

Book Review

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Qin, Yaqing. 2018. *A Relational Theory of World Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 978-1316634257

A Relational Theory of World Politics by Qin Yaqing offers a significant and alternative theoretical perspective as well as timely and novel insights on international relations in a rapidly changing world. It makes an important contribution to IR theorizing by providing a new ontological foundation in which relationality plays a central role. Based on an ontology of relationality, world politics is thus conceptualized, seen and understood differently from Western IR theories. A both/and logic is proposed to overcome the existing either/or (binary) logic that is deeply embedded in Western mainstream IR theories. Moreover, many traditional Chinese concepts, such as relationality and *zhongrong* or the middle way, are systematically formulated and applied to re-conceptualize and explain the changing world. For example, the concept of relational power and the concept of relational governance are constructed to analyse contemporary world politics. In addition, this book not only expounds a relational theory, but also provides a *tour d'horizon* of mainstream Western IR theories. The book compares and contrasts a relational theory with mainstream IR theories and demonstrates how a relational theory can complement mainstream IR theories rather than overthrow them.

The structure of the book is divided into three parts, which are subsequently divided into ten chapters. Four chapters in the first part deal with the important role that culture plays in IR theorizing. The central argument in chapter one is that culture shapes theory and theory development, which is often neglected by mainstream American positivist IR theories. Moreover, Qin argues that the departing point of the Chinese worldview is human, in contrast to the Western worldview that starts with matter. Drawing from Imre Lakatos' concept of theoretical hardcore that defines a research program, Qin posits that the theoretical hardcore of Chinese IR is shaped by a different background knowledge and practice. In chapter three, Qin explores how theoretical innovation can happen by emphasizing cultural resources, particularly the metaphysical components. He subsequently in chapter four argues that the ontology and

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epistemology of mainstream western IR theories are grounded on individualism and rationalism respectively.

In part two, Qin systematically expounds his concepts of relation and relationality in three chapters. In chapter five, he posits that the world in which we live in is a world of human relations rather than a world of rational individuals. He then introduces the meta-relationship, *ying* and *yang* and the *zhongrong* dialectics that is used to understand and interpret the *ying and yang* relationship in chapter six. Subsequently, chapter seven presents the logic of relationality as opposed to various logics in Western IR theories, such as the logic of consequence, the logic of appropriateness, the logic of arguing, as well as the logic of practice and the logic of habit. It is important to note that Qin emphasizes the complementary aspect of relational logic to Western mainstream logics rather than to challenge them.

Three chapters in part three deal with applications and implications of Qin's relational theory on real-world issues, namely, power, cooperation and governance. In chapter eight, Qin puts forward the concept of relational power in addition to the mainstream concepts of agential and structural power. These three types of power are differentiated based on two indicators which are the location of power and the accessibility of power. According to Qin, relational power is sharable and exchangeable, which is based on a co-empowering process. The underlying mechanism that holds relational power together as an exchange relationship, is the reciprocal *renqing* or human sentiment practice. In contrast to mainstream Western IR explanations of cooperation, in chapter nine, Qin contends that the relatedness between and among actors can better explain whether one chooses to cooperate or not. Moreover, after pointing out problems that are embedded in the current global governance in chapter ten, Qin proposes that the current international rule-based governance should combine with a relational governance that is based on negotiation, reciprocity, trust and morality.

While Qin's effort to construct a Chinese IR theory is laudable, there are three main issues, which I would like to highlight. First, the author unfortunately falls into the trap of over-essentializing Chineseness in his theory. By over-emphasizing the uniqueness of Chinese culture, Qin is stuck with the binary logic that he aims to overcome. Furthermore, he overlooks the diversity and plurality within China and in Chinese civilizations. For example, Chinese civilizations do not consist only of Confucian' teaching, but also other teachings, such as Daoist, Mohist, legalist, and *Zong Heng Jia* or the school of vertical and horizontal alliances. By the same token, Qin also over-essentializes Western ontology and epistemology and overlooks the diversity in Western civilizations. In addition, the modern Chinese experiences are also rich cultural resources from which a developing Chinese IR theory could draw. This could

potentially lead to a new theory that is different from the one that draws primarily from the Confucian teaching.

Moreover, Qin takes human relationships and hierarchies for granted. He does not explain how relationships and hierarchies between and among different actors originate, form and maintain. Therefore, the underlying socio-economic foundation of various human relationships and hierarchies are overlooked. Furthermore, the following questions remain unanswered. What will happen when a relational actor encounters a rational actor? Who has the advantage or disadvantage when they interact with each other in world politics? Can an actor be both rational and relational at the same time?

Finally, Qin's view on culture seems non-evolutionary. Culture changes and evolves! What was true in the past, may not be true nowadays. For instance, traditional Chinese culture might focus on humans and centers around relationality, but contemporary Chinese culture has perhaps evolved into a more individualistic and self-centered culture. A theory that derives from ancient Chinese resources may or may not be relevant and suitable to the current rapidly changing world. Theoretical innovation need not always come from cultural sources. As the world has become globalized, a modern Chinese IR theory can consist of both Chinese and Western elements as well as other elements from around the world. This may contribute to the construction of a global China IR theory that is not only applicable to China but also to other countries.

A Relational Theory of World Politics is worth reading for both IR theorists and social theorists as well as people who are trying to find alternative ways of thinking and reasoning beyond the West. It helps us to re-evaluate ontological and epistemological assumptions of mainstream Western theories as well as to think differently about world politics and to a larger extent, the social world by using different concepts.

Qin's relational theory is the beginning of a new theory rather than the end of it. Future research should be conducted to test the theory centering around two questions. Can Qin's relational theory explain China's behavior and actions in the current world and/or in history? Can it also explain other non-Chinese actors' behavior and actions in the current world politics and/or in world history?