Methodological Relationalism," *Philosophical Researches* 1 (2011): 90-3.
[56] Chih-yu Shih, "Asian Local School of International Relations Research," *Quarterly Journal of Intenational Politics* 3 (2010): 57-8.
[57] Zhao, "The Theory of Universal Existence," 26.
[58] LH.M. Ling, "Worlds beyond Westphalia: Daoist dialectics and the 'China threat'," *Review of International Studies* 39 (2013): 549–68.
[59] Kavalski, "Guanxi or What," 397–420.
[60] See Ling Wei, "Balance of Relations: ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving Regional Order," *World Economics and Politics,* no.7 (2017): 38–64.
[61] See Dingding Chen, "Cooperation Conflict and Processual Constructivism: The Case on Sino-U.S. Relations," *World Economics and Politics,* no.10 (2016): 59–74.

theory.

In the last few years, there have been some attempts by Western IR scholars to compare and reconcile Western and Chinese IR relational theory. Most notably, in 2019, the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (CRIA) published a special issue on "Global relational theorizing." In this issue, Paes and Linares acknowledge that the relational turn in IR "goes beyond the English-speaking core of the discipline. Relational perspectives have also emerged from other geo-linguistic traditions".[62] Meanwhile, Jackson and Nexon argue that "thinking from relationalism as the starting-point allows us to better appreciate how differences between and among relationally-inclined scholars form a complex tapestry of debates internal to relationalism broadly understood."[63] Another article in the CRIA special issue identifies "points of comparison and contrast, convergence and divergence"[64] between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relational IR theorizing.

In the same issue, Qin and Nordin make a more detailed comparative analysis of relationality and rationality in Confucian and Western traditions of thought.[65] They take the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an example to illustrate that relations enjoy a more prominent ontological position in the traditional Confucian practice emphasizing community rather than individual rationality. The ASEAN example reveals that "different cultural communities draw from different background knowledge and have different practices."[66] The CRIA special issue also contains further discussions on the relationality between self and other in Chinese and Western thought,[67] and feminist issues in the relational theory of IR.[68]

Although the CRIA special issue is only a preliminary step towards dialogue between IR scholars from the East and West, in which different ideas collide, it suggests that an inclusive (dialogic) approach rather than an either-or approach to the development of IR theory can be more conducive to knowledge production. As Shahi points out, it is essential to develop "an intellectual strategy that emphasizes deeper dialogues, two-way communications, and ideational exchanges between the West and the non-West."[69] Therefore, in order to fully evaluate the academic significance of the global "relational turn", it is necessary to go beyond the differentiated narrative framework of the East-West cultural divide and explore the commonality of the "relational turn" in theoretical and empirical terms. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are significant problems to be overcome if such a dialogue is to be established, since there are fundamental differences between the Western and Chinese versions of relationalism. These differences stem from the distinct intellectual traditions on which the two versions rest.

Western IR theory originated from the rationalist tradition established in ancient Greece, which was inherited by Europe and subsequently the whole of Western intellectual culture. As a result, instrumental rationality became the philosophical foundation of economics and political science. Since the establishment of the IR discipline based on instrumental rationality one hundred years ago, the influence of Western mainstream IR theories has spread throughout

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[62] Paes and Linares, "Letter from the Editors," 569.

[63] Jackson and Nexon, "Reclaiming the Social," 582.

[64] Nordin et al., "Towards global relational theorizing," 570.

[65] Qin and Nordin, "Relationality and rationality."

[66] Qin and Nordin, "Relationality and rationality," 601.

[67] See Astrid H. M. Nordin and Graham M. Smith, "Relating Self and other in Chinese and Western tought," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no.5 (2019): 636–53.

[68] See Marysia Zalewski, "Forget(ting) Feminism? Investigating Relationality in International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no.5 (2019): 615–35.

[69] Shahi, "Foregrounding the Complexities," 1.

the world, shaping the global academic discourse system of IR. The development of Western IR theory has gone through several major paradigm debates, eventually resulting in the three mainstream theoretical paradigms of realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism. However, since the late 1990s, Western mainstream IR theorizing appears to have entered a cul-de-sac, even producing conjecture, in one case, about the possibility of the "end of International Relations theory."[70] In essence, a range of ontological and epistemological reflections on the state of IR theory, including debates concerning relationalism, are reflected in "complaints about the death of IR theory [which] reflect social developments in the field."[71]

One of the important reasons for this dilemma is that ontological assumptions in mainstream Western IR theory appear to exclude the possibility of explaining change in the international system. The current theoretical ontology based on the work of Kenneth Waltz is essentially a static model of actors in an international system with fixed characteristics. It cannot therefore provide an explanatory model for the phenomenon of lasting change to the international system.

According to Waltz's structural realist model, which relies on rationalism as its foundation, the international system is assumed to be composed of discrete, interacting units: nation states. The "structure" of the international system is said to be "anarchic". This term refers to an international system which lacks a world government, and in which every nation-state actor is responsible for looking after itself, rendering the international system a "self-help system". The system is thus composed of self-regarding units, which primarily seek to survive. Nation states are the only entities in international relations that have the centralized legitimate authority to use force to look after themselves. Sovereign states are thus the constitutive units of the international system, and the primary actors in world politics.[72]

Neoliberal institutionalism also adheres to rationalist thinking. It emphasizes the use of international institutions by states to further their interests through cooperation. Robert Keohane views institutions and international regimes (defined by Krasner as "principles, norms, rules, and decision making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue-area")[73] not as substitutes for world government but as important factors to weaken conflicts and enhance cooperation. In Keohane's view, institutions and regimes can exist and function independently without relying on the power of hegemony. In other words, neoliberal institutionalism considers the institutions and international regimes established by the hegemonic state as another kind of substantive existence in the international system.[74]

The ontology of constructivism, as interpreted by the perspective's most famous theorist Alexander Wendt, holds that "the structures of human association are primarily cultural rather than material phenomena, and against rationalism that these structures not only regulate behavior but construct identities and interests".[75] Wendt and other constructivists assume that international structure is determined primarily not by material capabilities of

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[70] See Tim Dunne, Lene Hansen and Colin Wight, "The End of International Relations Theory?," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 405–25.

[71] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon. "International Theory in a Post-Paradigmatic Era: From Substantive Wagers to Scientific Ontologies." *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 3 (2013): 543–65.

[72] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 88–92.

[73] Stephen D. Krasner, "Structural Causes and Regime Consequences: Regimes as Intervening Variables," *International Organization* 36, no. 2 (1982): 185.

[74] See Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[75] Alexander Wendt, "The State and the Problem of Corporate Agency," in *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 193.

states, but by ideas shared intersubjectively between states. The shared ideas here refer to social knowledge, as opposed to power and interests: the latter tend to be emphasized by neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists.

An ontological problem with the theory of constructivism – shared with neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism – is that defining attributes such as the generic identity of the state and individual identity do not change as a result of interaction. Based on the assumption of the independence of structure and unit, there is no ontological difference between constructivism, structural realism, and neoliberal institutionalism. All three mainstream IR theories are substantialist. The substantialist assumption of the inherent stability of the units and their separation from the interactive practice-based process excludes the possibility of changes in the components and composition of the international system.

The ontological assumption that the world is composed of independent entities with a stable nature is a typical reflection of the standard Western thinking mode of substantialism. Substantialism classifies the actions of entities as "self-action" and "inter-action".[76] In the self-action approach, actors choose to act according to rational choices. Entities do not change their "primary" characteristics, which "make an entity a particular kind of entity".[77] In the inter-action approach, "entities no longer generate their own action, but rather, the relevant action takes place among the entities themselves. Entities remain fixed and unchanging throughout such inter-action, each independent of the existence of the others, much like billiard balls or the particles of Newtonian mechanics".[78]

The unaltered nature of substantialist ontology makes it difficult to explain change in IR. In fact, Jackson and Nexon have introduced these criticisms and analyses into IR research: "Most theories in IR cannot adequately account for 'change between systems' (e.g. between the 'feudal system' and the 'early state system'), and the same difficulties explaining such changes undermine efforts to elucidate the dynamics of 'change within systems' (e.g. shifts in the balance of power in a 'multipolar system')." They point out that the contradiction intrinsic to the theory is that "[s]ubstantialism requires that substances have invariant characteristics which are unaffected by changes in variable attributes".[79] This kind of contradiction is widespread in substantialist assumptions about units such as actors and structures in mainstream Western IR theory, which is the fundamental reason for its lack of explanatory power concerning change in the international system.

The substantialist ontology of mainstream Western IR theory is also difficult to reconcile with the highly interrelated and fluid real world. With the accelerated development of economic globalization, regional integration and multi-polarization of the current era, a highly mobile reality is taking shape. In Zhao Tingyang's contra-Western theoretical model, "[t]he international political concepts defined by the nation-state system, imperialism, and hegemony model are gradually losing their correspondence with the fact of globalization." Indeed, changes in the structure of the international system "are changes in the way the world exists".[80] The 21st century world contains such a highly interconnected set of international social networks that globalization itself has brought about changes in the international

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[76] Emirbayer, "Manifesto," 282–83.
[77] Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States," 296.
[78] Emirbayer, "Manifesto," 285–6.
[79] Jackson and Nexon, "Relations Before States," 296–7.
[80] Zhao Tingyang, *A Possible World of All-under-the-Heaven System: The World Order in the Past and for the Future* (Beijing: Citic Press Group, 2016), 1–2.

system. The increasing number of non-state actors and other forces in IR have made the world a place of complex interactivity in which previous assumptions about the leading role of nation states are being undermined, and ever-evolving processes of change are generating an emergent, altered reality.

Thus, systemic change, which involves a change to the structure of the international system itself, is taking place in the contemporary world. This change is primarily embodied as changes "in the international distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights".[81] In general, the rise of the overall power of emerging countries, allied with the unresolved financial crisis which has been ongoing since 2008, has brought about a trend of a declining hegemon (the US) being challenged by rising powers (led by China). This has resulted in the replacement of the existing unipolar or bipolar model of global power by an emerging multipolar prototype which will inevitably bring about changes in the system.

An additional factor affecting the structure of the international system is that the nature of the world's security threats after the Cold War is different from the traditional war-based security threats in the Westphalian system. The world today faces a complex and interconnected raft of non-traditional security threats such as poverty, disasters, epidemic diseases, international terrorism, climate change, financial crises and environmental issues. These emerging issues impact the functioning of the international system and in the process inevitably alter it. The impact of non-traditional security threats implies that the range of theoretical models proposed by mainstream (Western) IR theory based on the interaction of nation-states in an anarchic international system is not adequate to explain the new, emerging situation in the 21st century.

Systems change, unlike systemic change (defined as change within the system), is a change to the system itself. Some important changes in international reality, such as economic globalization and regional integration, have not brought essential systems changes, but the concept of sovereignty has shown a tendency to relaxation. Specifically, this phenomenon is caused by two aspects of reality. On the one hand, the diversification of actors in the international system brought about by economic globalization and regional integration has blurred the concept of national sovereignty. The strengthening of social forces in the international system has produced a large number of non-state actors. Non-governmental actors, such as international organizations, regional organizations, and international civil society, have become important factors influencing international affairs in terms of agenda-setting, normative advocacy, and so on. In this context, the connotation of national interest and its means of realization have changed considerably. The internal affairs that originally belonged to a country are often affected by external forces or require international solutions (such as in non-traditional security areas) due to their influence beyond borders. In other words, participation in international organizations and the conclusion of international agreements are premised on the externalization of domestic politics to some extent and the transfer of partial sovereignty, which makes national sovereignty ambiguous. In addition, the formation of regionalized international communities has further weakened the concept of sovereignty. The acceleration of regional integration has created a more dynamic regionalized international community. As neoliberal institutionalists point out, the increasing influence of intergovernmental organizations (such as the European Union) and other integrated

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[81] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)*,* 42.

cooperation platforms - such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), "10+3" (ASEAN China, Japan, and South Korea), and the North America Free Trade Area (NAFTA) – challenge the idea of nation-states as the primary arbiters of international affairs.[82] The phenomenon of regional integration itself weakens the notion of absolute sovereignty.

In summary, the post-Cold War international reality challenges the ontology of mainstream Western IR which posits sovereign states as the main actors. Although systems change has not yet appeared in full, the substantial nation-state and atomic interactive mode can no longer describe the transitional state of today's globalizing world. Although the academic world of IR senses the tension between theory and practice, Kavaoglu points out that the "Westphalian narrative" in IR "prevents international relations scholars from theorizing cross-civilizational and cross-regional interdependencies [and] thwarts the accommodation of pluralism in an increasingly globalized world. It is time for IR scholars to do away with it".[83]

However, there is no doubt, based on the evidence presented above, that any attempt to "do away with" mainstream IR theory and replace it with relationalist-based theorising is going to be easier said than done, as the final section in this article will demonstrate.

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Where Next for *Guanxi*?

As we have seen, there are significant ontological differences between Chinese and Western scholars' positions on relationalism. Specifically, first, the concept of "relations" is given a rather different emphasis by Chinese and Western IR scholars, which creates an inevitable dialogical tension. Western relational theory focuses on practice, discourse, and process analysis in the framing of IR as primarily concerned with interstate relations. Western relational theory focuses on the background and discourse of relations, but always with fixed, unitary states as the primary actors and focus of analysis. In the Western conception, relations may be fluid, but the actors remain essentially unchanging. In contrast, in the Sinophone sphere the elaboration of relational theory draws on the resources of traditional Chinese philosophy. China's "*guanxi*" is not only a strategic "relationship" exchange, but also emphasizes the original and basic "connection" between actors. The identities of the actors are inherently linked to their interaction, meaning that relations are an integral part of intersubjective identity construction. Relations and actors are not seen as separate substantive entities, but as inter-active and co-constituting. In *guanxi*-based theory, actors therefore are not fixed, unchanging units, but are themselves constituted by their interactions and the relationships formed. Thus, there are subtle but important differences between Chinese and Western IR scholars in terms of their understanding of relational ontology.

There are sometimes similarities and overlaps in positions too. For instance, Jackson and Nexon's notion of "relations before state" is similar to Zhao Tingyang's "co-existence precedes existence". However, on this point, Qin takes a different position. In Qin's relational theory, relations and the individual actor co-exist and are mutually constitutive, meaning that they are fluid and not to be seen as fixed entities. Qin's relationalism is therefore a direct challenge to Western IR's substantialism and the conscious or unconscious cognitive biases of scholars who tend to adhere to mainstream IR theory. Qin sets relationalism on a radically new ontological footing based on traditional Chinese thought which alters the conception of

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[82] Keohane, "After Hegemony".
[83] Turan Kayaoglu, "Westphalian Eurocentrism in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2010): 197–217.

actors and the nature of the relations between actors.

World politics is undoubtedly moving towards an increasingly fluid space of ever more complex relations between actors. Relations are ubiquitous in various forms and are an indispensable element of society. However, the dominant position of substantialist mainstream theory that the modernization process is driven by rationality often suppresses the basic element of relationality in both theoretical constructions and practical life. Therefore, the attempt to make the transition from substantialist theory to relationalist theory has become an important feature of contemporary social thought. The IR field, as a latecomer to the relational turn, still has arduous tasks in terms of theoretical construction, agenda expansion, and, above all, changing the cognitive and ontological approach of scholars.

Relational ontology reveals the social mechanisms inherent in the realm of the international and points out a dynamic direction for IR theory. Building on this idea, the main problem for academic IR to consider is not to seek to explain the international system as a fixed, synchronic structure, but to analyze the development and evolution of the international system over time. Scholars need to ensure that theoretical frameworks account for dynamic interactions and the evolving identity of actors. Theorizing in IR needs to move on from static Newtonian and Cartesian dualist models to ones which take account of dynamic complexity and emerging phenomena.[84] If Western and Chinese models can somehow be reconciled, and Chinese theoretical elements accepted by Western IR scholars, then a new synthesized relationalism may present a way forward for moribund IR theory. In other words, it is necessary to put the relations back into International Relations.

Hypothetically, therefore, the need to develop a relational analytical framework provides a bridge between Chinese Confucian philosophy, Western philosophy, Western sociology and mainstream (Western) IR theories. The significance of relational ontology in Chinese IR theory lies not only in a new understanding of relations, but, more importantly, stems from the fact that it proposes issues and agendas that could not previously be conceived within the framework of mainstream IR theory due to cultural and cognitive biases. Relationalism opens up space for the innovation of IR theory in the context of a world of intercultural inter-action, and promotes the development of a truly globalized IR.[85] In short, to promote the in-depth development of the study of relational IR theory requires the joint efforts of Chinese and Western IR academia, with room for contributions from other non-Western scholars from the rest of the world as well. To transcend cultural barriers and promote the study of global relationalism is the intrinsic requirement of the relationalist worldview.

However, there are numerous obstacles to this pleasant vision of a newly relationalist IR theory. Most importantly, there is the difficulty for Western scholars of accepting a Chinese vision of how IR theory should be reconfigured. This difficulty is based not only on theoretical grounds, but also on deep-rooted cultural, philosophical, historical, cognitive, and political factors. For the West, any products of China – including scholarly theories – are perceived as linked to the Chinese state. Thus, Zhao's relationalist-based *Tianxia* theory is interpreted by one prominent Western scholar as an attempt to justify the emerging global hegemony of the Chinese state.[86] The fact that China has a one-party authoritarian system

[84] Emilian Kavalski, "Complexifying IR: Disturbing the 'Deep Newtonian Slumber' of the Mainstream," in *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos: Reflections on Complexity and Global Life,* ed. Emilian Kavalski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 253-72.

[85] Acharya, "Rethinking Power".

[86] William Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or A New Hegemony," *International Studies Review* 10, no. 7 (2008): 749-61.

with a communist party in government also unfortunately creates an intrinsic obstruction to Chinese scholarship being taken seriously in the West.

Apart from such scholarly considerations, "China threat" discourse tends to prevail in many Western depictions of China's rise, including books written by figures influential in the US administration.[87] China's lack of soft power and worsening image in the West – particularly from about 2017 onwards – hinders the promotion of joint research.[88] Since Chinese students and scholars are sometimes viewed as security threats in Western countries, the consequence is an inherent difficulty in building cooperative academic networks. Lack of trust is also increasingly evident in Chinese policy towards the West, largely as a reaction to the generally hostile reception that China gets there. Overall, the lack of trust between China and the West is a severe impediment to cooperation on scholarship in the social sciences. It is difficult, therefore, to see grounds for optimism in terms of Sino-Western cooperation on the ongoing project of reformulating IR theory on the basis of relationalism.

There is another important connected obstacle. While relationalism based on *guanxi* culture has a long tradition in China with deeply felt historical roots, Western relationalism is largely a theoretical construct residing mainly in scholarly texts published from the 1990s onwards. Relationalism in the West has no public face, lacks celebrity intellectuals to espouse it, and is essentially unknown to the general population. The fundamental difference in public and scholarly engagement with relationalism – deep cultural and historical roots in China versus essentially no general awareness in the West – presents a very serious obstacle to productive dialogue on the topic. Even the Western scholars who research relationalism address it on a theoretical level and fail to appreciate the cultural, historical, and even emotional content that relationalism has for Chinese people. The problem here is that, given the generally negative view of China in the West and the connected lack of understanding of Chinese culture and history, it cannot be expected that most Western scholars or the public would give serious consideration to Chinese relationalism. At present it seems a very difficult task even to raise awareness of the topic among Western IR scholars.

Thus, there are serious impediments to any attempt to introduce relationalism into the mainstream of IR theory in any meaningful way. Reconciling Western and Chinese perceptions of the role of relations in IR appears to be similarly difficult. Nevertheless, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, there are very good reasons to believe that the attempt must be made if IR theory is to move forward to encompass the complex reality of the interconnected and interdependent 21st century world. We live in a world in which understanding the relations between international actors, who are themselves shaped by the resulting interactions, is essential if we are to generate meaningful insights in the field of IR; and it is only by drawing on the acquired wisdom of both Western and non-Western traditions that progress can be made in developing the study of relationalism in IR. Serious efforts need to be made by scholars of both Western and non-Western origins if the deep theoretical insights of Chinese relationalism are to be used effectively to generate a new, dynamic version of IR theory.

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[87] Two notable books in the "China threat" genre written by authors influential in the Trump administration are: Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015); and Peter Navarro and Greg Autry, *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon – A Global Call to Action* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011).

[88] Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," *Pew Research Center: Global Attitudes & Trends*, October 6, 2020, accessed October 24, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/.

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