The three theoretical currents of Chinese International Relations: an analysis

Las tres corrientes teóricas de las Relaciones Internacionales chinas: un análisis

Abstract: This article addresses the three main theoretical currents of Chinese International Relations: *Tianxia*, Relational Theory of International Relations, and Moral Realism. The aim is to present these currents, discuss their specifics and their main ideational elements, verify their points of contact with Western theories, and suggest possible contributions to the field of studies. This was possible via a literature review of the works of the three main authors: Zhao Tingyang, Qin Yaqing, and Yan Xuetong, in addition to an analysis of the discussions already conducted by researchers on the topic.

Keywords: International Relations; China; *Tianxia*; Relational Theory of International Relations; Moral Realism.

Resumen: El artículo aborda las tres principales corrientes teóricas de las relaciones internacionales chinas: la Tianxia, la Teoría Relacional de las Relaciones Internacionales y el Realismo Moral. El objetivo es presentar estas corrientes, discutir sus particularidades, sus principales elementos ideológicos, verificar sus puntos de contacto con las teorías occidentales y plantear las posibles contribuciones al campo de estudio. Esto se llevará a cabo mediante una revisión bibliográfica de las obras de los tres autores principales que abordan el tema: Zhao Tingyang, Qin Yaqing y Yan Xuetong, además del análisis del debate sobre este asunto ya realizado por otros investigadores.

Palabras clave: Relaciones Internacionales; China; Tianxia; Realismo Moral, Teoría Relacional.

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1 INTRODUCTION

History matters. This is also true when studying International Relations (IR) theories. In this sense, to investigate the development of theories in this discipline in the People's Republic of China, it is essential to revisit, even if very briefly, some constitutive aspects of Chinese culture, philosophy, and mentality.

The Chinese have recognized the existence of their own state, in continuous development but as a single entity, for 4,000 years. Although archaeological records identify the existence of prehistoric communities in areas of present-day China, especially around the Yellow River, it was the so-called Xia Dynasty, which emerged in 2070 BC and initiated the long sequence of dynasties that succeeded one another in command of the continuously developing political entity, resulting in what is now the People's Republic of China (Fairbank; Goldman, 2006).

Certainly, this unity that spans centuries is a narrative construction; after all, multiple distinct cultures have inhabited the same geographic space over time. But beyond these fundamental separations, including ethnic and linguistic ones, there is a deeply shared communality, such as beliefs related to ancestors and patriarchy, civility and harmony, collectivity over individuality, and family, among others, which stem from a deep past and build a common nation (Wood, 2021).

As Kissinger (2011) explains, Chinese history has seen countless periods of civil war, interregna, and chaos. At the end of each collapse, the Chinese state reassembled itself as if by an immutable law of nature. The founding principles of Chinese culture have always endured. For millennia, however, China has never been forced to contend with other civilizations comparable in scale or sophistication. The Chinese were isolated from the Indians by the nearly insurmountable heights of the Himalayas, and from the Persians and Babylonians—and even more so from the Romans—by the vast deserts of Central Asia. This incredible isolation engendered a unique self-perception. Chinese elites gradually became accustomed to the notion that China was unique—not just "a great civilization" among others, but "civilization itself" (Kissinger, 2011, p. 10).

Thus, this article aims to analyze three Chinese theoretical schools of thought in International Relations that were inspired by and influenced by the country's long history and rich philosophical tradition. These three currents are highlighted by several authors, such as Hun Joon Kim (2016), Amitav Acharya (2019), Yih-Jye Hwang (2021), Pedro Barbosa (2021), and Yong Soo Eun (2020), as those that best represent a "theory of International Relations with Chinese characteristics," or a "Chinese school of International Relations."

This article contributes to a better understanding of Chinese thought on International Relations at a time when the rise of that Eastern power to the forefront of the international system begins to significantly influence global productive, security and defense, financial, and scientific-technological structures.

This interpretation is similar to the classic formulation by Susan Strange (1988), who defines "structural power" as the ability to shape the four fundamental pillars of the international system: production, security, finance, and knowledge.

The research sought to elucidate the following question: How does Chinese culture impose its own characteristics on International Relations studies in China? The hypothesis investigated here is that ancient Chinese culture effectively imposes its own epistemology on Chinese International Relations studies, distinct from that which nourishes mainstream theories developed in the West.

In this respect, we will present the ideational elements that have shaped Chinese mentality in general and International Relations in particular, and then present the three highlighted currents, stressing the importance of further research on Chinese current in International Relations.

To refute or validate the initial hypothesis, we sought to review the existing literature on the topic, particularly that produced by the three leading Chinese authors in International Relations: Zhao Tingyang, Qin Yaqing, and Yan Xuetong. The content analysis of the texts consisted of examining both the manifest meaning of the three authors' discourse and the ideas not explicitly expressed, but suggested, in their arguments.

The research also considered the work of Brazilian authors in the field of International Relations in China, such as the pioneering article by Alexandre Leite and Jessica Máximo (2013), and the more recent paper by Pedro Barbosa (2021), which also addresses the three Chinese authors studied here.

The qualitative content analysis extracted what was considered relevant to answering the research question. Furthermore, a dialogue was established with non-Chinese authors who have already addressed the subject discussed here.

Next, we will present ideational aspects of Chinese culture that impose a unique epistemology on International Relations studies, distinct from that which nourishes Western mainstream theories.

2 RELEVANT IDEATIONAL ASPECTS

To understand the country, one needs to analyze the family environment in which modern China began to emerge using an anthropological approach (Fairbank; Goldman, 2006). Until very recently, the Chinese family was a microcosm, a kind of miniature state.

> The family, not the individual, represented the social unit and the element responsible for political life and its locality. Children's devotion and obedience, instilled within the family, fostered loyalty to the ruler and obedience to the established authority of the state (Fairbank; Goldman, 2006, p. 35, our translation).

In the traditional Chinese family authority model, the father is the supreme autocrat, deciding all relevant family matters and marriages, and controlling family finances. The children's mixture of love, fear, and admiration for their father was reinforced by respect for older people. The loss of physical vigor with advancing age was compensated for by wisdom. The domination of the younger by the older was accompanied by the domination of the woman by men.

Upon marriage, the bride exchanged the domination of her father for that of her husband, who, in turn, was chosen by her father in arranged marriages (Fairbank; Goldman, 2006).

This behavioral pattern stems primarily from two philosophical traditions: the first, religious in nature, is Daoism; the second, strictly philosophical in nature, is Confucianism.

Laozi (2019) is credited with authoring *Dao De Jing* (or *Tao te ching*), the basic text of Daoism, which can be translated as "Classic of the Way and its Virtue" (Kirkland, 2004). Simply stated, a Daoist attitude toward life advocates acceptance and submission to the natural flow of the universe, adapting to change without resistance, in pursuit of a balanced and harmonious existence.

Daoism believes that the universe is governed by the interaction of opposing, complementary, and interdependent forces, and by the succession of cycles, by the law of eternal return. *Dao* is the predominant harmony in the universe, the good and balanced relationship between all things. One of the most significant symbols of this idea is *yin-yang*, which represents the duality of the world. The dark side, *yin*, is associated with femininity, coldness, passivity, and the Moon. The white side, *yang*, refers to masculinity, heat, activity, and the Sun. The dynamic interaction between *yin* and *yang* is often represented by the illustration in Figure 1, *Taiji*. In it, the circle is divided into two equal parts, one black and one white, each containing a dot of the opposite color, indicating that nothing is completely *yin* or purely *yang*. The figure also denotes movement, with each side transforming into the other, reflecting the notion that change is constant in the universe.

Figure 1 – *Taijitu*: Daoist symbol representing *yin-yang*
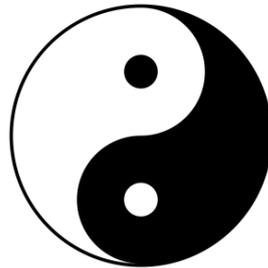
Source: *Taijitu* (*yin-yang* symbol). Version available in the public domain via
Wikimedia Commons/Wikimedia Commons (CC0 or public domain).

Confucius is the English translation of *Kǒngzǐ*, or "Master Kong." He lived about five centuries before Christ, and his life ideals were influenced by his life of poverty despite being of noble heritage. Confucius was not a revolutionary. He became a teacher of "Rites" (a mixture of etiquette and traditional laws).

At his time (between 551 and 479 BC), during the Zhou dynasty, China was experiencing a period of political disintegration and wars, the final phase of a period known as the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), the predecessor of the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Amid the prevailing turmoil, Confucius was concerned about restoring stability and a moral code of conduct. His model was that of the Zhou Dynasty's

first centuries[1] and, even more so, of the ancient mythical Chinese rulers, examples of moral rectitude and wisdom, with the Yellow Emperor, or Huangdi (2697-2598 BC), standing out. According to myth, Huangdi was the ancestor of the entire Han people. In this sense, the core of Confucius' message was the need to reestablish the authority of the "son of heaven" by concentrating power in a single wise and legitimate monarch (Wood, 2021).

Confucianism sought to stabilize society, proposing that social organization should obey the cosmic order and its hierarchy of relationships: parents and children, men and women, and kings and subjects. Each person should fulfill their role in society. Its ultimate goal would be to achieve "social harmony."

Confucian ethics were used by Chinese dynasties, which adopted it as official government doctrine during the time of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty (156-87 BC), and remained a central element of Chinese governance until the last dynasty, which ended in the 20th century. The doctrine advocated that sovereigns should be advised by capable officials, selected based on merit in examinations open to all men, regardless of their social class or origin. This paved the way for the weakening of the hereditary aristocracy and the emergence of a new source of power in China: the Mandarins. Mandarins were selected through imperial examinations, which were extremely important in China and persisted for centuries, only being abolished in the throes of the last dynasty in 1905.

But the enormous Confucian influence does not derive solely from its government support. This philosophy was nurtured and maintained by Confucian intellectuals, who interpreted and reinterpreted the thought over the centuries, transforming it into a kind of moral law to which all Chinese were subject.

Having considered Daoism and Confucianism, it is important for the purpose of this text to understand a third concept present in Chinese culture: *Tianxia*. The expression literally means "all under heaven." It emerged in the same Zhou Dynasty that inspired Confucius, some 3,000 years ago, to govern the many culturally and ethnically diverse tribes and kingdoms. The concept was adapted until it was considered by some authors a concise way of explaining the Chinese vision of world order.

In the following sections, we will examine three Chinese theoretical approaches to International Relations that were inspired by and influenced by the country's long and rich philosophical tradition, particularly Daoism, Confucianism, and the concept of *Tianxia*. As already mentioned, the three theoretical currents presented below are considered by various authors to best represent a "theory of International Relations with Chinese characteristics," or a "Chinese school of International Relations."

3 ALL UNDER HEAVEN: *TIANXIA* (天下)

Zhao Tingyang, a Chinese political philosopher born in 1961, is the author of *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, in which he attempts to modernize

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[1] This dynasty ruled for a long period, approximately 800 years, from 1046 to 256 BC. It is subdivided into an initial period, from 1046 to 771 BC, known as the Western Zhou, and a final period, from 770 to 221 BC, called the Eastern Zhou. This second period is subdivided into two: the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), and the Warring States Period (475-221 BC).

the concept of *Tianxia*. Initially, it is interesting to note that the concept of "all under heaven" refers to the tributary system—or suzerainty—that prevailed in Asia before the arrival of the Western system of nation-states (Kim, 2016).

The story, as told by Zhao, recounts the rise of the Zhou dynasty, which militarily defeated the king of the Shang dynasty, the previous one. From then on, the Zhou dynasty would have to govern about a thousand tribes, many of them more powerful than the Zhou itself. The answer was to create a system based on three political premises: (i) the solutions to the common problems of all tribes should be provided by a universally accepted system, not by force; (ii) a system politically accepted by all would only be maintained through a political institution that benefited all people, from all nations, producing a common well-being throughout the world; and (iii) a universal system would only work if it created harmony among all nations and cultures. These three concepts laid the foundations of "all under heaven," or *Tianxia* (Tingyang, 2021).

In essence, it was a system of tributary suzerainty: each tribe maintained broad internal autonomy but recognized Zhou authority, contributing tribute in exchange for protection and inclusion in the universal order. Thus, the practice of suzerainty provided the political glue that transformed a multiplicity of peoples into a harmonized "world under heaven."

In this way, the Zhou dynasty's political invention differs greatly from its Western counterpart, the Greek political organization. While the Chinese began from the perspective of "all under heaven," the Greek vision took the *polis* as its central focus. The Greek system sought to establish a balance of power among city-states; in turn, the Chinese system aimed at a freely accepted subordination to a "world government" to be exercised by *Zhōngguó*, or the "Middle Kingdom."[2]

The system created by the Zhou dynasty had three main characteristics: (i) it was a monarchical system, which included certain aristocratic elements; (ii) it maintained the logic of an open system, given that there was a "world government" and an open number of States[3], which could participate as long as they were at peace with the other States in the system; and (iii) the world government was responsible for universal institutions, laws, and global order, arbitrated conflicts between States, and controlled all existing resources.

This world government, however, would lose its legitimacy, or, in other words, would lose the "mandate from heaven" if it committed injustices or abuse of power, which would justify a revolution. It was this "authorization for revolutions" that legitimized the various changes of dynasties that followed one another in the "world government" of "all under heaven" throughout China's history.

The States recognized by the world government would enjoy broad autonomy, but they were expected to contribute to the "all-under-heaven government" according to their wealth and capabilities. It was, therefore, a tributary system. An interesting aspect is

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2   In Mandarin, the Chinese refer to China by the characters 中国, or *Zhōngguó*, which literally means "Middle Kingdom." "Middle" here can be interpreted as both the geographically central position and the intermediate position, mediating between heaven and earth, that is, above other nations, according to the *Tianxia*.

3   Zhao here calls States sub-States, since they are subordinate to the world government. For reasons of clarity, this work will maintain the term "States" when referring to national entities.

that people could live and work anywhere, which denotes a global, rather than a national, philosophical perspective.

It is clear that the author proposes an approach from a different perspective than that traditionally used in International Relations in the West, proposed by Kenneth Waltz (2001), which considers three levels of analysis: systemic (international), domestic, and individual. Zhao's analysis focuses on the "world level," that is, global. Therefore, above the systemic or international level, it seeks explanations based on the positions of States in the international system. *Tianxia*, conceived from the global level, would be a *mundus qua mundus* vision, a "philosophy **of** the world," not a "philosophy **for** the world" (Tingyang, 2009).

The system, characterized by its global perspective and the principle of harmony among all nations, created, according to Zhao, a long-term peace that lasted centuries in China and encompassed what was perceived, due to the limited geographical knowledge of that time, as almost the entire known world to the Chinese. However, the author himself acknowledged that the unification—through war—of all China under the Qin dynasty in 221 BC showed that the system could not rid the world of war, nor deal with ambition and the thirst for power (Tingyang, 2009).

For Zhao, however, the *Tianxia* philosophy may hold very important lessons for today's world. According to the author, one of the most important principles of "all under heaven" is the premise of the "exclusion of nothing and nobody" or the "inclusion of all peoples and all lands." Following this principle, no one could be excluded or ignored, as no one was essentially incompatible with others. No one would be considered "foreign" or "pagan."

Based on *Tianxia*, no country or State could avoid disorder if the world itself were in a state of confusion or anarchy, because conflicts are inevitable even in countries where order prevails. External order within a political entity would always be the necessary condition for its own internal order. Consequently, external problems would be more serious than internal problems. In accordance with the principle of inclusion of all peoples, the creation of a "world-for-all-peoples" would arguably be a fundamental political necessity. For the author, such a world, which does not yet exist, should be a goal (Tingyang, 2009).

To this end, the "world as a whole," not individual States, should be the primary philosophical focus and the top priority of discussions. This is at the heart of *Tianxia* vision. As specified by the concept, the hierarchy would be: "all under heaven," States, and families. This organization clearly differs from the hierarchy prevalent in the West, which lists: nation-states, communities, and individuals. From the *Tianxia* perspective, the Western view would be incomplete, as States are not subordinate to anyone.

The lack of a superior entity governing everything would be precisely the reason why today's international system, based on the Western view, fails to prevent international conflicts. The United Nations' (UN) weakness, according to this view, would be due to the fact that this international organization is not hierarchically above nation-states and, therefore, lacks the power necessary to impose order.

Also from the perspective of this Chinese philosophy, a world government would only function if harmony prevailed. In fact, this would be an ontologically necessary condition for

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the coexistence and development of different things, usually defined as mutual dependence, a reciprocal development, which would lead to an appropriate "fit" between different things. Once again, the clear influence of Daoism is noted in this theoretical construction.

In this sense, the concept of harmony is deeper than that of cooperation since the game between States should not simply be fair. In this view, a harmonious relationship would presuppose that States could choose which game to play, under mutually agreed-upon rules, and not simply play fairly a game whose rules are imposed on them.

It is clear that the order proposed by *Tianxia* is a "hierarchical but stable" alternative, since it is led by a "moral, cultural, and political power" (Kim, 2016, p. 74).

Amitav Acharya (2019) positions philosopher Zhao Tingyang's ideas within what he calls "Cultural Idealism," since his reflections on *Tianxia* are anchored in Chinese history, culture, and identity, which gives them a special ethos. According to this moral, behavioral, affective, and intellectual model, humanity would be prone to mutual understanding and cooperation among nations in the pursuit of peace and global governance.

It is clear that this is more of a philosophical current than a theory of International Relations, which challenges one of the foundations of the traditional theories of the discipline, the one that presupposes an anarchic international system. It also challenges the principle of state sovereignty, which is based on the demarcation of territories mutually recognized by nation-states. Clearly, these are enormous limitations for the practical application of the *Tianxia* precepts in the modern international system.

An interesting aspect to highlight is the existence of some similarities and complementarity between the *Tianxia* system and Western-based cosmopolitanism, since both concepts emphasize, in addition to a worldview that transcends national borders and cultures, a unity and connection among all human beings.

In Western thought, this perspective finds one of its main foundations in the work of Immanuel Kant (2020 [1795]), especially in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, in which the author proposes a cosmopolitan order based on reason and universal morality. This Kantian ideal inspired the liberal branch of International Relations, which advocates cooperation between States through norms and institutions, in search of lasting peace. In this regard, both *Tianxia* and cosmopolitanism can be seen as expressions of the ideal that positions humanity as the fundamental reference point for international politics, although they stem from distinct cultural matrices.

Certainly, despite these points of some communality, the differences between the two concepts are striking. While the concept of *Tianxia* is Sinocentric and hierarchical, cosmopolitanism is universalist and egalitarian, not associated with any specific culture or country.

The Zhao's proposed system is also based on Utopian premises, on a Chinese culture idealism that barely conceals a sense of exceptionalism, a feeling of civilizational superiority, in which international society should be a reflection of its own social organization. The "Middle Kingdom" would grant each and every other State impartial treatment, considering them all equal. Thus, there is no way to speak of multilateralism in the *Tianxia* system, since the system was based on bilateral relations between China and each other State (Vaz-Pinto, 2014).

The *Tianxia* influence can be seen in recent Chinese diplomatic rhetoric, particularly in the concept of the "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" (人类命运共同体), widely promoted by President Xi Jinping in international forums. Like *Tianxia*, this notion is based on the idea of universal inclusion and the indivisibility of internal and external order, emphasizing cooperation for the sake of global harmony. Chinese diplomacy has mobilized this discourse in initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), and the very recent Global Governance Initiative (GGI), which seek to present China as a power that promotes international governance based on interdependence, dialogue, and mutual benefit, in contrast to the more rigidly normative and hierarchical Western institutions. Thus, Zhao Tingyang's thought resonates in the Chinese government's strategic formulations, serving as a conceptual framework that reinforces the moral legitimacy of China's rise in the international system.

The other Chinese author strongly inspired by the *Tianxia* concept, this one specifically from the field of International Relations, proposes a theory also anchored in traditional Chinese philosophical values, but with a complementary approach. This is Qin Yaqing, with his Relational Theory of World Politics.

4 RELATIONAL THEORY OF WORLD POLITICS

Qin Yaqing, a Chinese political scientist born in 1953, is recognized as the founder of a Chinese school of International Relations. He emphasizes that all social theories, including International Relations, must have a "theoretical hard core," centered on a "big idea" or a "big problem."

> "Social theory depends on the metaphysical component of theoretical hard core for its life and identity, which is vital part informed by the background knowledge of a cultural community" (Qin, 2018, p. 49).

In his theory, this theoretical hard core would be *Tianxia datong*, or the "great harmony of all under heaven." *Tianxia*, as already seen, refers to "all under heaven," while *datong* (大同) refers to everyone being in "peace, harmony, and happiness." The subsequent idea, which embodies the development of his theory, is that of relationality.

According to Qin, Western theories of International Relations place rationality as their main metaphysical component. In Confucian communities, however, this component would be "relationality," since they viewed the world as a "world of relations."

For Acharya (2019), this occurs because Qin's relational theory bases its epistemology on Chinese dialectics, which is different from Western, Hegelian dialectics. Distinctly, it does not follow the concepts of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, so dear to the Western thought. In Chinese dialectics, or *Zhongyong*, harmony plays a central role. *Yin* and *yang* are complementary and evolve together (Acharya, 2019).

Drawing on the epistemology of Chinese dialectics, Qin argues that, instead of rational calculations of self-interest and needs, state and non-state actors would base their actions on relationships of mutual benefit. There would be no confrontation between "thesis and antithesis," as in Hegelian dialectics. In *Zhongyong*, relationships would seek "co-theses."[4] Instead of a "rationality of each party," there would be a "relational rationality," constructed by the parties and for mutual benefit. In other words, Chinese dialectics would lead to international interactions based on cooperation and understanding, not contradictions and conflicts.

The "relational world" would not be a Hobbesian world, of a struggle of all against all, nor would it correspond to the Lockean vision, which emphasizes individual rights and private property, nor to the Kantian vision of universal fraternity. It would be, rather, a Confucian world, which includes everyone and in which human beings are interrelated and interdependent (Qin, 2018).

Thus, a social actor should first consider the relational context in which they are inserted before making a rational decision. In a world as interrelated as today's, the totality of relationships is like an intangible hand that guides the social actor toward a particular action (Qin, 2018).

In this sense, Yih-Jye Hwang explains Qin's position and the Confucian worldview as "everything being in everything else," meaning that everything is related to one another and to the context in which it is inserted. In Chinese society, social structure can be compared to the ripples in a pond, where each individual is at the center of the ripples and is affected by the concentric ripples generated by other' actions. The Western view, on the other hand, emphasizes an atomized perspective, in which each individual enjoys broad freedom and autonomy (Hwang, 2021).

The result of this view is that no actor can be considered absolutely rational, since, before deciding, they will necessarily be affected by the context in which they are inserted. This means that actors simply cannot know whether an action is rational or not if they are outside the "relational circles" in which each is inserted. Thus, in contrast to Western society, which would see each individual guided by their own interests and rationality, Confucian society would see individuals motivated by the need to maintain their relationships within society. What matters to these people is not individual agency; it is collective agency. Thus, relationships define identities, which shape interests and behaviors (Hwang, 2021).

In this sense, coexistence becomes a very important value in any relationship that involves one's own existence and the existence of others. Thus, the web of relationships in which the actor is embedded regulates their behavior and constitutes their identity, as it allows or constrains certain behaviors. The actor both manipulates and is manipulated in this relational web. Naturally, behaviors vary according to whether the other actor is seen as friend or foe and according to their importance or unimportance.

It is interesting to note that this "relational" behavior is witnessed by attentive Westerners living in China, even by those who do not dedicate themselves to primarily or

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4   The term "co-theses" is used here analytically to differentiate Chinese dialectics, based on complementarity and harmony, from Western Hegelian dialectics, structured on the thesis-antithesis-synthesis opposition.

scientifically studying human behavior. An example of this can be found in Cláudia Trevisan, a Brazilian journalist who lived in China for many years. In her book *Os Chineses*, Trevisan (2012, p. 47, our translation) identifies *Guanxi*, which refers to the network of relationships formed by the Chinese.

> *Guanxi* [...] refers to the essential network of relationships to the success of almost everything in China: from business to buying tickets for the Olympic Games. *Guanxi* is a person's intangible asset, and the more powerful and comprehensive it is, the greater their degree of influence. [...] The implicit agreement in these relationships is interdependence and the exchange of favors. If I receive help from someone in my network of influence, I must be prepared to reciprocate in the future, and vice versa.

Returning to Qin's theory, it is clear that he postulates that ancient Chinese thought presents an approach to human behavior that can be extrapolated to the States' behavior in dealing with global issues. In this context, Qin's position is similar to the tradition of Social Constructivism in International Relations. Nicholas Onuf (1989) was one of the pioneers of this perspective, arguing that international reality is constructed through language and social rules, in a continuous process of interaction. Alexander Wendt (1999), in turn, argues that international anarchy is not an objective condition, but a product of practices between States, so that the meaning attributed to anarchy depends on social interactions. Qin shares this constructivist view, but reworks it from the Confucian tradition, emphasizing relationality as the foundation of international order.

The author therefore advocates that global—or at least regional—governance should present more relational elements in the interaction between States, without excluding the elements of formal regulation from an order based on mutually accepted rules, such as the one currently in force. However, Qin believes that, although rules are very useful, they cannot encompass all situations that arise in relationships between States. Furthermore, he argues that rules can dehumanize a society that is, first and foremost, human, since overly rigid rules could lead societies to collapse by failing to consider the flexibility of human thought and action (Qin, 2018).

> "A well-governed Society is therefore one full of human feelings and human moral values. Mere cost-benefit calculations will not lead to sustainable governance. Relational governance can create a favorable environment through management and harmonization of relations, wherein governance is based upon mutual trust and is therefore sustainable and lasting."

According to Relational Theory, international cooperation occurs for distinct reasons from those presented by mainstream Western theories, which explain it by force (Realism), institutions (Institutional Liberalism), or norms (Constructivism). For Qin (2018), cooperation occurs through the establishment of relationships since diplomacy is a typical example of achieving one's own interests with the construction and maintenance of relationships.

The practical application of this relational logic can be seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013. Unlike Western governance structures, which are usually institutionalized, endowed with binding norms and coercive mechanisms, BRI advances predominantly bilaterally, through Memoranda of Understanding signed between China and partner States. This strategy is subsequently complemented by more flexible multilateral arrangements, such as the China-CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Forum and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). This practice confirms the relational emphasis highlighted by Qin Yaqing, as it prioritizes networks of interdependence and mutual gains over formal rules and rigid institutional structures.

Qin's theory can be criticized for its lack of methodological rigor. The concepts and methods presented are not sufficiently clear for the analysis of international relations. A fundamental issue in this regard is the lack of an explanation of how the process of relational co-construction of the international would occur, which makes it difficult to understand how it would be applied in concrete cases.

Another criticism is the anachronistic application of historical and ancestral Chinese mentality in a romanticized way. Hwang (2021) even highlights that it does not even correspond to China's historical reality, in which the practical application of *Tianxia* would not have occurred in the harmonious way the author presents it.

The third Chinese author to be presented in this work is Yan Xuetong. For Acharya (2019), he differs from the previous two given that he rejects the "labeling" of belonging to a "Chinese School of IR," in addition to being skeptical about theoretical and empirical potential of *Tianxia*. He embraces the concepts of anarchy and power politics, but sees the need for morality and ethics as tools to deal with global anarchy and China's rise.

5 MORAL REALISM

Yan Xuetong, born in 1952, is a professor and dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing. He is the author of Moral Realism, and he states, right at the beginning of his work, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Xuetong, 2019), that his theory is in line with the Classical Realism, analyzing the States' moral behavior based on power, capacity, and national interests. Xuetong (2019) recalls a statement by Edward Carr—every government needs power to exercise authority, but also needs the moral basis of popular consent—to affirm that his "Moral Realism" attributes to morality the same importance as power, capacity, and interest in policy formulation.

In this sense, the author affirms that political power is the key to the international relations of States, and the central attribute of political power is a morally informed authority, or *wangdao*. According to Xuetong (2019), power can be exercised through tyranny (*qiang*), hegemony (*ba*), or human authority (*wang*). *Wang* would be the most valued form of government.

But how would human authority be exercised? According to the author, it would be through "benevolence," "justice," and "rite." Thus, leadership that acts in accordance with these three principles would be accepted by other international actors. A kind of leadership by

example. Morality, in the realist tradition of IR proposed by Xuetong, would not be a list of values that the State should follow, but an instrument for the implementation of the nation's strategic preferences, whose interests can be achieved while gaining other States' support (Hwang, 2021).

The main question that motivates Xuetong's reflection is how an emerging State can surpass a hegemonic State and become the new international system leader. His analysis focuses on the ongoing dynamics involving the United States of America and the People's Republic of China. Xuetong's approach is close to Classical Realism, in the vein of Hans Morgenthau (1948), who, in *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, argues that international politics is governed by interest defined in terms of power, but admits that morality can play a relevant role in the legitimacy of state power. On the other hand, Xuetong distances himself from the Neorealism of John Mearsheimer (2014), who, in *The tragedy of great power politics*, argues that the anarchy of the international system forces States to continuously seek power, regardless of values or moral considerations. By approaching Morgenthau and distancing himself from Mearsheimer, Xuetong formulates a "moral realism" that incorporates the ethical dimension as an instrument of leadership and as a decisive factor in China's rise.

According to Acharya (2019), two things qualify the notion of morality in Xuetong's work: it deals with a governmental morality, which is an instrumental morality. This means that moral concerns are used by the State to maximize the achievement of its interests.

As a realist, Xuetong (2019) considers the international system to be anarchic, that power matters, and that international stability is the responsibility of the powers that lead the system. For the author, when the leading State does not lead, other States cannot follow, so the ship of the world sinks (Xuetong, 2019).

The author believes that China will only surpass the United States in leading the international system if it adopts the right policies, being a "great and responsible" State. This will not happen only through Chinese actions, but rather from the perception that other States have of the Eastern power's attitudes. In other words, China will only be "great and responsible" if it is seen as such by other countries. To achieve this, Moral Realism emphasizes the moral values of "righteousness and benevolence," overriding Western values of "equality and democracy." The theory calls for a policy of leading by example, which would avoid the "double standards"[5] that Xuetongs identifies in Western practices, especially those of the United States.

Thus, the exercise of hegemony by a State would not depend solely on material power, but also on "moral action." The degree of morality of the hegemonic State will define the duration of its supremacy and the stability of the entire system (Barbosa, 2021).

The rise and fall of powers would therefore be related not only to material power, but also to their authority, which is based on immaterial values that give them legitimacy, based on the credibility and trust they inspire in other international actors.

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5   In Yan Xuetong (2019), "double standards" refers to the recurring practice of Western powers, especially the United States, of selectively applying international principles and norms, demanding behaviors from other States that they themselves do not show. The author cites as examples the defense of non-intervention, democracy, or sovereign equality only when convenient, which would compromise the moral legitimacy of Western leadership.

In this sense, it is possible to find the resonance of Yan Xuetong's formulations in China's contemporary diplomatic practice. His defense of a "moral" and "responsible" leadership is manifested in the Chinese discourse of South-South cooperation and mutual benefits, expressed in initiatives such as infrastructure financing, the supply of vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the transfer of technologies to developing countries. Similarly, China has sought to present itself as a promoter of global public goods and as a "great responsible power," especially in international regimes such as that of climate change, where it has reinforced its commitment to the Paris Agreement and announced carbon neutrality targets by 2060. This stance contrasts with the frequent criticism of unilateral measures by the United States, reinforcing Xuetong's argument that the legitimacy of international leadership depends not only on material power, but also on the moral authority recognized by other States.

An easily observed criticism of Xuetong's work is its instrumental character, serving the Chinese State, insofar as, according to the author, it adopts exceptional behavior in its interstate relations, focusing on morality, while Western powers do not consider this a relevant aspect, emphasizing power and interest in an amoral way.

6 CONCLUSION

The three Chinese authors analyzed present an original approach, strongly rooted in their own culture. The study of their works sheds new light on the discipline of International Relations, enriching it with perspectives different from those presented by the Eurocentric canon.

However, it is interesting to note that, although based on their own culture, the three currents find points of contact with theories and concepts developed in the West. *Tianxia* presents convergences with liberal cosmopolitanism, whose precursor was Immanuel Kant (2020 [1795]), especially in *Perpetual Peace*, by proposing a cosmopolitan order based on universal reason and cooperation among peoples. Both concepts stem from a vision that transcends national borders, although *Tianxia* is Sinocentric and hierarchical, while Kantian cosmopolitanism is universalist and egalitarian. Relational Theory, on the other hand, engages with Social Constructivism, developed by Nicholas Onuf (1989) and consolidated by Alexander Wendt (1999), by emphasizing that interactions shape identities, interests, and norms. As with constructivism, Qin Yaqing argues that relationships precede rational action, but his Confucian approach prioritizes harmony and relationality as central values. Finally, Yan Xuetong's Moral Realism is similar to Hans Morgenthau's Classical Realism, which recognized the importance of moral considerations in international politics. Both diverge from John Mearsheimer's Neorealism, which excludes morality from relations between States, restricting it to the calculation of material power. Thus, Chinese currents engage critically with Western traditions, offering alternatives that blend Chinese cultural universalism with classical categories of International Relations theory.

Although the three currents of thought demonstrate a disagreement with today's international system, the idealization of Chinese history and culture is evident, demonstrating

an explicit instrumentalization of theory in favor of the Chinese government's interests. This is especially clear in Zhao's *Tianxia* and Yan's Moral Realism, and ultimately gives rise to the criticism that the analyses of these three Chinese thinkers suffer from the same problem identified in Western theories: an attempt to universalize their own worldview.

The views briefly outlined in this article, however, cannot be measured solely by their purported merits, or by the possible solutions to problems long sought in the IR discipline. They serve above all as inspiration for debates and discussions by presenting perspectives that challenge the Eurocentrism of mainstream theories.

Thus, this research found evidence and arguments that suggest the validity of the hypothesis proposed, that Chinese culture effectively determines a unique ontology for Chinese studies of International Relations, distinct from that which nourishes the Western canon.

It should be emphasized that the three currents of Chinese International Relations studied here are not—and cannot be—considered "neutral." After all, they are embedded in a context of China's rise to the forefront of the international system. They certainly influence and serve the formulation of that country's foreign policy, while their authors are influenced by such nation's strategic aspirations. This observation echoes the maxim of Robert Cox (1981), one of the leading exponents of Critical International Relations Theory, according to which "theory is always for someone, for some purpose." Thus, both the Chinese and Western currents can be understood as intellectual constructions linked to historical contexts, political interests, and specific strategic objectives (Cox, 1981, p. 128).

China's actual importance in the international system demands greater attention to the intellectual production of its researchers in the field of International Relations. This article, by shedding light on the three main theoretical currents of Chinese thought in this field, aims to contribute to this objective. Nevertheless, it is clearly a task that has to be completed, deepened, and refined in future studies.

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