
Reconceptualizing International Order: Contemporary Chinese Theories and Their Contributions to Global IR

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Abstract Recent years have witnessed the theorizing of international order from a global, rather than purely Western, perspective. We contribute to this approach by reviewing recent book-length theorizations by four prominent contemporary Chinese scholars. We outline how these conceptions of international order converge and diverge, identify their contributions and limitations, and compare them with Western paradigms of international order, such as realism and liberalism. We then demonstrate how insights from these Chinese approaches enrich existing international relations debates and shed light on contemporary Chinese foreign policy.

Qin, Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2018)

Ren, Xiao, *Zouxiang shijie de gongsheng* [Toward the symbiosis of the world] (Commercial Press, 2019)

Yan, Xuetong, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

Zhao, Tingyang, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (University of California Press, 2021)

Recent developments in world politics, including China's rise, Brexit, and the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, have posed significant challenges to the norms and institutions that have long underpinned the modern international system. In particular, the ongoing power shift from Western to non-Western states has led to increasing contestation over the existing framework, not only regarding material aspects such as economic inequalities but also concerning normative dimensions, especially the

“privileging of Western values and knowledge systems.”¹ This heightened normative contestation highlights the importance and necessity of incorporating a wider array of perspectives, especially those from relatively marginalized entities, into established theoretical frameworks for a more nuanced understanding of contemporary global dynamics.

The burgeoning field of global international relations (Global IR) provides a promising avenue to address this issue, seeking to broaden the scope of international relations (IR) through the incorporation of insights from around the world. Unlike conventional practices, which often extend Western-centric theories and case studies to global contexts, this approach emphasizes the integration of both non-Western theoretical frameworks and historical experiences.² Global IR scholars are not merely interested in “borrowing” individual ideas from non-Western contexts or attributing specific ideas essentially to cultures. They aim to develop a discipline that takes diversity and difference seriously, acknowledging that much work produced outside the Western mainstream is *already*—at least partially—globalized because of its production in a global academy, and thus some interactions with Western scholarship are required. The goal of this Global IR project is to foster a truly inclusive dialogue that respects diversity and seeks common understanding, enriching IR’s theoretical and empirical foundations.³

We aim to advance the Global IR agenda by integrating insights from Chinese scholarship into an important IR theme: the theory and practice of international order.⁴ We see this as a natural application because the term *international order* inherently suggests a global perspective. However, much of the current debate on this topic, and particularly on the so-called liberal international order (LIO), tends to sideline perspectives coming from outside the United States and Europe.⁵

On the other hand, while there is a wealth of Global IR scholarship on the distinctiveness of Chinese IR scholarship, these works often do not specifically address conceptions of order.⁶ Similarly, research that historicizes Chinese orders often overlooks the contributions of their contemporary intellectual heirs.⁷ We seek to complement these studies by focusing on contemporary Chinese scholars’ understandings of order, taking into account the modern sociopolitical production of knowledge in China to draw out common threads and areas of debate in the broad literature.

The past decades have witnessed a wealth of new IR scholarship in China, which offers valuable insights into the concept of international order. Here, we focus on a few influential works in this burgeoning literature. As in America, reviews of this

1. Reus-Smit and Zarakol 2023, 1.

2. Acharya and Buzan 2007; Kang 2010; Phillips and Sharman 2015; Spruyt 2020; Zarakol 2022.

3. Acharya 2014a.

4. Ikenberry 2018; Lascurlettes and Poznansky 2021.

5. Acharya 2014b.

6. Acharya 2019; Buzan 2018; Hwang 2022; Kim 2016; Lu 2024; Perez Mena 2023; Ren 2020; Schneider 2014.

7. Hui 2005; Kang 2010; MacKay 2019; Phillips and Sharman 2015; Spruyt 2020; Zarakol 2022.

kind tend to be organized around paradigmatic research agendas with central organizing texts, and in fact, there is a general consensus around which texts are particularly influential. Scholarship on Chinese IR theories broadly agrees on the importance or centrality of moral realism (*daoyi xianshi zhuyi*), associated with Yan Xuetong and collaborators at Tsinghua University; relationalism (*guanxi lilun*), associated with Qin Yaqing; and Tianxia-ism (*tianxia [all-under-heaven] zhuyi*), associated with Zhao Tingyang.⁸

Each of these theories has been influential in China for some time.⁹ But they are not alone in their influence. In more recent years, Ren Xiao and his colleagues in the Shanghai IR community have introduced a self-consciously novel paradigm based on social symbiosis theory (*shehui gongsheng lun*).¹⁰ While not all studies of Chinese IR scholarship explicitly cover this school of thought, we include Ren's most recent work on this theoretical paradigm in our analysis for two reasons. First, most progenitors of this theory are influential Chinese scholars,¹¹ and their texts have gained significant traction in the contemporary Chinese IR community. More importantly, putting the symbiosis theory alongside three more established theories offers intriguing and valuable theoretical insights. See Table 1 for a brief overview of these four theories.

While certain aspects of these Chinese IR theories have been described in various Chinese and English outlets,¹² the four books reviewed here showcase these authors' latest efforts to develop and articulate their theoretical arguments.¹³ International order is a central concern of all four theories, and each provides a useful alternative conceptualization of order for Western IR scholars to engage with. In juxtaposing these Chinese conceptions with those provided by other scholarship, we have three key objectives.

First, we aim to address the polymorphic critique of the international order debate¹⁴ through a comparative examination of conceptions of order within contemporary

8. Acharya 2019; Hwang 2022; Kim 2016; Ren 2020.

9. For example, some scholars have adopted these theories to understand issues like US–China competition (Lei 2022; Ma 2022) and Chinese foreign policy (Han, Chen, and Tian 2020; Z. Wang 2021).

10. Hwang 2022; Lu 2024; Perez Mena 2023; Ren 2015. There are also other emerging but influential IR theories in the Chinese academy, including the balance-of-relationships theory of Shih Chihyu and Huan Chiung-Chiu, the social-evolution theory of Tang Shiping, and the “New Tianxiaism” (*xin tianxia zhuyi*) of Xu Jinlin.

11. Kristensen and Nielsen 2013.

12. See, for example, Qin 2016; Ren 2015; X. Yan 2014; T. Zhao 2009.

13. Specifically, although the core ideas of Yan's moral realism and Qin's relationalism were originally published in Chinese, the two books reviewed here offer a comprehensive exposition and development of their theories. They are written in English and have been *translated back* into Chinese since publication. On the other hand, Zhao's book is an English translation of his 2016 Chinese book, *Tianxia de dangdaixin* [The contemporary nature of *tianxia*]. This translated version represents his most recent efforts to advance the notion of Tianxia to conceptualize international order, incorporating his latest responses to scholarly critiques. The translation enables the global academic community to engage with Zhao's ideas and enriches the discourse on Tianxia beyond linguistic barriers. Finally, while many scholars in China have contributed articles to articulate and develop the symbiotic IR theory, Ren's book is a milestone: the first Chinese monograph dedicated to this theory.

14. Acharya 2014a; Reus-Smit and Zarakol 2023.

Chinese scholarship and between Chinese and mainstream theories. The convergence and divergence emerging from this dual-level comparison indicate that these theories, while emerging from China, should not be seen as “Chinese” in the essentialist sense. Rather, they are the product of a shared sociopolitical and intellectual milieu. Their commonalities can provide implications for thinking about Chinese society and policy, whereas their differences help reinforce the need to consider divergent perspectives even within the same society.¹⁵

TABLE 1. Four theoretical paradigms in Chinese IR scholarship

Chinese IR theory	Representative thinkers	Summary
Moral realism (<i>daoyi xianshi zhuyi</i>)	Yan Xuetong	A theory that combines realism’s emphasis on power, capability, and interest with a focus on morality and moral behavior.
Relationalism (<i>guanxi lilun</i>)	Qin Yaqing	Argues that, instead of rational calculations of self-interest, relationships are the key determinant of states’ and nonstate actors’ interests, identities, and behaviors.
Tianxiaism (<i>all-under-heaven</i>)	Zhao Tingyang	A Chinese idea about the world. Denotes an all-inclusive world-system that is based on relational rationality and positive-sum interactions rather than individual rationality and zero-sum interactions.
Symbiosis in IR (<i>gong-sheng guoji guanxi lilun</i>)	Ren Xiao, Su Changhe, Jin Yingzhong, Hu Shoujun	Based on symbiotic relationships in nature. Argues that pluralist symbiosis among actors is the ideal state of nature in social systems such as the international system.

Second, our analysis reveals that the “normative and epistemic biases” underpinning the mainstream theories of international order¹⁶ also exist in non-Western scholarship. Precisely because the Chinese scholars considered here aspire to engage intellectually with the Western mainstream, many use some of the fundamental assumptions of mainstream IR theories, such as state-centrism, in constructing their own theories. This suggests that the Chinese paradigms are subject to similar analytical and normative critiques as their Western counterparts. Through a nuanced engagement with influential Chinese scholarship and critical perspectives in IR, we hope to illuminate the diverse ways these Chinese insights can be integrated into broader academic discussions.

Finally, the influence of these Chinese authors in China’s policy circles allows us to contribute, at least speculatively, to debates about Chinese approaches to international order, a key area of interest in the IR literature.¹⁷ The scholars whose works are reviewed here hold influential positions in government, academia, or think tanks, which potentially enables them to shape China’s foreign policy decision

15. Perez Mena 2023.

16. Reus-Smit and Zarakol 2023, 1.

17. Breslin 2013; Chan 2021; Johnston 2019; Kastner, Pearson, and Rector 2019; Weiss and Wallace 2021; Zhou and Esteban 2018.

making (see the table in the online supplement for a summary of these positions). While a direct correlation between these authors' theories and specific policy practices cannot be conclusively established, it is plausible that China's foreign policy elites are familiar with these ideas. And understanding the intellectual milieu of these elites may be helpful in anticipating the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy.

We begin by discussing the rationale for our focus on "Chinese" IR scholarship, delving into the specific sociopolitical and intellectual contexts that bind the four reviewed authors together. This exploration not only points to their analytical utility but also suggests possible policy relevance. We then review each author's contribution to the global debate on international order. Following this review, we synthesize the theoretical and policy lessons to be drawn from the totality of their perspectives, emphasizing their commonalities and differences in both cases and outlining areas for productive discussion and critical engagement. We conclude with some key takeaways.

The Concept and Practice of Chinese IR

Our analysis of the four Chinese conceptions of international order aligns with the recent broader calls to globalize IR as a discipline. In his 2014 presidential address to the International Studies Association, Amitav Acharya called for a new kind of IR theory, which he called Global IR.¹⁸ Beginning from the premise that knowledge production is always situated in the context of its history and sociology, he drew on earlier studies to argue that the Western mainstream is biased by a reliance on European history and its origins in the Anglo-American academy.¹⁹ Making IR a truly global endeavor means overcoming this bias and constructing a project that "transcends the distinction between West and non-West—or any similar binary and mutually exclusive categories" through a "pluralistic universalism" that recovers knowledge(s) developed in places other than the West and based on evidence other than European history.²⁰

One way that Global IR has inspired fruitful areas of research is in the rise of "national" IR theories produced by scholars from non-Western countries or regions. For example, there are distinctive paradigmatic approaches in this tradition coming from Indian and Korean IR scholarship, produced both before and after the advent of Global IR as a self-conscious project.²¹ But perhaps the most substantial source of "national" IR comes from contemporary China. Several influential Chinese scholars have self-consciously attempted to construct a "Chinese School" of IR theory, and sought recognition from the broad IR community.²² This work

18. Acharya 2014a.

19. Hoffman 1977; Smith 2000; Wæver 1998.

20. Acharya 2014a, 649.

21. Cho 2015; Mallavarapu 2009.

22. Qin 2018b; Ren 2020.

has also been the subject of significant analysis within the Global IR literature, with outside observers looking to China as a source of new theoretical insights.²³

What Is “Chinese IR”?

Of course, applying a national label like “Chinese” to any particular theory or scholarship is always somewhat fraught. Peter Katzenstein, for example, warns against thinking of Chinese IR in essentialist terms, arguing that the “diversity and heterogeneity of world politics requires us to shed our habitual preference for arguing in terms of binary distinctions.”²⁴ In this view, categorizing theories as “American” or “Chinese,” “Western” or “non-Western” oversimplifies distinctions within nations and implies that these theories are limited in scope to their region of origin. Indeed, this skepticism exists within the Chinese academy itself: the project of a unified Chinese School is still highly controversial among Chinese scholars. Yan, for example, has expressed ideas similar to Katzenstein’s about the need for universal theories that are not Chinese *per se* but general theories of IR meant to travel.²⁵

We largely agree with this critique. Still, most scholars involved in this debate would admit a central premise of Global IR: that knowledge production is inherently situated and that such a context can inadvertently foster parochialism, unless there is a deliberate effort to encompass diverse perspectives. Therefore, the task of Global IR analysis is to avoid essentialism and undue restrictions of theoretical scope while also realizing the realities of taken-for-granted assumptions that affect theory and knowledge produced under specific sociological conditions.²⁶ This suggests that research that tries to study knowledge from China, or anywhere else that has been largely marginalized in the anglophone mainstream, needs to tread carefully to avoid essentialism while appreciating that the sociology of knowledge production differs around the world and that this variation is in fact a partial cause of Western IR’s parochialism in the first place.²⁷

Acharya’s call for transcending binaries aligns seamlessly with this line of reasoning,²⁸ and our analysis takes several steps to address these concerns while situating itself within the Global IR tradition. First, rather than condensing Chinese thought to a monolithic view, we investigate a multiplicity of Chinese perspectives using four different books. We have opted to use terms like “Chinese theories” and “Chinese scholars” rather than the controversial concept of the Chinese School. These collective names highlight the multiplicity of theories while acknowledging their shared historical and sociological origins. Moreover, in line with the aspirations of these Chinese scholars, we consider their theories not as narrowly focused or

23. Acharya 2019; Hwang 2022; Kim 2016; Kristensen and Nielsen 2013.

24. Katzenstein 2018, 389.

25. Xueting Yan 2019a; Yan and Fang 2023.

26. Eun 2018; Katzenstein 2018.

27. Hoffman 1977; Wæver 1998.

28. Acharya 2014a.

limited in applicability, but as comprehensive and universally relevant arguments. This approach facilitates the discussion of IR topics from a more global perspective. Finally, we explicate connections between these theories and the mainstream, rather than assuming them to be completely alien to Western readers. This allows us to highlight their similarities and differences and suggest fruitful points of contact and departure between these texts and those more familiar to Western audiences.

Origins and Evolution of Chinese IR Theories

Our review is grounded on the Global IR understanding that Chinese IR scholarship is not developed in isolation but is profoundly influenced by China's distinctive sociopolitical, historical, and intellectual contexts, as well as the globalization of the IR discipline. The integration of the Chinese IR community with the world began in the late 1970s. Influenced by Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening-up" policy, Chinese scholars started to transition from a critical and hostile stance toward Western IR theories to a more open, learning-focused approach.²⁹ The 1980s and 1990s saw the establishment of numerous new IR institutions in China and the translation and intensive study of theoretical works by key Western thinkers like Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz.³⁰ Many Chinese IR students were encouraged to pursue their studies abroad during this period, predominantly in the United States and the United Kingdom. Three of the four scholars reviewed here—Yan, Qin, and Ren—had such overseas educational experiences. Even for Zhao, who is primarily educated in China, Western philosophy is the primary research interest in his early academic career.

This extensive exposure to Western scholarship profoundly shaped Chinese scholars' understanding of mainstream IR theories. It facilitated the development of contemporary Chinese IR theories that can directly engage with the Western mainstream. For instance, Yan's moral realism offers a nuanced adaptation of classical realism.³¹ Likewise, Qin's relational theory and Zhao's Tianxianism provide distinctive insights that can speak to Wendtian constructivism³² and Kantian peace,³³ respectively. These connections are fundamental to the subsequent dialogues between Chinese and Western theoretical frameworks.

At the same time, the intensive engagement with Western, notably American, IR theories has made Chinese scholars increasingly aware of the US's predominance in knowledge production.³⁴ This awareness has fueled a desire within the Chinese

29. Hwang 2022.

30. Qin 2007.

31. Xuetong Yan 2019b, chapter 1.

32. Qin 2018b, 84–94. In fact, Qin also facilitated cross-national academic dialogue by translating Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* into Chinese, introducing it to the Chinese scholarly community.

33. T. Zhao 2021, 193–200.

34. Zhang 2003, 92.

IR community to develop IR theories that contain Chinese characteristics. The 1987 Shanghai IR Theory Seminar marked a significant milestone of this aspiration, where Chinese officials and scholars first explicitly called for a national effort to construct China's own IR theory.³⁵ This ambition intensified in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, paralleling China's emergence as a global power.

Although initial theoretical attempts by Chinese scholars relied heavily on Marxist or socialist theories,³⁶ the introduction of the English School to the Chinese IR community in the late 1990s played a pivotal role in shaping their theorizing approaches, contributing to the emergence of contemporary Chinese IR theories. According to Zhang, the English School's increasing popularity in China is attributable to its intellectual persuasiveness but also to its offering an alternative to the dominant American perspectives in world politics, such as realism and liberalism.³⁷

More importantly, the emergence and development of the English School as a well-recognized, independent academic community in the discipline serves as a model for Chinese academics advocating the establishment of a “national” IR school. Influenced by this model, many scholars, including Ren, suggested in the 2000s that the Chinese IR community draw inspiration from the English School in formulating its own theoretical approaches.³⁸

The impact of the English School on Chinese IR theories manifests in two main aspects. First, the English School's focus on the concept of “international society” prompts Chinese scholars to consider the fundamental questions that define or distinguish an IR community. For example, Qin suggested in 2005 that the key question for a growing Chinese School could be “how China can peacefully integrate into the world,” or, more broadly, “how rising great powers interact with the international system.”³⁹ While this question may not be accepted by every scholar in China, it appears to capture, at least to a certain degree, the primary concerns of the four theories reviewed here.

Second, by emphasizing the role of culture and history in international studies, the English School also inspired these scholars to strategically incorporate China's traditions and historical experiences into their theories.⁴⁰ Qin, again, identifies three primary sources for theoretical inspiration: China's classical thinking and ancient history, influential modernization philosophies such as Marxism and Maoism, and reformist thinking in the post-Mao period.⁴¹ These rich historical and philosophical traditions or “reservoirs” have significantly informed the development of contemporary Chinese thought.

35. Hwang 2022; Lu 2024; Zhang 2003.

36. Hwang 2022, 7.

37. Zhang 2003, 98–103.

38. Pang 2003; Ren 2003.

39. Qin 2005, 176.

40. Ren 2009.

41. Qin 2007, 329–34.

On the conceptual front, integrating important ideas from these philosophical traditions is critical in influencing the theoretical frameworks of Chinese scholars. Although these scholars tend to emphasize the impact of classical Chinese philosophies (such as Confucianism and Daoism) on their work but understate the ideological influence of Marxism or socialism—in part to foster engagement with the Global IR discourse and challenge Western-centric paradigms—key aspects of their theories, such as the power–morality interplay and the notion of collective governance, are, as we will show, deeply shaped by both schools of thought.

Empirically, China's historical legacy, the governance models of ancient Chinese empires in particular, also significantly influences these scholars' conceptions. Their theories frequently cite historical dynasties such as the Zhou and the Ming as successful examples of international order that offer enduring lessons and frameworks pertinent to global governance in the contemporary era.⁴²

All of this indicates that the Chinese IR theories examined here are shaped by a wide array of factors. On the one hand, they are developed in the milieu of contemporary Chinese politics and society, influenced by the policy orientations of the Chinese Communist Party, and often incorporate insights from both ancient and modern Chinese thought and experience.⁴³ On the other hand, they are significantly informed by Anglo-American IR scholarship, particularly the American paradigms and the English School. This dual influence positions these theories at the forefront of the Global IR agenda, enabling a unique synthesis of Chinese perspectives with mainstream IR theories for the construction of innovative theoretical frameworks. While such a synthetic approach may inadvertently overlook other non-Western perspectives, it nonetheless serves as a valuable entry point for engagement by scholars in the Global IR tradition, particularly those exploring issues related to international order.

Chinese IR Theories and Debates on International Order

The topic of international order occupies a central place in the discussion of both Chinese and mainstream IR scholarship, driven by recent geopolitical challenges across the globe. In particular, with the continuous shift of power between China and the US, scholars and policymakers have become increasingly interested in, and perhaps anxious to know, whether and how a powerful China will shape the future of the US-led LIO.

Mainstream IR scholars tend to hold one of two views on this issue. Some, like Ikenberry, are more optimistic about the resilience of the LIO. They argue that China might continue to endorse the existing order, which has facilitated its growth in recent decades,⁴⁴ or that the US and its allies could uphold the LIO,

42. Ren 2019; Xuetong Yan 2019b; T. Zhao 2021.

43. Qin 2007.

44. Chan 2021; Ikenberry 2014.

possibly in an adapted form, even if China seeks changes.⁴⁵ In contrast, the pessimists believe that China's intention to challenge the LIO is obvious, though their opinions vary regarding the magnitude and nature of this challenge.⁴⁶

Such ongoing practical debates on the resilience of the LIO and China's potential challenge also catalyze more profound theoretical investigations in IR. Specifically, these policy-oriented discussions have heightened scholarly interest in the conceptualization of order, prompting a re-engagement with classical theories and seminal literature.⁴⁷ Many IR scholars today are exploring critical theoretical questions on the notion of international order, including its very existence, origins, and sustaining mechanisms, and the dynamics of its transformation or dissolution.⁴⁸

Incorporating Chinese perspectives into these discussions can significantly enrich the theoretical framework and practical understanding of international order. On the practical front, these perspectives offer insights into China's position regarding the existing international order and the potential alternatives it envisions. Knowing these Chinese visions is thus essential for evaluating which arrangements it wants to revise, what ideas it wants to promote, and how these goals can be achieved. Theoretically, the integration of Chinese theories can expand the field's intellectual diversity, advancing our knowledge of international order with different perspectives that may help address the fundamental theoretical questions in the discipline.

In fact, engaging in a debate on international order with the mainstream is perhaps one important academic goal of Chinese IR scholars, as evidenced by some notable similarities between their theories and the mainstream literature. For example, both tend toward a state-centric perspective, considering states as the primitive units that constitute order. This choice of focus is nontrivial in Chinese scholarship, because "polity" is the more typical term for key IR actors in Confucian thought and the Chinese historical narratives these theories draw on.⁴⁹ Moreover, like many other IR theorists, these Chinese scholars tend to define order as a certain level of regularity and predictability,⁵⁰ indicating that they have already been part of an academic conversation that crosses national boundaries.

At the same time, the distinctive historical and sociopolitical origins of these Chinese theories lead to significant divergences between them and the Western theories. First, while there is a consensus that international order aims to mitigate the challenges of a (disordered) baseline condition, they differ significantly in their understanding of this baseline. Western scholars typically identify power politics and conflicts under anarchy as the core issues that international order must

45. Ikenberry 2020.

46. Breslin 2013; Callahan 2016; Johnston 2019; Kastner, Pearson, and Rector 2019; Weiss and Wallace 2021.

47. Lascurettes 2020; Tang 2016.

48. Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021.

49. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this distinction.

50. Bain 2020; Bially Mattern 2005; Lascurettes and Poznansky 2021; Tang 2016.

resolve.⁵¹ In contrast, most of the Chinese scholars we review perceive the prevailing Western-centric international order as problematic and needing reform, if not a complete overhaul. They tend to go beyond minor adjustments and call for a more substantial transformation of the modern international order.

These Chinese IR theories also exhibit diverse perspectives on the mechanisms that produce international orders. Some align more with hegemonic theories, positing that order is imposed by powerful states' deliberate actions or leadership.⁵² But others tend to advocate a more grass-roots, bottom-up approach, suggesting that order can naturally emerge from the interactions among a range of actors, influenced by either rational or relational dynamics.⁵³

The differences in these theories also extend to their conceptions of the ideal form of international order. Generally, they fall into two distinct schools of thought: one that considers the ideal form of order as a static outcome or equilibrium, and one that perceives it as a dynamic process. The former view, akin to some Western understandings such as Ikenberry's conception of the LIO,⁵⁴ often uses the prevalence of certain norms or ideologies as the primary criterion for inferring the degree of orderliness in the system. The latter regards order as "a state of becoming" rather than "a state of being," suggesting constant flux and adaptation rather than a fixed state of order.⁵⁵

Table 2 presents a comparative summary of the core arguments put forth by these authors, alongside Ikenberry's conception of the LIO. We consider Ikenberry's framework a useful reference point here, not merely due to its influence on the mainstream literature but also because it is one of the primary conceptions that these contemporary Chinese paradigms are engaging with.

Interpretation and Translation in Chinese IR

Before delving into our detailed analysis, we address an important conceptual challenge: the intricacies of interpretation and translation. They are common issues in Global IR studies, especially when engaging with theories originally articulated in languages other than English. In the Chinese case, as certain concepts are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese thought, the interpretation of their meanings or implications can be highly contested, even among Chinese scholars.⁵⁶ For example, Yan interprets *wangdao* in his work as a form of humane authority in international politics, but the term's literal translation from Chinese, "the kingly way," often refers to a Confucian ideal of benevolent governance within a nation, so it does not necessarily extend to international leadership. Similarly, Zhao's interpretation of Tianxianism

51. Ikenberry 2011.

52. Xuetong Yan 2019b; T. Zhao 2021.

53. Qin 2018b; Ren 2019.

54. Ikenberry 2014.

55. Cooley and Nexon 2020, 32.

56. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

starkly contrasts with other Chinese work, like Xu’s “New Tianxiaism,” with its marked implicit Sinocentrism and authoritarian inclination.⁵⁷

TABLE 2. Four Chinese visions of international order and Ikenberry’s view of the LIO

	<i>Liberal international order (Ikenberry)</i>	<i>Moral realism (Yan Xuetong)</i>	<i>Relationalism (Qin Yaqing)</i>	<i>Tianxiaism (Zhao Tingyang)</i>	<i>Symbiotic IR theory (Ren Xiao and the Shanghai School)</i>
<i>Baseline</i>	Anarchy	Anarchy	LIO	LIO	LIO
<i>Mechanism of order</i>	Liberal hierarchy	Moral hierarchy	Centrality and harmony	Confucian amelioration	Functional differentiation
<i>Ideal form of order</i>	A liberal hegemony led by the US	A moral hierarchy based on humane authority	Harmonizing relationships as a constant process	A legitimate supra-national authority	Cooperation among functionally different states
<i>Practical example</i>	US-led international order since 1945	US leadership under Franklin Roosevelt	ASEAN+	Western Zhou dynasty in ancient China	Inter-polity system in premodern East Asia

While this kind of interpretive ambiguity is certainly a reflection of the rich diversity of Chinese IR scholarship, we will prioritize the authors’ own understandings of these contested concepts. It is not that we consider their views definitive or authoritative. Rather, we have made this methodological choice because these interpretations are integral components of their broader theories of international order, and thereby merit rigorous academic examination. Readers, however, are encouraged to critically engage with these concepts by acknowledging their contextual richness and philosophical nuances.

In addition to interpretation, we are aware of the intricacies of translation. Given that some of the source texts under review were not originally written or available in English, we rely primarily on English translations by the authors themselves or, where necessary, our interpretations of the original Chinese works. This process introduces asymmetry between the Chinese “source” texts and their English “target” translations, a phenomenon highlighted in translation studies.⁵⁸ To uphold the integrity of our analysis, we follow established practices in the study of non-Western IR by presenting key terms in both English and their original Chinese. To ensure methodological rigor and transparency, in the online supplement we provide a comprehensive list of critical Chinese terms used in these theories, along with English translations and justification for our translation decisions.

57. Chu 2020, 7.

58. Capan, Dos Reis, and Grasten 2021.

Four Chinese Visions of Order

Yan's Moral Realism: A Moral Order Built on Humane Authority

Yan's concept of the disordered baseline maps closely to Hobbesian anarchy in Western IR theories—a world of “war of every man against every man.⁵⁹ He shares an understanding with many realists that states in this anarchic context are likely to resort to force to achieve their goals or secure their national interests, which leads to the prevalence of the principles of *realpolitik* in the international system.

Instead of advocating solutions such as balance-of-power policies, he proposes establishing an international order governed by moral norms. These norms are widely accepted moral principles that guide states toward achieving their interests through the legal means applicable to a specific historical period.⁶⁰ They can effectively curb *realpolitik* and war under anarchy because a high degree of morality enables nations to settle their disputes peacefully.⁶¹

According to Yan, an order based on moral values or norms is unlikely to emerge from states' dynamic social interactions alone, as some constructivists have suggested.⁶² It can be established by only the dominant power's exercise of humane authority (*wangdao*) in the international system. This is one of four types of international leadership in Yan's theory.⁶³ The moral behavior required of the dominant power by this form of leadership not only encourages emulation by secondary states but also grants the leader the authority to reward the states that obey and punish the ones that violate these moral principles.⁶⁴

For moral realists, the dominant states have both the ability and the will to construct a moral order. Their overwhelming material capabilities can provide rewards or punishments to shape the behaviors of other states. Moreover, the competition between dominant powers, especially during power transitions, can increase their willingness to practice and spread moral principles. Yan believes that in a competitive context, adherence to international moral codes can enhance “the legitimacy of a leading state's mobilization of support both at home and abroad,” “giving that state more influence” than its competitors.⁶⁵ Moral leadership thus has strategic value: the more morally a great power behaves in the competition, the more support and legitimacy it will garner, and the more likely it is that a moral order under the leadership of humane authority will emerge.

59. Hobbes 1997, 77.

60. Xuetong Yan 2019b, 110.

61. Ibid., 43–44.

62. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998.

63. The other three are hegemony (*baquan*), anemocracy (*hunyong*), and tyranny (*qiangquan*). Xuetong Yan 2019b, 43–47.

64. Xuetong Yan 2019b, 43.

65. Ibid., 19–20.

The interplay between material capability and moral leadership in Yan's theory largely derives from Yan's reading of ancient Chinese philosophy, especially Xunzi's thoughts on humane authority and benevolent governance (*wangdao*).⁶⁶ It also resembles the dynamic interactions between the substructure and the superstructure in Marxist theory. Within the broader IR discourse, this theory is also aligned with some tenets of classical realism, which emphasizes the role of morality in world politics,⁶⁷ and hegemonic theories, which argue that the dominant actor should take the leadership role in promoting norms and establishing order.⁶⁸

However, the principle of morality-based hierarchy distinguishes Yan's moral order from many historical and contemporary orders initiated by hegemonic states. Those hegemonic orders, though different in many aspects, are often established in a top-down manner: the prevailing norms in these orders are imposed by the hegemon on the subordinates, not unlike America's promotion of liberal values in the modern international order.⁶⁹ The main ordered objects or order-takers in these orders are subordinate states.

In Yan's moral order, however, *the dominant states themselves* are the key ordered objects. Assuming the preexistence of a set of universally acknowledged moral values, Yan argues that these powerful states need to behave morally first before they can promote moral principles to subordinate other actors.⁷⁰ The legitimacy of their humane authority originates from these powerful leaders' consistent practice of moral values. Therefore, the dominant and subordinate states are both order-takers.

Qin's Relational Order as a Form of Governance

The main goal of Qin's relational theory is to introduce an alternative ontology for the observation and analysis of world politics. According to Qin, many Western IR theories are heavily informed by (his interpretation of) Hegelian (or Hegelian/Marxian) dialectics, stressing the tension between thesis and antithesis. Since these two terms are independent and rely on each other for existence or constituting their own identities, they are "neither mutually transformable nor reciprocally accommodating," just as the proletariat cannot become the bourgeoisie and vice versa.⁷¹

Citing Carl Schmitt, Qin argues that this dialectical tradition led to a common belief in IR that "the central principle is contradiction, [and] the central theme of social life is conflict."⁷² Such a contradictory view results in a self-other dichotomy and antagonism, leading to conquest or dominance in world politics—an aspect that Qin considers as the baseline condition for his relational order.

66. Yan et al. 2011, chapter 2.

67. Morgenthau 1960, 248.

68. Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990.

69. Ikenberry 2009.

70. Xuetong Yan 2019b, 43.

71. Qin 2018b, 160–61.

72. Ibid., 164.

For Qin, the West's solution to this confrontational nature of IR is to build a rule-based international order to exercise governance.⁷³ While Qin does not deny the success of this type of governance, he argues that it cannot solve the problems brought about by the dialectic. Existing rules-based orders are mainly designed to curb the worst outcomes of rational, egoistic self-interest maximization by prompting actors to work for common goals. The approach they use is still synthesis (or assimilation of different actors), though usually in a nonviolent way. When rules cannot be enforced to change behaviors and identities, nor be expected to bring tangible benefits to the participants, their effectiveness will be questioned, and antagonism is likely to re-emerge.⁷⁴

Therefore, Qin argues that in addition to rule-based governance we need a complementary governance model to address the fundamental problems caused by the Hegelian dialectics. He sees sinophone relationalism, which originates from traditional *guan-xi* (relational) culture in China, as a powerful alternative.⁷⁵ It is heavily influenced by the *yin-yang* metaphysics of traditional Chinese Daoist philosophy.⁷⁶ Its basic assumption is that “the world is a universe of relatedness,” “composed of continuous events and ongoing relations rather than substantial objects and discrete entities.” It “represents itself always as a complexly relational whole in which actors live and co-live, act and interact.”⁷⁷

The organizing principle of this relational order is “centrality and harmony” (*zhong-gyong*), a concept from Confucianism that balances or stabilizes the relationship between two dialectically opposite but related entities to avoid antagonistic annexation or synthesis. The primary units in this order are “relators” (or “relators-in-relations”), whose interests, preferences, and identities depend on their relationships with others. The primary goal of relators is “to reinforce, sustain, and deepen relationships, rather than the instrumental goals that they serve so well.”⁷⁸ Inter-relator trust is a key factor that ties these units together. This relational trust is different from the concept of trust deriving from rational evaluation in many IR studies, which emphasizes the belief that the other side prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting one's own cooperation.⁷⁹ It mainly comes from relators' moral practices, which produce and reproduce harmonious relations.

Since relations are dynamic practices, Qin's relational order is a process that involves “continual negotiation, bargaining, concession, coordination, and balance of relations.”⁸⁰ Hence, Qin, unlike other Chinese theorists, does not have a clear vision of the equilibrium of a relational order. His ideal form of order is grounded

73. Qin seems to treat governance and order as two closely related, even interchangeable, concepts because “governance means establishing and maintaining order.” *Ibid.*, 345.

74. *Ibid.*, 320–28.

75. Kavalski 2018; Qin and Nordin 2019; Shih et al. 2019.

76. Ling 2014; Qin 2016, 2018b.

77. Qin 2018b, 107–108.

78. Qin 2018b, 71.

79. Kydd 2005.

80. Qin 2018b, 336.

in an ontological argument of what it means to be an “ordering” state, rather than the substantial view of what the “ordered” state is. He locates order in the dynamics that emphasize procedural engagement and trust-building, even if the apparent results or outcomes are limited, as evidenced by APEC and ASEAN.⁸¹

A relation-based order is thus different from a rule-based order along multiple dimensions. It focuses on the process instead of the outcome, with harmonious coexistence rather than rule enforcement as the ordering mechanism, and intersubjective trust rather than self-interest as the ordering force. Despite these differences, Qin argues that these two types of order are not necessarily competitors. Instead, they can “be synthesized into a model that does not see the elements in the two approaches as contradictory.”⁸² How can this synthesis be achieved? And how many forms can this “synthetic governance” take? Qin does not answer these questions, except to claim that cultural differences can determine states’ preference for a more relational or rule-based order.⁸³ If this is true, a global order that combines both types of governance seems unlikely to emerge, as competing orders, derived from diverging cultures, are likely to arise.

Zhao’s Tianxiaism: Inclusive World Governance

Like many Western IR theorists, Zhao sees the increasing contradictions and conflicts in the modern world, manifesting in global issues such as nuclear proliferation, terrorism, climate change, and pandemics, as problems to be solved.⁸⁴ Echoing Qin, he argues that Western liberalism is unable to solve these problems because unilateral universalism and individual rationality make liberalism a source of conflict rather than a solution.⁸⁵ An order based on unilateral universalism will cause violent synthesis, annexation, or assimilation, whereas one based on individual rationality will inevitably lead to conflict over resource allocation.

The solution proposed by Zhao is *Tianxiaism*,⁸⁶ a traditional Chinese idea comprising three principles:

- The internalization of the world (*wuwai*), referring to an institutionalized interconnected world in which all resources, technologies, and knowledge are non-exclusive.
- Relational rationality (*guanxi lixing*) of agents, which prioritizes minimizing mutual harm and maximizing mutual benefits over maximizing self-interest.
- Confucian amelioration (*kongzi gaishan*), which conceptualizes gains as inseparable: either all gain or none does. In game-theoretic terms, interactions are

81. Qin 2018b, 348, 354.

82. Ibid., 351.

83. Ibid., 354.

84. T. Zhao 2008, 58.

85. Ibid., 60.

86. T. Zhao 2021, xv.

generally win-win (interaction produces mutually beneficial outcomes) or lose-lose (no one gains), rather than positive-sum (the sum of gains and losses is greater than zero) or zero-sum.

For many scholars, an order based on these principles seems utopian.⁸⁷ While Zhao acknowledges this limitation,⁸⁸ he contends that Tianxia will be achieved if one or several supra-national institutions can exercise these principles in the international system. The result could take the form of a world state, but it could also be a united Earth confederation. Regardless of its form, a Tianxia order requires some kind of collective governance, with a dedicated authority to uphold these principles and oversee the conduct of various actors,⁸⁹ echoing Marx's conceptualization of an ideal state in certain respects.

However, when it comes to the question of what mechanisms can lead to the emergence of a Tianxia order in the contemporary world, Zhao's argument veers toward vagueness. Unlike Babones,⁹⁰ Zhao is skeptical that the LIO is sufficiently inclusive to form the basis of a Tianxia led by the US.⁹¹ The UN, though it could be a nascent proto-Tianxia institution, lacks power and independence, and its embedded logic of sovereignty is a major hurdle to achieving a true Tianxia order.⁹²

For Zhao, the experience of the ancient Chinese Western Zhou dynasty in establishing a Tianxia order may inform contemporary practices. When facing the political problem of how to govern an expansive territory, a large population, and numerous vassals of the Shang dynasty after its collapse, the Zhou dynasty adopted a "whirlpool model" (a term coined by Zhao). The model begins with a set of institutional designs that provide mutual benefits that exceed those gained from remaining independent of the system, encourage interdependence and reciprocity among members, and have a universal character (they do not exclude any members). More importantly, these political institutions capture the psychological imagination and affective sentiments of their people.⁹³

These political institutions will facilitate the mobilization of material resources among their members, including a common language for coordinating action, a shared historical consciousness, an inclusive conception of eligible leadership from the outside, and a legitimization of successful governance through the "mandate of heaven" (*tianming*).⁹⁴ These benefits will draw outsiders toward joining the order rather than destroying it, which enhances their identification with Tianxiaism. In this way, even military vulnerability can transform outsiders into insiders. It was

87. Callahan 2008; Feng and Daolun 2010.

88. T. Zhao 2018, 7.

89. T. Zhao 2021, 39.

90. Babones 2017.

91. T. Zhao 2021, 184–85.

92. Ibid., 198–200.

93. T. Zhao 2021, 51.

94. Ibid., 132–33.

this model that helped China's Tianxia continue to expand, even after the "Chinese" were conquered by the Mongols and Manchus.⁹⁵

Zhao argues that a Tianxia order is held together by the political authority of the leader, which derives from the technocratic capacity for solving problems and delivering benefits.⁹⁶ As long as the leading institutions can address problems like collective action and benefit the members, they will have the authority to govern. This kind of order does not have an endpoint but resides in the dynamic practices or processes that address collective problems when they arise.

Ren and the Shanghai School: A Symbiotic Order Based on Pluralism and Mutualism

Chinese symbiotic IR theorists choose the contemporary international system as their starting point of analysis. They believe that one of the most important goals that the international community needs to pursue is to build and maintain an international order to constrain friction and conflict, and at the same time foster cooperation and development.⁹⁷

From their perspective, the modern international order led by the US, though it has its merits, is unable to take on this role because it is built on the Western idea of homogeneous symbiosis (*tongzhi gongsheng*): that similarity between states is the foundation of coexistence and cooperation.⁹⁸ A typical example is Ikenberry's view on democratic cooperation in the LIO, which emphasizes that "democracies are ... particularly able and willing to operate within an open, rule-based international system and to cooperate for mutual gain."⁹⁹

For Ren and many symbiotic scholars, homogeneous symbiosis violates an inherent feature of the international system: pluralism. Modern states differ along a variety of dimensions, including but not limited to power, ideology, and culture. Homogeneous symbiosis treats this plurality or diversity among states as a problem to be addressed. This increases mistrust and hostility between states with different attributes and prompts the more powerful actors to pressure the "heretics" to become more like them (such as through forced democratization). Many conflicts within the LIO, Ren argues, are the direct result of Western powers' adherence to this principle.¹⁰⁰

A better solution, according to these Chinese theorists, is to build an international order based on the principle of heterogeneous symbiosis (*yizhi gongsheng*). This principle considers pluralism or diversity among states to be both a "fundamental reality" and an opportunity for mutual development.¹⁰¹ An order built on this principle can

95. T. Zhao 2021, 172.

96. Ibid., 104. D. Zhao 2009 calls this "performance-based legitimacy."

97. Ren 2019, chapter 2.

98. Ren 2015, 164.

99. Ikenberry 2009, 72.

100. Ren 2015, 164–65.

101. Ren 2020, 405–406.

nudge states to respect and value each other's distinctive features and cooperate with one another as equals.

This kind of mutual respect and cooperation does not mean that states are functionally similar units in the symbiotic order. Rather, these scholars argue, states with different natural and social endowments should have different roles or positions.¹⁰² Just as an orchestra needs those who can play strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion, a symbiotic order will be established and maintained only if states can find mutual strength in their individual differences.

These scholars often consider the “tributary system” of ancient East Asia as a classic example of a symbiotic order.¹⁰³ They also believe that current systemic changes, particularly globalization and political multipolarization, may facilitate the emergence of another symbiotic international order in the modern era, though they are vague about the mechanisms.¹⁰⁴ They have argued that these changes can significantly weaken the dominance of the homogeneous-symbiosis idea and strengthen interdependence among states with different attributes. This makes them more likely to work with one another to identify common interests and areas of cooperation.¹⁰⁵

At first glance, some arguments in symbiotic IR theory are very similar to those of Western liberal theory, which is built on the benefits of comparative advantage in economics.¹⁰⁶ Both believe that common interests and interdependence are the driving force of cooperation; actors tend to care more about absolute gains and a win-win situation than about relative gains and a zero-sum game. Yet scholars in this intellectual tradition strongly disagree with the liberal view that shared liberal ideology or a democratic political system is a prerequisite for consistent cooperation. Consistent with the official Chinese view, they believe that other types of regimes can be as reliable as Western liberal democracies in practicing coexistence and cooperation. Thus liberalism should never be used as a criterion to differentiate states or evaluate their ability to cooperate.

Enriching Global IR with Chinese Ideas of Order

We have seen that each Chinese paradigm presents a particular vision of order and thus offers different answers to the fundamental questions related to the theorization of international order. But this does not mean that these theories are totally idiosyncratic and independent. They emerge from similar academic environments, draw from shared empirical experiences, and intersect on several core ideas.¹⁰⁷

102. Ren 2020, 407.

103. Ren 2019, 2020.

104. Jin 2014; Ren 2014; Su 2014.

105. Jin 2011, 17–19.

106. Doyle 1983.

107. Acharya 2019; Kim 2016; Qin 2018a.

We now delve into three core ideas that are widely shared by these Chinese conceptions of order: a relational approach to order, global collective pluralism, and state morality. These elements may or may not be uniquely “Chinese,” but we argue that they represent significant contributions from Chinese IR scholarship to the broader Global IR literature, particularly because they offer nuanced perspectives that have received limited attention in Western academic discussions. We place each of these ideas into relevant intellectual contexts, suggesting avenues for engagement and critique for IR scholars.

A Relational Approach to Order

The first idea shared by most Chinese paradigms is a relational approach to conceptualizing order. This approach is considered a good complement to the widespread substantivist view that treats order as the structural outcome of the distribution of some states’ attributes, such as power and ideology. Its analytical primitive is “a relation between entities,”¹⁰⁸ and it emphasizes the dynamic processes that connect or give rise to agents and the structure in which they are embedded.¹⁰⁹

This distinctive meso-level ontology suggests that relationalism should have much to offer to the conceptualization of international order. Yet, despite recent calls for a “relational turn” in IR,¹¹⁰ its influence remains limited. A growing number of Western scholars have defined order as stable or patterned relationships,¹¹¹ but few have systemically theorized it from a relational perspective.

The concept is prominent in Chinese IR scholarship. Qin’s relational theory underscores governance and order as manifestations of the relationships among societal members, positing that harmonious human relations are indicative of effective governance and a healthy order.¹¹² Similarly, Ren conceptualizes a “symbiotic order” as an intricate network of mutually beneficial relationships between states,¹¹³ while Zhao’s vision of a “Tianxia order” is built on the principle of relational rationality, a derivative of relational ontology.¹¹⁴

Chinese scholars further distinguish their relational perspectives from both their domestic peers and anglophone relationalism by anchoring their theories in distinct Chinese intellectual traditions. For example, the symbiotic theory draws heavily from the Confucian concept of designated roles and positions, such as those between prince and minister, or father and son, emphasizing the significance of

108. Jackson and Nexon 2019, 585.

109. Emirbayer 1997; Jackson and Nexon 1999, 2019; Nordin et al. 2019.

110. Jackson and Nexon 1999; McCourt 2016.

111. Bially Matten 2005; Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021.

112. Qin 2018b, 337.

113. Ren 2019, 102–114.

114. T. Zhao 2021, 263.

role recognition within these dynamics.¹¹⁵ Hence, an ideal symbiotic order is envisioned as a network of states interconnected by mutually recognized roles or statuses, established through their relationships with each other.¹¹⁶ This role-based relationalism sets the symbiotic theory apart from other, more practice-oriented relational theories in both Western and Chinese IR literature.¹¹⁷

On the other hand, while Zhao and Qin both adopt a process-oriented relational lens to theorize order, their interpretations diverge on how relations shape order. Zhao's Tianxiaism is based on an entity-centric ontology. It emphasizes "relational rationality," where actors are encouraged to prioritize collective well-being over individual self-interest.¹¹⁸ This individual-level relational rationality is connected to the broader concept of a Tianxia order through the Confucian notion of the "greater self," which represents the collective or community that encompasses all entities, and is often likened to a family. In this framework, the Confucian collectivity, similar to the social structure in IR, emerges through inter-entity relations but transcends the sum of its parts. Entities derive both physical and ontological security from this collectivity, making coexistence a foundational prerequisite for individual existence. Thus, a Tianxia order advocates practices that uphold the welfare of the greater self or the belief of "Tianxia as one family" over individual interests.¹¹⁹

In contrast, Qin's perspective on relational order is informed by both Daoist dialectics and the Confucian concept of harmony. While he does not deny the existence of a collective "greater self" in order, he emphasizes *yin-yang* metaphysics and the principle of central harmony and thus posits that individual existence and collective coexistence are interdependent and mutually defined.¹²⁰ In Qin's framework, relational order is manifested through the harmonization of relations, balancing the needs of individual existence with those of the collective. Unlike Zhao's model, where entities are somewhat absorbed into a collective entity, Qin's envisions states as coexisting within a collective framework through processes that do not essentialize the collective itself.

The relational approach within Chinese scholarship enriches Global IR research by speaking to existing Western relational theories.¹²¹ For instance, the symbiotic order's categorization of different roles in interstate relationships can be captured by network-relational approaches in IR.¹²² Similarly, Zhao's emphasis on

115. For an in-depth discussion of role conceptualization in Confucianism and Western role theory, see Shih 2022.

116. Ren 2019, chapter 4.

117. The distinction between position-centric and process-oriented approaches is also present in Western relational thought. For further discussion, see Jackson and Nexon 2019.

118. T. Zhao 2021, 143.

119. Ibid., 99–101.

120. Qin 2018b, 128.

121. A dedicated issue of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* has explored relational theorizing in both anglophone and sinophone scholarship, focusing on relationalism broadly rather than specifically on relational approaches to order. For an overview of these discussions, see Nordin et al. 2019.

122. Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009; Nexon and Wright 2007.

coexistence preceding self-existence in the international system mirrors Jackson and Nexon's argument for "relations before states."¹²³

Moreover, Qin's concept of relational governance finds parallels in Abbott's processual sociology¹²⁴ and the practice theory prevalent in international studies,¹²⁵ particularly in their rejection of static entities and emphasis on the dynamic processes that produce and reproduce entities. In all of these cases, there are some commonalities in basic ontology between Chinese and Western thinkers, but also points of departure due to their different intellectual heritages.

Indeed, this shared emphasis on relational ontologies presents a promising avenue for engagement with critical IR, which has embraced "anti-substantialist" and "anti-foundationalist" ontologies for both normative and analytical purposes.¹²⁶ As Kurki notes, relational ontologies are fundamental to Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theories, which each seek to destabilize taken-for-granted aspects of the international system, from the territorial state to global race and gender hierarchies, by conceiving of them in process-relational terms rather than substantialist ones.¹²⁷ While there may be normative discrepancies between the Chinese theories discussed here and different strands of critical IR (as we discuss later), their ontological common ground, particularly in contrast to mainstream American paradigms like neoliberalism, suggests a rich potential for dialogue and critique. Such critical discourse could further the objectives of the Global IR initiative, especially in challenging and transcending essentialism.¹²⁸

Global Collective Pluralism

The relational underpinnings of these paradigms shape Chinese theorists' views on the guiding principles for organizing diversity within international orders. Reus-Smit introduces a framework with two key dimensions to categorize the recognition of diversity in international systems: the nature of the entities whose diversity is acknowledged (whether collectivities or individuals) and the scope of recognition (whether universal or particularistic).¹²⁹ The LIO, in Reus-Smit's account, is the first order in history that values pluralism at the individual level and applies this principle universally.

This individual-based global pluralistic principle has granted the LIO distinct advantages over many past orders with particularistic recognition (for example, historical empires). But the dissonance between the order's primary agents of authority (states) and the subjects of diversity protection (individuals) often results in less

123. Jackson and Nexon 1999.

124. Abbott 2006.

125. Adler and Pouliot 2011; McCourt 2016.

126. Brown 1994.

127. Kurki 2022, 824–25.

128. Barnett and Zarakol 2023.

129. Reus-Smit 2021.

pluralism at the level of state governance, making the order susceptible to internal challenges due to its limited capacity to accommodate collectivist perspectives.¹³⁰

Specifically, the emphasis on individual-level pluralism mandates that states acknowledge and safeguard the diversity among individuals. This requirement, combined with liberal theory, suggests that countries should adopt similar domestic frameworks to protect individual diversity. When a state fails to meet this standard, the principle suggests that other states are justified in intervening to enforce these norms, a stance that conflicts with the sovereignty principle, overlooks nationalist sentiments, and potentially diminishes state-level diversity.¹³¹ Such contradictions may also compromise the system's legitimacy, especially when these conflicting imperatives are applied inconsistently.

This underlying issue contributes to the skepticism among many Chinese scholars regarding the prospect of a modern, universal order (such as the LIO) built on global individual pluralism. Their strong belief in relationalism leads to the perception that the social or relational dimensions of existence are equally, if not more, important than individual autonomy.¹³² From this perspective, collectives, especially states, are conceptualized as “individuals-in-relations,” and they are the main actors in orders whose diversity and independence should be respected.

Therefore, these Chinese theorists advocate *global collective pluralism* as an alternative principle for governing international diversity.¹³³ In the framework of Reus-Smit,¹³⁴ this principle acknowledges state-level diversity and champions universal recognition.

Interestingly, global collective pluralism is the only model in Reus-Smit's framework without historical examples. For him, some ancient Chinese empires, like the Qing dynasty, would be cases of *regional* collective pluralist orders. Chinese scholars in the modern age generalize these historical systems—which could not reasonably have been global due to technological constraints—to a universal scope. In other words, their reliance on Chinese history to develop their visions of international order leads Chinese theorists not so much to totally unthinkable places (from a Western point of view) but to places that the most directly comparable Western scholars see from a very different perspective.

In fact, the basics of global collective pluralism are also present in some Western IR thought. Neorealism, for example, conceptualizes states as “black boxes,” treating them as functionally similar units in the analysis of international politics.¹³⁵ Similarly, some constructivist theories, in conversation with neorealism, view

130. Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Reus-Smit 2021.

131. Reus-Smit 2021.

132. Chinese authors differ in their valuation of social versus individual existence. For example, Qin 2018b, 127 posits that both are of equal importance, whereas T. Zhao 2021 views social existence as a prerequisite for individual existence.

133. Qin 2018b; Ren 2019; T. Zhao 2021.

134. Reus-Smit 2021.

135. Waltz 1979.

states as the principal actors who are socialized into specific relational patterns within international systems,¹³⁶ or even conceptualize states as analogous to persons on an ontological level.¹³⁷ Acharya's notion of "deep pluralism" also reflects a recognition of both collective and individual diversity within contemporary IR.¹³⁸

What distinguishes the Chinese perspective from these understandings is the explicit normative dimension it attaches to the concept of state-centrism. Western scholars often adopt a state-centric approach for reasons of theoretical parsimony,¹³⁹ but the Chinese scholars we review here take the ontological position of the group as a normative proposition. In this sense, collective, or state-level, diversity *is* and *ought to be* the basis of international order.

These scholars believe that an international order built on the principle of global collective pluralism would be more adaptable. Such an order, where the state serves as both the central actor and the acknowledged unit, could effectively reconcile the often conflicting principles of sovereignty and human rights protection. Each state would retain the right to maintain its distinct traditions and cultures, with this diversity being respected by others within the order, consistent with China's current policy.¹⁴⁰

However, making state-level diversity the focus of recognition introduces two significant challenges that could undermine the stability and legitimacy of the order. First, if only state diversity is acknowledged, minority groups with salient collective identities, such as religious or ethnic communities, may intensify their demands for independence and recognition. This scenario raises complex questions about which claims to independence ought to be supported, potentially leading to "highly volatile cleavages and hierarchies" within the international system.¹⁴¹

Second, the challenge of safeguarding individual diversity within states becomes more significant in a state-centric pluralistic international order. While these Chinese scholars often presuppose the stable governance of diverse populations, this assumption overlooks the increasing instances of social and ethnic tensions observed globally, including within China. Therefore, an essential advancement for these theorists would involve developing frameworks for institutional mechanisms or structures capable of maintaining a balance between recognizing state-level diversity and ensuring the protection of individual diversities within those states.

State Morality in Order

Morality, or the moral behavior of states, is a third concept widely shared by these Chinese scholars. Yan's moral realism, most obviously, emphasizes the role of

136. Wendt 1992.

137. Wendt 2004.

138. Acharya and Buzan 2019.

139. Singer 1961.

140. Zhang and Buzan 2022.

141. Reus-Smit 2021, 16.

states' moral behavior in establishing and maintaining international order.¹⁴² Likewise, Qin and Zhao underscore the importance of moral conduct as a foundational element in the creation and maintenance of their relational and Tianxia orders, respectively.¹⁴³

These discussions prompt a reassessment of the role of state morality in the conceptualization of international order. While the discourse on morality and ethical conduct is not new to IR literature,¹⁴⁴ Western theories of order often sideline morality, focusing instead on describing the empirical realities of existing orders. This approach stems from the recognition that international order, particularly since World War II, may not always align with, and can even obstruct, the achievement of equitable global outcomes. The enduring conflict between human rights and sovereignty norms, which both underpin modern international society,¹⁴⁵ frequently leads to outcomes that favor the interests of the Global North at the expense of the Global South.¹⁴⁶

In contrast, Chinese theoretical perspectives integrate normative evaluations into their conceptual frameworks, engaging with both the empirical question of what orders are and the normative inquiry into what orders ought to be. This normative stance resonates well with some English School claims regarding the moral purpose of rules or norms in organizing world politics,¹⁴⁷ and with the research agenda on resurrecting morality as a central component of IR theorizing.¹⁴⁸ Bull, for example, examines the relationship between order and justice, asserting that international order is compatible with what he calls international justice—assigning normative rights to states—because a key part of international society is the sovereignty norm.¹⁴⁹ These Chinese theorists, however, go further and argue that international justice and international order are inseparable. They do not, like many of their Western counterparts, draw a distinction between descriptive claims and normative political theory; for them, normative issues are constitutive of the descriptive phenomenon of international order.

Such an attempt to bring state morality—or more broadly, the normative dimension—back into discussions of international order provides valuable insights but also introduces two significant challenges. First, the fact that moral foreign policies can yield positive outcomes¹⁵⁰ does not guarantee that states are always willing to behave in alignment with moral principles in international orders. This means that these Chinese scholars should explore specific mechanisms (such as the struggle for reputation, audience costs, or competitive advantages) that could incentivize

142. Xuetong Yan 2019b.

143. Qin 2018b, 371–72; T. Zhao 2021, 111.

144. See, for example, Kertzer et al. 2014; Nye 2020.

145. Mazrui 1967, 129–46.

146. Tate 1943.

147. Bull 1971; Reus-Smit 1999.

148. Barkin 2003; Price 2008; Rathbun and Pomeroy 2021.

149. Bull 1971.

150. See, for example, Kertzer et al. 2014.

states to adhere to “good” behavior in the international arena, thereby grounding their morally based arguments in practical reality.

Second, given the abstract nature of moral concepts such as justice and democracy, it is imperative for these theorists to articulate clear and universally resonant interpretations of these values to prevent ambiguity. The key questions, for instance, include “What constitutes a just order?” and “How can such an order be realized?” Answering these questions is complex because interpretations of moral values and their application can vary widely, often leading to divergent views on what constitutes justice and how it should be implemented in the international context.

In fact, even among the scholars we review here, there is no consensus on how state morality is to be conceptualized. While some posit the existence of universally recognized moral principles that guide state behavior in world politics,¹⁵¹ others view morality more broadly as behaviors that are nonviolent or universally beneficial.¹⁵² But the specifics of these values and the mechanisms of their global prevalence remain largely unexplored. Examining the commonalities between different interpretations of moral principles to construct the base of global values is perhaps a viable approach,¹⁵³ but whether the whole world would hold enough commonalities in interpreting these moral values is an open question.

This diversity in moral interpretation raises critical questions about the governance of international morality. Who determines the standards of justice and proper governance? Do powerful states exert disproportionate influence in defining moral norms, or might an international or supranational body like the UN play a role in arbitrating these values? If so, how can we prevent such an institution’s standards from being skewed by the interests of dominant powers? The ambiguity surrounding these issues in Chinese scholarship calls for more detailed exploration to clarify the role and interpretation of morality in international order.

This vagueness in morality highlights one place in which the ontological commonalities between these theories and critical IR might become somewhat more fraught. As we have noted, part of the purpose of critical theory’s analytical move to focus on relations is to undermine, or at least avoid reifying, social structures that oppress or marginalize. But these Chinese theories tend to frame morality, explicitly or implicitly, as a strategic tool, one which enables states to shape international order. Such a perspective may or may not have advantages relative to currently prevailing policy practices, but it is still fundamentally *for* the powerful. If “theory is always for someone and for some purpose,”¹⁵⁴ these theories seem to accept and reinforce global hierarchy—if not exactly the current global hierarchy—whereas critical theorists seek to construct worlds in opposition to hierarchy. Thus, while the ontological commitments of these theories might offer space for critical IR to engage, their normative commitments create opportunities for critique.

151. Qin 2018b; Xuetong Yan 2019b.

152. Ren 2019; Su 2013; T. Zhao 2021.

153. Lebow and Zhang 2022; Xuetong Yan 2018.

154. Cox 1981, 128.

This space for critique is perhaps easiest to see in these scholars' treatment of empire. They frequently cast the rule of ancient Chinese empires like the Zhou and the Ming as moral and effective, and thus worthy of emulation today.¹⁵⁵ While drawing from these non-Western histories to inform IR theory is consistent with the broader tenets of Global IR, such an approach inevitably conveys a degree of explicit or implicit normative approval of these historical periods.

This approval suggests that these Chinese scholars overlook or downplay the coercive or negative aspects of Chinese empires,¹⁵⁶ and consider international order as benign hierarchies.¹⁵⁷ Leadership in these hierarchies entails ruling or governance with a focus on abstract norms of morality or justice while relegating domestic governance to individual member states. In this construction, China is poised to emerge as an important player, given its ideational contributions and historical experiences in establishing such hierarchies, both at home and abroad. Yan's humane authority (*wangdao*), Zhao's Tianxia order, the symbiotic theory, and Qin's relational governance (especially in its discussion of power and relations) all align with this overarching framework to varying extents.

In this context, a critical approach to these theorists' moral precepts becomes particularly crucial. Each paradigm, in its own way, critiques Western ideals and institutions and offers an alternative that theoretically involves less coercion and more benign leadership. However, their reliance on China's imperial history raises questions about settling on a particular notion of morality or justice. A speculative world of hierarchy without exploitation is certainly a contribution to IR theory, but it is perhaps less than clear how that world could be built and sustained (without the use of power or force), especially when these visions are based on an arguably oversimplified and benevolent interpretation of the history of Chinese empires. Thus, even though some scholars have positioned these Chinese theories within decolonial discourses,¹⁵⁸ others remain skeptical, pointing to their normative foundations, anchored in imperial history, as a potential pitfall.¹⁵⁹

Relationship to Chinese Foreign Policy

In addition to academic discourses, these Chinese IR theories make notable contributions to debates on Chinese foreign policy. In fact, Chinese scholarship has a long history and interest in developing theories that can directly inform policymaking.¹⁶⁰ To bridge the gap between academic insights and policy implementation, China has, in the post-Deng era, established a variety of channels that connect intellectuals and

155. Ren 2019; Xuetong Yan 2019b; T. Zhao 2021.

156. Y.-k. Wang 2013.

157. Kang 2020.

158. Xiang 2023.

159. Murray 2020.

160. Qin 2007, 318.

think tanks to policymakers, such as consultations, internal reports, and conferences.¹⁶¹ These avenues not only give scholars influence on China's foreign policy practices but also allow policymakers to convey their priorities or requirements to the academic community, shaping the scholarly debates and research agendas in China.¹⁶²

This dynamic interplay between academia and policy suggests potential links between Chinese IR theories and Chinese foreign policy, especially given that the authors of these theories, as we have mentioned, hold prominent roles in policy circles. For instance, the shared emphasis on relational thought in Chinese IR aligns with China's "partnership diplomacy" in the post–Cold War period.¹⁶³ Moreover, while there may be no consensus among these theories on the exact nature of state morality, their collective focus on moral state behavior is consistent with the Chinese government's frequent emphasis on fairness and justice in diplomacy.¹⁶⁴

Such resonance between Chinese IR theories and Chinese policy should increase our confidence that these perspectives, or some combination of them, offer useful insights into the origins and nuances of China's views of and preference for international order. Notably, many features of these Chinese paradigms are distinct from Western equivalents in ways that provide a theoretical foundation for China's (official) critiques of the present rules-based international order.

Symbiosis theory's focus on homogeneous symbiosis, for example, stands in direct contrast to the West's emphasis on the virtues of democracy for building and strengthening international order. Moral realism contrasts with traditional Western realism, which specifically emphasizes power and amorality in hegemonic orders. Qin, Ren, and Zhao, to different degrees, all implicate Western liberalism in the creation of the problematic baseline condition that their ideas of order are meant to remedy. While the correlation between these theories and Chinese foreign policy is not perfect, it is strong enough to attract notice.

Moreover, most of these theories seem to suggest that great powers are the central actors in world politics, and implicitly or explicitly position China at the center of the emergent international order, as Callahan argued.¹⁶⁵ Whether that means conflict or not in the future is of course indeterminate, but it does suggest the groundwork for a proactive foreign policy aimed at broadening China's global influence. It is also likely that a world in which such efforts are successful—one in which China plays a significant role in shaping the international order—is one that emphasizes ideal-type domestic politics much less than a world built on liberalism. Even in Zhao's "all under heaven," there is little indication that the instantiated global morality would be an entirely liberal one.

161. Q. Zhao 2006.

162. Feng and He 2016; Pu and Wang 2018.

163. Striver 2017.

164. Bin 2021.

165. Callahan 2008.

These shared perspectives, however, do not preclude differences in the policy approaches these scholars advocate toward achieving their envisioned international order. One area of disagreement is the extent to which changing the international order requires conflict. Yan's moral realism sees order as hegemonic by nature. At a policy level, one could interpret *wangdao* as an implicit call for China to assume the role currently informally occupied by the United States as the guarantor of a set of norms and institutions. If this is true, then some kind of contestation or conflict seems likely, unless Chinese elites simply desire a new distribution of power within current institutions.¹⁶⁶

In some tension with this perspective is Qin's relationalism, which emphasizes dialectics and dialogue. Although the long-term policy implications of Qin's theory may be less clear than those of Yan's theory, it does seem less confrontational. Consistent with its processual underpinnings, the most obvious policy motivated by Qin's theory would be one of intense diplomacy between important states, fostering an evolution of the order's central institutions into a synthesis that incorporates aspects of both old and new. This still implies a significant change to the present order rather than an uncomplicated integration, but it suggests that the process of getting there would involve diplomacy and relation-building more than coercion or conflict.

Another key issue animating the difference in policy implications between these theories is that of sovereignty, which divides Ren's symbiosis theory (and perhaps Yan's moral realism and Qin's relational theory) from Zhao's Tianxiaism. As we have seen, the symbiosis theory looks superficially similar to the liberal idea of comparative advantage, which creates some potential for common ground on economic governance. But extending this logic into the political realm would suggest a preference for nonintervention in foreign domestic politics and thus an emphasis on sovereignty at the expense of, for example, democracy promotion. This suggests the possibility of building an international order that maintains some of the liberal economic system but retrenches on issues that implicate domestic politics.

Zhao's Tianxiaism, on the other hand, takes a very different stance in its critique of modern international organizations: that they are generally too weak. Rather than calling for a leading state like Yan or for a decentralized order like Ren, Zhao's preference is for stronger international institutions that instantiate a shared set of normative commitments and distributions of materials. This implies a particular erosion of the sovereignty norms embedded in the contemporary international system—precisely the opposite of symbiosis. One could imagine a Tianxia order in which the key organs of the LIO are strengthened to bind even the powerful states.

All of this suggests that, despite some commonalities, there are active debates within the Chinese IR community about the appropriate state policy for the shaping of international order. The various theoretical approaches—each with its own set of policy implications—reflect differing views on critical issues such as the balance between sovereignty and other international objectives, the role of

166. Ikenberry 2014.

major powers, and the architecture of international institutions. This means that observers should follow debates among these scholars and recognize their multiplicity, rather than attempting to divine any particular master narrative to understand how influential scholarship leads to policy.

Conclusion

Our review of the four Chinese order paradigms challenges the belief, common among IR scholars and policymakers, that contemporary China has a coherent and consistent vision of a future international order that can be meaningfully understood through the lens of existing Western theories. Their visions of international order with Chinese characteristics differ along many dimensions, both from each other and from those described by Western paradigms like realism and liberalism. Although some studies have found that Beijing seems to have clear preferences toward certain existing rules or principles of modern international order,¹⁶⁷ we argue that even prominent thinkers in the contemporary Chinese IR scholarship do not agree on what new rules or ideas China should promote or what policies China should implement to establish an international order.

At the same time, these Chinese paradigms share some important concepts that can engage with and contribute to existing order debates. These common ideas are not strictly unique to Chinese theory or philosophy, complicating a binary East–West dichotomy.¹⁶⁸ But rather than undermining our task, discussing these ideas presents avenues for future research on international order from a more global perspective.

There are, of course, challenges associated with these works.¹⁶⁹ First, as noted in our discussion of state morality, their treatment of imperialism has space for significant critique. Although these theories advocate a universal approach to international order, they often draw on China’s imperial past, potentially romanticizing it while overlooking its coercive aspects. This approach raises concerns about the normative implications of these theories, particularly their tacit acceptance or even endorsement of hierarchical structures, albeit envisioned as benign.

This is not to say that these scholars’ discussion of empires is without value—scholars in these traditions have even attempted to reframe them as decolonial.¹⁷⁰ However, to fully engage with their contributions, particularly their analysis of how international orders are formed and function, it is essential to critically examine both the historical contexts that inform their theories and the conceptual frameworks that underwrite the normative appeal of their ideal constructed worlds.

167. Johnston 2019; Weiss and Wallace 2021.

168. Katzenstein 2018.

169. A recent issue of the *Chinese Journal of International Politics* features direct responses from Chinese IR theorists like Qin, Yan, and Ren to challenges and critiques by leading Western theorists like Buzan. For an introduction to this special issue, see Lu 2024.

170. Xiang 2023.

Only through this dual examination can we ensure a comprehensive understanding of the contributions and limitations of these theories.

Furthermore, this literature faces challenges that are familiar to Western readers in its treatment of issues of gender, a systemic issue in the Chinese academy.¹⁷¹ Most prominent works of Chinese IR scholarship, including the four books examined here, lack female authorship, highlighting a significant gap in gender diversity. Moreover, feminist critiques may take issue with the cultural traditions underpinning these theories, such as the unequal Confucian father-son and husband-wife relationships, as well as the benevolent hierarchy established on these relationships.¹⁷² Addressing these gender-related critiques is a crucial next step for Chinese IR scholarship.

Relatedly, while some Chinese authors assert that these theories align with broader Global South perspectives,¹⁷³ there remains a significant gap in their engagement with non-Western scholarship in other regions.¹⁷⁴ Chinese IR scholarship can move forward by addressing these concerns and fostering greater inclusivity and dialogue.

Through this critical review, we aim to contribute to the Global IR project by offering scholars a template for engaging with non-Western IR theories, incorporating fresh theoretical insights and empirical reference points. We believe that, in addition to the efforts of integrating and analyzing historical cases from these under-studied regions, constructive conversations with these non-Western theorists can equally benefit existing IR scholarship. By embracing diverse theoretical perspectives and engaging in meaningful dialogues, the field of IR can gain a deeper understanding of world politics in the contemporary era.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this review essay is available at <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818324000171>>.

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171. Blanchard and Lin 2016.

172. Ibid.; Wawrytko 2000.

173. Xiang 2023.

174. Though some in the Chinese IR community have recognized this limitation and are beginning to broaden their engagement, as seen in recent works like Qin 2020.

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