

## ***A Relational Theory of World Politics***

Yaqing Qin (秦亚青)

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A leading Chinese scholar of international relations, Yaqing Qin is professor of International Studies at China Foreign Affairs University, and Executive Vice-President of China National Association for International Studies. His academic interests include international relations theory and global governance. Originally published as 关系与过程 in 2012 by Shanghai People's Publishing House, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* stages a comparison of Chinese international relations (IR) theory and traditional Western IR theory. The book, which is organized around the key concept of *relationality*, affords *relation* an important ontological status and assumes that human relations are the bases of human action; it explains why and how relations are significant for understanding the social world ontologically, epistemologically and methodologically. Part One, which assumes that the formation of social theory is related to a specific culture, provides a foundation for the book as a whole. Part Two develops a relational theory of world politics and interprets international relations from a perspective of relationality. Applying this theory, in Part Three the author re-conceptualizes power, cooperation and governance which are three key ideas in international relations.

The discussion starts with how a social theory originates in the first place. The author maintains that culture defined in terms of shared background knowledge, is the birthmark of social theory (p. 3). Exploring how and why culture is a significant incubator and shaper of social theory, Yaqing Qin signals monism and pluralism as two major approaches to social theory building and development. Chapter One compares these approaches in detail and concludes that the differences between them revolve around their ideas about whether the

social world is different from the natural world and whether social theory is different from natural theory. Monism holds that the two are the same and pluralism assumes they are different (pp. 7-17). Upholding the second position, Yaqing Qin argues that monism is self-enclosed while pluralism not only recognizes the existence of multiple realities but also embraces multiple ways of perceiving the social world (p. 21). Culture becomes significant if added to the process of social theory building, and understanding and interpretation are based on practical knowledge that is developed through generations. This may be embedded in a particular cultural community, either created by or creating that community (p. 24). Different cultures shape different social theories.

Yaqing Qin then moves on to discuss how culture shapes social theory, proposing that the ‘metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core’ is the life of a theory and is composed of the metaphysical part and the substantive part (p. 28). The latter helps members of a cultural community observe and perceive empirical facts, while the former helps them understand and interpret such facts (pp. 25-26). Culture matters because it nurtures the background knowledge of a cultural community which is fundamental for the metaphysical part of a social theory (p. 46). Thus, exploration of cultural resources for theory will promote and inspire theoretical innovation. In chapter three, further explanation is given of how the metaphysical component of a theoretical hard core defines the theory itself (p. 51). Theory producers from different cultural backgrounds will likely propose different metaphysical components resulting in varied social theory. Theories dealing with different issues or problems at the substantive level may have a similar or identical metaphysical component at a deeper level. In this case, the eventual convergence of mainstream IR theories in the United States is the result of the shared metaphysical component of their theoretical hardcore: structural realism and neoliberal institutionalism first and rationalistic theory and Wendtian constructivism later (pp. 53-54). In addition, encouraging efforts to excavate non-western cultural resources will be helpful for theoretical innovation in IR.

In chapter four, Yaqing Qin divides the development of IR theory history into three rapprochements: neorealist-neoliberalist synthesis (p. 77), rationalistic-constructivist

reconciliation (p.84) and transatlantic rapprochement referring to the convergence of the English School with American mainstream IR theory (p. 95). By examining these three rapprochements, the author concludes that mainstream IR theories share a common metaphysical component in their theoretical hard cores, which is ontological individualism together with epistemological rationalism (p. 101). Deeply embedded in the metaphysical component is the background knowledge that defines western culture particularly since the Enlightenment. In the first part of the book the author illustrates how culture produces social theory. This in turn provides a base for an alternative worldview from the traditional western IR theories—that is, a theory embedded in Chinese culture.

In Part Two, the core of the book, the author develops a relational theory of world politics using three key concepts: relations (p. 118), relators (p. 121), and relational webs (p. 141). Relationality is a characteristic element of the background knowledge that has been formed and evolved in practice and over history in the Confucian cultural sphere which sees the world as one of relations and the social world as one of human relations (p. 107). To be more specific, relationality is the metaphysical component of the hardcore for a relational theory of world politics because it describes the world from a Confucian perspective which differs from those mainstream IR theories which hold a Christian worldview and take individualistic rationality as their theoretical nucleus.

Closely linked with the discussion of relationality as an ontological element are the epistemological and methodological dimensions which sustain the relational theory of world politics. At the epistemological level, Yaqing Qin examines the meta-relationship which, as understood by traditional Chinese philosophy, is the relationship between *yin* (the feminine principle/force) and *yang* (the masculine principle/force) and all other relationships can be seen as derivatives of the yin-yang relationship. At the methodological level, the author presents *zhongyong* dialectics which is a long-cherished Confucian worldview that may lay the epistemological foundation for understanding meta-relationship dialectically (p. 152). In contrast to Hegelian dialectics, which posits conflict as the basis of a relationship, *zhongyong* dialectics interprets this as harmonious, also distinguishing Chinese relation theory from

traditional western IR theories. Moving the logic of relationality on, Yaqing Qin argues that social actors base their actions on relations. An actor makes judgments and decisions according to her relationships to specific others, with the totality of her relational circles or the relational context as the background (pp. 207-208). In other words, the logic of relationality holds that it is the relational web in which the actor is embedded that regulates the behaviour and constitutes the identity of the actor. It is also the relational web that the actor tries to make use of so that she can better realize her self-interest (p. 236).

From the perspective of relational theory, power, cooperation and global governance are re-conceptualized in chapters eight, nine and ten respectively, which collectively constitute the third part of the study. According to the generally accepted definition of Robert Dahl, power is one's ability to make others to do what they otherwise would not do; it is exclusively owned by the individual actor, considered as her attribute, possession, and characteristic feature (p. 241). On the other hand, examining power from the standpoint of relationality, Yaqing Qin defines 'relational power' as the ability to manage relations where resources reside with relations among agents and are accessible or usable through relations; such power is sharable, exchangeable and may well constitute a co-empowering process. Chapter nine examines cooperation in a relational world. Where mainstream IR theory advocates force, institutions, and norms as promoters of cooperation, Yaqing Qin believes much cooperative behaviour can be explained by *relatedness*. Kin selection, Confucian improvement or reciprocity, and Mencius optimality are three mechanisms for achieving cooperation. Diplomacy is typically an activity where one's interest can be realized through making, maintaining, and managing relations with others (p. 316). Chapter ten discusses global governance; relational theory assumes that governance does not have to be rule-based or regime-based; it is a process of relational management and a communitarian society tends to favour the relational governance approach (p. 354). In sum, this book provides a reinterpretation of world politics from non-western perspectives and in so doing opens up the possibility of theoretical innovation. Drawing on Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions it lays out the concept of relationality and builds toward a Chinese international relations theory. Scholars with an interest in

international relations theory and ancient Chinese thought will find it a stimulating aid to their research.

**Hui Yang**, PhD Candidate, School of Political Science, Shandong University, Visiting Scholar/Duke University