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## The Rise of Chinese Perspectives in International Relations

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### Abstract

Although there has been a delay in the arrival of International Relations (IR) as a discipline in China, the last few decades have seen significant contributions to the theoretical development of this field within the Chinese academy. Thus, this article aims to examine the introduction of Chinese political thought into International Relations Theory (IRT), scrutinizing the projects for the development of a “Chinese Theory of International Relations”, as well as the contributions and implications that such a theory may have in the field of IR. Based on an essentially qualitative methodology and rooted in the historiographical method, this article explores the ontological and epistemological discussions surrounding these theoretical frameworks, subsequently analyzing four recent theoretical proposals – Moral Realism, Relational Theory, Tianxia, and the “Gongsheng School.” Our conclusion summarizes our findings, highlighting the contributions of Chinese theoretical development, while also leaving open its possible implications for the reinvention of the discipline and for the redefinition of the International Order.

### Keywords

International Relations Theory, Political Thought, Gongsheng School, Chinese School, Tsinghua Approach

## Introduction

From Brailard's (1990) perspective, a theory is "a coherent and systematic expression of our knowledge about what we refer to as reality" ( p. 11). In this sense, the function of a theory is to systematize and explain the phenomena of a given reality. Kenneth Waltz, on the other hand, distinguishes theories in the Exact Sciences from those in the Social Sciences, or more specifically in International Relations (IR). Unlike the former, the latter are "concerned more with philosophic interpretation than with theoretical explanation" (Waltz, 1979, p. 6). Thus, Waltz (1979) defines theory as follows:

*A theory is a picture, mentally formed, of a bounded realm or domain of activity. A theory is a depiction of the organization of a domain and of the connections among its parts. (...) A theory indicates that some factors are more important than others and specifies relations among them. (...) A theory arranges phenomena so that they are seen as mutually dependent; it connects otherwise disparate facts; it shows how changes in some of the phenomena necessarily entail changes in others. (pp. 8–10)*

In IR, theory has played a predominant role, lending greater scientific rigor to the discipline and assisting in the interpretation of the phenomena it analyses. For a long time defined as "an American Social Science" (Hoffmann, 1977, p. 41) due to the significant development of its theoretical framework in the United States, IR has undergone successive theoretical debates, marked by the emergence and confrontation of new theoretical perspectives. The end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century was characterized by a theoretical stagnation, as the major debates dissipated (Dunne et al., 2013; Jackson & Nexon, 2013). Some scholars declared the end of International Relations Theory (IRT) (Sylvester, 2013), while others sought to renew the field through new approaches, such as theoretical pluralism (Lake, 2013), or by investing in the development of new theorizing outside the Western sphere. This is where the project of a "Chinese Theory of International Relations" fits in, offering a new interpretation of international phenomena.

This article thus seeks to present, explore, and critically examine the concept of a "Chinese Theory of International Relations," which is currently most prominently represented by the projects of the "Chinese School of International Relations," the "Tsinghua Approach," and the "Gongsheng School." Like Western theories, these projects and the theoretical proposals associated with them reflect a distinct worldview and perspective on the relationships between peoples and political entities. Therefore,

our analysis will begin by exploring Chinese political-international thought and the Chinese view of the world. Following this, we will examine China's recent contributions to the discipline and to the current state of IRT. Our research will seek to answer the following central question: What possibilities do Chinese theoretical proposals offer to International Relations?

This work adopts a qualitative approach, grounded in exploratory, descriptive, and historiographical methods, and is divided into four parts. The first section analyses the characteristics and the “singularity” of Chinese political thought. The second section focuses on the evolution of the study of IR in China. The third section examines in detail the three most recent projects, the “Chinese School,” the “Tsinghua Approach,” and the “Gongsheng School,” considering their methods and key issues. The fourth section explores Chinese theoretical proposals and their specificities. The conclusion summarizes the findings, highlighting the contributions of these proposals to the discipline.

### **Ancient Chinese Thought on Politics and on The International Stage**

In this section, we will examine the Chinese vision on society and on the world through an analysis of ancient Chinese political thought. Understanding these aspects will be crucial for subsequently interpreting Chinese theoretical proposals on IR and for assessing their contributions to the discipline.

Chinese thought and vision regarding international politics and relations are intrinsically linked to China's perspective on the State and Society, and, most importantly, to its view of its own civilization. Within this intellectual framework, two core and enduring concepts stand out in Chinese political thought: timelessness and centrality. In this context, timelessness refers to the idea that Chinese civilization considers itself eternal, with no clear beginning and in a state of constant renewal (Kissinger, 2011). This is illustrated in the story of the Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi*), regarded as the legendary founder of China, as well as in the teachings of Confucius. Both claimed that they merely sought to restore the order and principles that had previously existed and guided the Chinese people and were therefore not creating anything new (Alves & Mendes, 2022). Centrality, on the other hand, is clearly reflected in the Chinese term for China, *Zhōngguó*, which can be translated as the Middle Kingdom or the Central Empire, in opposition to *yidi*, the barbarian peoples, and *waiguo*, the outside world (Kim, 2018). As Mendes points out, this view reflects a conviction of supremacy, where China believes it has a “historical right to be a great power” (Mendes, 2020, p. 15).

It is from these two ideas, as well as a hierarchical conception of society, that much of Chinese political thought develops, drawing particularly on the contributions of thinkers such as Confucius, Laozi, Mozi, and Mencius. The main school of Chinese thought is Confucianism, led by Confucius. The primary goal of Confucianism is to achieve harmony across all spheres of society. Some of its key themes include the idea of benevolence, the pursuit of a just government, and the establishment of a harmonious society through virtues (Alves & Mendes, 2022; Mendes, 2020). Virtues are a constant theme in Confucianism, demanding that individuals respect their place in society and adhere to rituals and traditions. Furthermore, they are closely linked to the defense of a society where relationships are defined by hierarchy (Kim, 2018; Mendes, 2020).

Mencius extends Confucius' core ideas by introducing the concept of "human goodness." In the social sphere, this concept is linked to a positive view of human nature, considering individuals as inherently good. In the political sphere, it is associated with the advocacy of a strong government, guided by moral principles, and responsible for meeting the needs of all individuals (Alves & Mendes, 2022; Kim, 2018). Like Confucius, Mencius believes that the best form of government is one where power is concentrated in the hands of a few – those who have perfected their virtues (Kim, 2018).

Another major school of Chinese thought is Daoism, headed by Laozi. This school centers on the concept of Dao, which is both the origin of all things and an ideal to be pursued (Laozi, 2001; Mendes, 2020). Laozi's philosophy is critical of rituals and civilization itself, instead advocating a simpler and earlier time where needs were fewer and more easily satisfied (Kim, 2018; Laozi, 2001). Recognizing the impossibility of returning to that time, Laozi argues that the goal of politics is to halt the process of civilization, allowing individuals to live and act as naturally and unconsciously as possible. This translates into a form of government in which the ruler's role is to ensure the natural flow of the political community without active interference – a concept known as *wuwei*, which translates as "non-action" or "doing nothing" (Kim, 2018).

The third major school of Chinese philosophy is Mohism, founded by Mozi. This philosophy is based on the concept of *jianai*, which can be translated as "universal love" or "impartial care," and it stands in contrast to the benevolence of Confucianism (Alves & Mendes, 2022; Kim, 2018). Despite this difference, Mohism shares Confucianism's ultimate goal of constructing a harmonious society. To achieve this, Mozi introduces a conception of the state of nature and politics based on morality, arguing that individuals should behave in accordance with their moral values in their relationships, and that the State should act as a moral unifier. Therefore, the ruler must embody and act as the highest moral example (Kim, 2018; Pines, 2009).

Ancient Chinese thought – particularly Confucian thought on politics and society – had two main expressions, one internal and one external, which synthesized and contributed to Ancient China's political thinking. These are the concepts of *tianxia*, an ancient model of political and territorial organization, and the Tributary System, the historic framework governing relations between China and its neighbors.

The *tianxia* system or political model dates to the late 10th century BCE, when the Zhou tribe overthrew the Shang tribe and began to rule the territory that corresponds to present-day mainland China, which at that time was referred to as all-under-heaven. To legitimize their rule, the Zhou invoked the notion of the heavenly mandate (*tianming*), arguing that the Shang tribe had become immoral, causing Heaven (*tian*) to withdraw its legitimacy to govern and grant it instead to the Zhou (Kim, 2018). In a geopolitical landscape where the Zhou tribe was just one among many, and neither the strongest nor the most populous, it was necessary to develop a system of political and territorial governance to ensure their retention of power (Zhao, 2012). Thus, the Zhou developed the *tianxia* model – which literally translates as all-under-heaven – a system based on inclusion, coexistence, harmony, rejection of the use of force, and the idea of the common good, drawing on the notions of the heavenly mandate, heavenly will, and Son of Heaven (Kim, 2018; Zhao, 2012). Politically and territorially, this is a hierarchical and concentric system in which various tribes are arranged around the Son of Heaven according to their power, the size of their territory, and their ties to the ruler (Kim, 2018; Zhao, 2009). Thus, it resembles a feudal system, establishing a decentralized political model based on vassalage and tribute, with governance akin to what Confucius called *wangdao*, that is, “benevolent rule” (Zhao, 2009, 2012).

*Tianxia* collapsed with the fall of the Zhou dynasty and the rise of the Qin dynasty, which unified China as an empire around 221 BCE (Kim, 2018; Zhao, 2012). Nevertheless, its influence persisted. During the rule of the Qing dynasty, *tianxia* was transposed into the international sphere through what became known as the Tributary System, which for centuries served as the framework for China's relations with its neighbors (Kissinger, 2011). This system established a pattern of relations based on a hierarchical view of international relations, with the Emperor and the Middle Kingdom at the center, surrounded by other kingdoms and peoples, ranked according to their power and importance to Imperial China (Kim, 2018; Zhao, 2009). Like the Zhou model, the Tributary System was based on vassalage, whereby neighboring peoples were expected not only to show respect but also to pay tribute to the Emperor (Kissinger, 2011; Zhao, 2009).

Alongside the concepts already mentioned, another fundamental and recurring concept in Chinese philosophy that merits attention is the concept of *gongsheng*. This concept is related to the idea of interdependence and coexistence among all things and is present in the main Chinese philosophical traditions: Confucianism and Taoism (Gong, 2024). As Song (2024) points out, this concept can be translated as "symbiosis" and is linked "to the conception of the world as consisting of mutually embedded, co-existent and co-becoming entities" (p.4).

The concept of *gongsheng* emerged no earlier than the Qin period, being associated with the idea of co-survival and co-growth (Song, 2024). After being absent from philosophy for a period of time, it was revived in the 20th century, both in Chinese and Japanese society. It was, in fact, in Japan that the concept gained a modern meaning, being used to advocate for a harmonious social life through coexistence among individuals and the pursuit of understanding despite differences (Song, 2024). The importance attributed to the concept in Japan led to its resurgence in Chinese society, which absorbed the Japanese modern conception, eventually becoming a constant presence in political circles (Song, 2024). Thus, the concept evolved towards the need for coexistence and collaboration among different entities so that humanity can live in harmony and progress.

Recently, the concept of *gongsheng* has gained greater prominence in the context of Chinese foreign policy formulation and China's positioning within the International System. It is, for instance, a foundational idea behind the concept of a "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind" (Smith, 2018; Wu, 2024).

Having analyzed Chinese political thought and worldview, we have identified key philosophical and practical elements that will serve as a framework for understanding Chinese theories of IR in the following sections.

## **International Relations in China**

This section focuses on the historical development of IR studies in China. This will help us to understand why there is a growing interest in developing a Chinese-centric theory of IR, as well as the objectives, challenges, and current state of the theoretical proposals.

After the Century of Humiliation, Imperial China sought to isolate itself, closing off to the West. As a result, the Middle Empire had little contact with the significant innovations that emerged between the mid-19th century and the early 20th century in Europe and North America, including academic and scientific advancements (Zhang, 2012a). Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, we cannot

consider the existence of formal study of international phenomena in Chinese territory (Qin, 2007; Yih-Jye, 2021). Although there were efforts concerning Diplomatic History and Political Science since the mid-19th century, these were primarily focused on the study of diplomatic relations and the political problems of China, or alternatively, on military matters (*ibid*). The study of international relations only began following the consolidation of the political framework of the new regime and after the reforms in the educational system according to Soviet standards. The first significant milestone was the establishment of the Department of Diplomatic Studies at Renmin University in 1953 (Qin, 2007; Shambaugh, 2011; Zhang, 2012a). This was followed in 1955 by the establishment of the Foreign Affairs College, which sought “to train China’s diplomats and do research in IR” (Qin, 2007, p. 315). At that time, the study of international relations was wholly state-dependent, with the sole objective of assisting the government in political decision-making, and indeed, any other research initiatives in the field were prohibited (Zhang, 2012a). Qin (2007) designates this as the first phase of IR studies in China, lasting until 1963 and characterized primarily by a lack of concern for the theoretical development of the discipline.

The Sino-Soviet split and the Korean War prompted a strengthening of the study and investigation of international phenomena in China, which was at that time referred to as “International Studies” (Zhang, 2012a). In this context, in 1963, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued a directive “calling for the strengthening of research on matters affecting China’s foreign relations” (Liang, 1997, p. 24). As a result, new departments were created in three major Chinese universities – Peking University, Renmin University, and Fudan University – dedicated to the study of international phenomena, specifically colonial liberation movements, communist movements, and the West, the latter not so much from the perspective of importing and understanding the state of the art of the discipline, but rather in an attempt to comprehend the enemy (Qin, 2007; Xinning, 2001; Zhang, 2012a). This second phase (1964–1979) is also characterized by the Cultural Revolution, which hindered contact with Western IR and obstructed methodological and theoretical development. Moreover, it led to the suspension of the Foreign Affairs College and all departments dedicated to the study of international politics (Shambaugh, 2011; Yongjin & Teng-chi, 2016).

The end of the Cultural Revolution and the reforms instituted by Deng Xiaoping allowed the dual development of IR in China. On the one hand, the cessation of the persecution of Chinese tradition, particularly Confucianism, and the increase in academic freedom facilitated the emergence of new efforts to study international relations; on the other hand, China’s opening to the world enabled contact with the West, academic and

scientific exchange, and the introduction of major Western works into the Chinese market (Shambaugh, 2011; Yongjin & Teng-chi, 2016). During this phase, Chinese students began studying at major American and European institutions, facilitating contact with Western theories that began to be imported into China, rendering the study of international phenomena in Chinese institutions more scientific, but also fueling the conviction that China needed to develop its own theoretical perspectives (Qin, 2007; Xinning, 2001; Zhang, 2012a).

If, during the first two phases, the study of international politics was largely confined to the orientation of public policies, being primarily influenced by Marxist and Third World narratives, from the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards, this study began to progressively shift towards the understanding of international phenomena and, more importantly, towards theoretical and methodological analysis and formulation (Qin, 2007; Shambaugh, 2011; Zhang, 2012a).

It is within this context that we identify the first attempts to theoretical development in the field of IR in China. The initial theoretical perspectives, if we may call them that, date back to the 1960s and 1970s when some Chinese scholars sought to formulate perspectives based on imperialism, colonization, and Marxist and Mao Zedong thought (Liang, 1997). However, as Xinning (2001) notes, until 1980, IRT was not truly taught, but rather “just interpretations of the viewpoints of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedong” (p. 63). In the inaugural edition of the Foreign Affairs College journal in 1984, Liu Chun, citing Zhou Enlai, stated that Chinese scholars should “be capable of sinicising diplomacy” (Liu, 1984, p. 2). In 1985, a new impetus for theoretical development emerged through a directive from the CCP “On the Reform of the Teaching of Ideology, Ethics, and Political Theory in Schools and Universities,” which was followed by a conference about IRT held in 1987 by the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, at which the call for the first time for the development of a “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics” was made (Liang, 1997). This was followed by two more conferences, one in 1991 and another in 1994, both associated with Peking University and aimed at stimulating the theoretical development of Chinese IR (Shambaugh, 2011; Xinning, 2001; Zhang, 2012a). In 2000, a new proposal emerged, namely a “Chinese School of International Relations” put forth by Qin Yaqing.

From Qin's perspective, the theoretical development of IR in China can be divided into three phases. The first phase is the pre-theoretical phase, during which there was no deliberate effort towards theoretical development. This phase corresponds to the period between 1953 and 1989, during which the primary objective of studies regarding international relations was to assist in political decision-making, with theory “understood

mainly as the policy and strategy put forward by political leaders” (Qin, 2007, p. 318). The second phase, designated the theoretical learning phase, corresponds to the period from 1990 to the present day, and was characterized by the introduction of theoretical perspectives into the study of phenomena with the aim of corroborating or falsifying those perspectives. During this phase, Chinese scholars realized that IRT were “perspectives from which people observe the IR world, hypotheses by which people test their abstraction of the IR world, and generalizations through which people understand the IR world” (Qin, 2007, p. 319). Thus, during this period, Chinese scholars grasped the true significance of theories, beginning to utilize them for the explanation of international phenomena. The third phase, lastly, is marked by the development of new theoretical perspectives. According to Qin, this phase has not yet begun in China, despite the existence of three potential sources for a “Chinese Theory of International Relations”: Relational Theory, Moral Realism, and Tianxia (Qin, 2007, 2018a).

Through this section, we can understand the historical evolution of the study of IR in China, which has culminated in the pressing need to develop a theory based on Chinese political thought, a topic that will be explored in greater depth in the following sections.

### **From “Chinese Characteristics” to the Contemporary Projects: Ontology and Methodology of Chinese proposals**

Having examined the historical evolution of the study of IR in China, we can identify two initial attempts to develop a “Chinese Theory of International Relations”: the project of a “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics” and the “Chinese School of International Relations.” In addition to these, we can also recognize two further attempts: the “Tsinghua Approach” and the “Gongsheng School.” Now, we can turn our attention to these projects themselves. This section will provide a historiographical analysis of the broader projects for the development of a Chinese theory of IR, considering the ontological discussion and methodologies employed.

Nevertheless, before proceeding, it is important to reflect on the various terms that have already been used in the context of the theoretical development of IR in China. In this regard, we can highlight Zhang’s (2012a) perspective, which argues that the term “Chinese Theory of International Relations” broadly refers to the overarching academic project of theoretical development of IR in China, while terms such as “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics” and “Chinese School” represent specific attempts to advance this project, or, in other words, specific projects within it.

*The “Chinese Theory of IR” is, therefore, best seen as a continuous intellectual and discursive project, without a precise meaning or clear boundaries, containing within itself sub-projects such as a “Theory of IR with Chinese Characteristics” and the “Chinese School” that compete to shape the larger project of developing Chinese theories of IR. (Zhang, 2012a, p. 73)*

The way we refer to each of these movements and projects is far from free from controversy. Traditionally, from a positivist perspective, the term “theory” refers to a set of systematized propositions articulated through a specific method to interpret reality and make predictions. On the other hand, the term “school” is predominantly used to identify a set of theoretical propositions shared by several members of the academic community.

Most of the literature agrees that it is still too early to classify the so-called “Chinese theories” as fully-fledged theories or to define the “Chinese School” or other movements as “schools.” Various authors, including Acharya (2019), Jiangli and Buzan (2014), and Yan (2011), agree that the diversity of Chinese experience and tradition makes it difficult for a single “school” to encompass all its aspects, while also making it unlikely for any single “school” to unify and accommodate the wide range of scholars and perspectives on international relations in China.

The reality is that terms like “Chinese School” have been widely used but perhaps prematurely and not as rigorously as they should be (Zhang, 2012c). Throughout this section, we will explore the four projects for the development of a “Chinese Theory of International Relations.” At the end of this section, we will return to this discussion, attempting to identify the most appropriate terminology for each case. Until then, we will use the term “project” to refer to each of them, in line with Zhang (2012a).

The first attempt to develop a “Chinese Theory of International Relations” emerged in the 1980s with the idea of a “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics.” For Liang Shoude (1997), one of the leading figures behind this idea, such a project should seek to combine elements of the Marxist view of international politics and Western theories, as well as the civilizational tradition and the Chinese development model. Moreover, the Chinese contribution to the study of international politics should be based on three elements: national interest and, consequently, the rights of sovereignty; the concept of means of production, which should be introduced in theorization to highlight the influence of economic factors; and the idea of development through reforms, related to the Chinese development model (Liang, 1997; Xinning, 2001). This project emerged separately from the ideology of “Socialism with Chinese

Characteristics,” although sharing with it not only the designation but also ideas and principles, a similarity which underlies some of the principal criticisms of this project, accusing it of serving the political interests of the CCP, of not being guided by academic and scientific standards, and of focusing more on aiding political decision-making than on understanding international reality (Xinning, 2001; Zhang, 2012a). In recent times, this project has been led by Zhu Feng, who, like Liang Shoude, is a member of Beijing University and believes that, given China's growing prominence and impact on global politics, it is essential to refine and articulate a theory of international politics and diplomacy that reflects Chinese characteristics. This involves leveraging China's historical and cultural heritage, integrating its diplomatic practices, and incorporating aspects of Western theories to support the policies and international initiatives of China as an emerging power (Zhu, 2009).

Regardless of the criticisms and opinions surrounding the “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics,” this project has had a significant impact on the theoretical development of IR in China. Although its development was driven by a growing dissatisfaction with the West's dominance in the academic discourse of the discipline, the project itself also contributed to raising awareness of and reinforcing this dissatisfaction, urging the search for other alternatives, namely a new project called the “Chinese School of International Relations” (Qin, 2006; Zhang, 2012a). The main advocate of this “Chinese School” is Qin Yaqing, a professor at the China Foreign Affairs University. In Qin's (2005) opinion, any Chinese theory of IR must have three elements: it must be based on Chinese culture and tradition; it must be universal; and it must be unique and distinct from other theories.

Starting from this conception, Qin (2005, p. 62) acknowledges that there is no “Chinese School of International Relations” nor a Chinese theory of IR, pointing to the “lack of a core theoretical problematic” as the main reason. This theoretical core must be distinct, academically significant, and purposeful. It cannot merely focus on Chinese culture or political thought, contrary to what many Chinese scholars have done (Qin, 2005). Qin (2006) highlights the geo-cultural context, acknowledging its impact on IRT. He consequently posits that a Chinese theory of IR presents a unique opportunity and offers added value, considering it both possible and inevitable. Qin (2005, pp. 68–69) thus proposes, as the theoretical core of a Chinese theory of IR, the “relationship between a rising great power and the existing international system”, or more specifically the “peaceful integration into international society for a great power,” recognizing the contribution of the Chinese case to deepening an area of international politics that is not conceived by Realism and is little or not at all deepened by Liberalism and

Constructivism. This theoretical core must be based on the ideological source and on the ideas of reform and opening initiated by Deng Xiaoping and which allowed China, for the first time, to integrate into the international system (Qin, 2006).

Nevertheless, Qin (2006) identifies two additional potential ideological/problematic sources for a Chinese theory of IR: firstly, the Confucian worldview, characterized by hierarchy, order, and difference, aiming of achieve harmony through governance based on ritual and morality, and of which the best example is the tianxia and the Tributary System: secondly, the thought surrounding contemporary Chinese republican leaders, notably Mao, and revolutionary practice, transforming revolution into the central element of Chinese political thought, and associating it with other ideas such as sovereignty and equality, which represents a departure from tianxia and Confucian thought.

From Feng's perspective (2012a), the "Chinese School" stands out as one of the most prominent and well-regarded theoretical projects in contemporary Chinese IR, due both to the academic prestige of one of its main patrons, Qin Yaqing, and to the theoretical sophistication of its proposals. Despite this, the "Chinese School" is still a project under construction, or a "discourse about the future" (Zhang, 2012a, p. 76), and it does not yet constitute a fully developed and systematic theory, nor does it form a coherent school of thought akin to the "English School" or the "Frankfurt School." Qin (2018a), however, and alongside possible core problematics, also identifies three potential sources of what could be a Chinese theory of IR or a "Chinese School": the Moral Realism of Yan Xuetong, the Tianxia of Zhao Tingyang, and the Relational Theory developed by himself.

This project is not, however, free from criticism. One of the main critics is Yan Xuetong, from Tsinghua University, who states that there is no single theory that fits into the "Chinese School" (Yan, 2011). The main criticisms focus on the designation of the school, which Yan considers incompatible with the spirit of Social Sciences theories, which are not named by their creator, nor according to their geographical origin, but rather by their ideas or the institution where they emerge (Yan, 2011; Zhang, 2012a). Another criticism concerns the variety and heterogeneity of the Chinese cultural tradition, which, from Yan's perspective, makes it impossible for a single Chinese school to emerge, and gives the example of the United States of America, where diverse and incommensurable theories have emerged during the past decades (Yan, 2011; Zhang, 2012a).

Specifically, Yan's position is that a theory of IR should be recognized as such, and not as a "Chinese theory" or a "Chinese School." For him, Chinese scholars should

focus on contributing to the advancement of the discipline and the understanding of contemporary issues, bringing forth the Chinese experience, rather than forcefully seeking a theory or school that represents the entire Chinese philosophical tradition, which he even considers impossible (Yan, 2011). Furthermore, according to Yan, a “Chinese Theory of International Relations” should not reject Western theories, but rather complement existing theories (Yan, 2011).

Technically, both the idea of complementarity and the belief in the universal validity of any IR theory, alongside the notion that a theory should primarily aim to address current issues in international relations, are also supported by Qin and other scholars associated with the “Chinese School” project (Zhang, 2012a). Indeed, Qin (2018b) emphasizes that the goal is not to advance academic nationalism or establish Chinese dominance in IR theory but rather to broaden and enhance the field as a whole, contributing meaningfully to global knowledge. Thus, the main disagreement appears to lie in the terminology used. In fact, while Yan Xuetong rejects the label of “Chinese School,” he does not dismiss the intellectual agenda that underpins the project (Zhang, 2012b).

There are also disagreements in relation to the methods employed and the theoretical cores selected. In collaboration with his colleagues from Tsinghua University, Yan has been developing an alternative project, which emphasizes what he considers to be more scientific and positivist methods of theoretical construction. This project has been referred to by some as the “Tsinghua School” (Acharya, 2019; Zhang, 2012a), while others prefer the term “Tsinghua Approach” (Hun Joon, 2016; Xiao, 2020; Zhang, 2012b). In line with the majority of the literature, we adopt the latter term.

This intellectual endeavor began in 2005, when Yan and his colleagues from the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University began to dedicate themselves to the study of the relationship between the political units existing in pre-Qin China, with special focus on the Spring and Autumn Period, a period of the Eastern Zhou era, marked by the dilution of the authority of the Zhou monarch and the strengthening of the powers of the feudal lords. Thus, the “Tsinghua Approach” has sought to extract from the interstate relations of that time, as well as from the thought of pre-Qin philosophers on these relations, a line of political thought and a relationship model that can be synthesized into a problematic capable of originating a new IRT (Jin & Sun, 2016; Zhang, 2012b). Yan and the “Tsinghua Approach” have sought to present a concrete project, establishing as objective not simply to recover ancient thought and adapt it to contemporary problems, but rather, given the current problems, to identify in ancient thought key elements that can help to the understanding of current problems and, from

there, synthesize and systematize these elements into a theory that can be empirically proven (Jin & Sun, 2016; Yan, 2019). This project identified a theoretical core around which to work, and its efforts have already led to a theoretical proposal known as Moral Realism, which we will explore in the next section.

In parallel with the previously discussed attempts, another initiative for the theoretical development of IR in China can be identified. This approach is associated with the concept of *gongsheng*, previously explored, which has recently been incorporated into the field of IR, sparking debates around a “gongsheng theory” or “symbiosis theory” (Ren, 2024; Song, 2024). However, as previously mentioned, the use of the term “theory” may not be the most appropriate for Chinese theoretical proposals, which could be even more problematic in this case given the multiple theoretical proposals related to the concept of *gongsheng*. This complexity led Ren (2024) to use, instead, the term “Gongsheng School of International Relations” to describe these initiatives. Alternatively, this approach could also be referred to as the “Fudan School,” since most of its proponents are affiliated with Fudan University. However, this article will adopt the nomenclature suggested by Ren.

Like the other “schools,” this approach has focused its debate on ontological questions regarding the nature of international relations, while also proposing elements for constructing a more harmonious international system, emphasizing a vision for a better world rather than simply interpreting the world as it is.

Discussing this “Gongsheng School” first requires revisiting the work of Hu Shoujun, who introduced the concept of *gongsheng* to the Social Sciences through Sociology, via the concept of “social *gongsheng*” (Ren, 2024). According to Hu (2000), social *gongsheng* is characterized by respect for principles such as equality and mutual respect, enabling harmonious coexistence through a balance between competition and cooperation. Although divergent interests may lead to competition and conflict, this does not imply that one party seeks to destroy the other. Thus, conflicts should be regulated through compromise, embodied in law (Hu, 2000; Ren, 2024).

Building on this conception, the concept was later introduced into IR by Jin Yingzhong, Secretary-General of the Shanghai Society of International Relations (Ren, 2024). According to Jin (2011), coexistence is the fundamental form of human existence, and the same applies to international society itself, driven by the interdependence among humans and international actors. The challenge posed by Jin sparked an engaging theoretical and ontological debate around the concept of *gongsheng*, leading to the development of several theoretical proposals focusing on coexistence and

interdependence as fundamental elements of the international system, which will be examined later in this study (Ren, 2013, 2024; Su, 2013).

Throughout this section, we have observed that the term “school” has been used in two distinct ways: as a broad theoretical umbrella encompassing all proposals rooted in Chinese experience and philosophy (the so-called “Chinese School”), and, in a more traditionally way, to denote specific groups of scholars who share common perspectives on the core ideas and theoretical principles that a “Chinese Theory of International Relations” should involve, such as the “Gongsheng School.” While the term “school” seems appropriate in the latter case, as it represents a set of ideas and approaches championed by a specific group of scholars, its application to the former case appears inadequate. In the case of the movement centered around Tsinghua, referring to it as a “school” might not be entirely inaccurate, as it involves a group of scholars who share similar theoretical conceptions and propositions. However, since these scholars go beyond shared ideas to adopt a common methodology or approach, the term “Tsinghua Approach” appears more appropriate. Thus, we reaffirm our alignment with the majority of the literature on this matter.

While we retain the most commonly applied designations for the sake of adherence to the established discourse in the literature and to ensure continuity in academic dialogue, we emphasize that the four cases discussed in this section should be interpreted as distinct attempts to advance the academic project of a “Chinese Theory of International Relations” – that is, as four specific projects within this broader endeavor, aligning with Zhang’s (2012a) perspective.

As for the so-called “Chinese theories,” which we will delve into in the following section, this terminology is also problematic. These do not yet constitute fully developed theoretical systems widely recognized by the scientific community. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to these so-called “Chinese theories” as “theoretical proposals,” as they remain collections of propositions and/or theoretical cores still under development. Qin (2006, 2018a), for instance, identifies Tianxia, Moral Realism, and Relational Theory as potential sources – or rather, theoretical cores – that could underpin a future “Chinese School.” Therefore, using the term “Chinese School” to refer to a collection of distinct theoretical proposals is incorrect, at least for now. However, to designate a school of thought that does not yet exist but could emerge from one of the aforementioned theoretical cores, as Qin argues, this terminology might eventually be appropriate. In the case of internal movements within the “Gongsheng School,” we can refer to theoretical cores or, at the very least, perspectives on international reality.

Having identified the main theoretical development projects of IR in China, as well as distinguishing the various approaches and clarifying the nomenclature used, we can now proceed to the next section, where we will explore the Chinese theoretical proposals in greater detail, with a focus on the three most prominent projects today: the “Chinese School,” the “Tsinghua Approach,” and the “Gongsheng School.”

### **The Chinese Proposals: Moral Realism, Relational Theory, Tianxia, and Gongsheng School**

In the previous section, we identified four projects aiming to develop a Chinese theory of IR: the “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics,” the “Chinese School of International Relations,” the “Tsinghua Approach,” and the “Gongsheng School.” Within the “Chinese School,” in particular, we distinguished three potential sources for a new IRT grounded in Chinese specificity: Moral Realism, Relational Theory and Tianxia. In parallel, we also identify Moral Realism as a theoretical proposal associated with the “Tsinghua Approach,” while the “Gongsheng School” represents a project more aligned with a traditional school of thought. Thus, in this section, our aim is to delve into each of these theoretical proposals, identifying their inherent challenges and their respective interpretations of the international system. Subsequently, we aim to assess the contributions of these propositions to the broader discipline of IR.

#### **Tianxia**

Based on the political model developed by the Zhou, Zhao Tingyang presented a theoretical proposal with a universalist approach, focusing specifically on the contributions of this model to international relations and to the resolution of global issues. From Zhao's perspective, the current world is a “non-world” and a “failed world” because there is no true global governance nor a world society governed by a universal institution superior to states and to their interests (Jiangli & Buzan, 2014; Zhao, 2009, 2012). Zhao identifies something akin to what Thomas Hobbes observed centuries earlier – the absence of a Leviathan, an entity that ensures order among states. Building on this, Zhao sets out to revive the principles of tianxia, systematizing them into a vision for the world and a theoretical proposal for IR.

Zhao's proposal, which he himself calls Tianxia or “Political World Philosophy,” is based on principles such as universality, inclusion, non-use of force, and harmony, highlighting the role of a “universal institution” in resolving the chaos and problems that the world currently faces (Jiangli & Buzan, 2014; Zhao, 2009). In the author's view, this

institution has nothing in common with current international organizations, as these are state-driven constructs designed to safeguard the interests of individual states (Zhao, 2009). Therefore, Zhao advocates the development of a “World Political System” centered around this institution, which would eliminate the notion of the “outside,” including all peoples and operating on the basis of the common will, universal governance, and the satisfaction of universal interests (Qin, 2018a; Zhao, 2009). For this vision, the international gives way to the global, as the world and the society of states come to be seen as a single unit, sharing one collective will (the common will of all peoples) and a single interest, thereby becoming truly universal.

To summarize, this proposal is grounded in several key assumptions, including the universal inclusion of all peoples, which implies the absence of discrimination based on culture or religion; the existence of a “universal institution” that ensures order and harmony through values, norms, and rituals; the need for political transposition, meaning the implementation of the system from the highest to the lowest levels, accompanied by an ethical transposition in the opposite direction to guarantee the system's legitimacy; and, finally, harmony as a crucial element that demonstrates the system's success (Zhao, 2009, 2012).

### **Relational Theory**

Drawing on certain Confucian notions, particularly harmony, social order, and the concept of *guanxi*, Qin Yaqing suggested an alternative theoretical proposal known as Relational Theory (Jiangli & Buzan, 2014; Qin, 2005). This proposal conceptualizes international politics from a relational perspective, understanding international phenomena through the typology and characteristics of the relationships between international actors. Relational Theory thus envisions the world as “a world of relations,” that is, a world “where dynamic relations define the identities and activities of actors and where actors relate and are related as they practice. It is also a world where politics is more about relations than power and where governance of relations is its most skillful art” (Qin, 2018a, p. 427). The central issue in international politics, therefore, is not power but relationships, meaning that the type and nature of relations between different states shape international politics. This is justified by Qin's (2018a) perspective that a state's behavior in response to the actions of another state always depends on the type of relationship that exists between them.

A frequently cited example associated with this theoretical proposal is the attitude and behavior of the United States towards the United Kingdom and North Korea, both nuclear-armed states. While the US encourages the UK to maintain its nuclear

arsenal, it consistently exerts pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons. Relational Theory explains this behavior by the nature of the relationships the US has with these two countries: the UK, a close ally and NATO member, which is unlikely to attack the US; and North Korea, with which relations are hostile, posing a greater threat regarding the potential use of nuclear weapons against the US. We can thus understand that international politics is not viewed as a chaotic power struggle, but rather as a reality where cooperation, complementarity, and harmony also exist, depending entirely on the relationships and the degree of closeness between the actors involved (Jiangli & Buzan, 2014; Qin, 2018a).

### **Moral Realism**

Concurrently with the aforementioned proposals, Yan Xuetong and other scholars associated with the “Tsinghua Approach” formulated an alternative theoretical framework known as Moral Realism. The aim of this proposal is not to replace but to complement Western theories. In this way, Yan proposes a symbiosis between Western Realism and Chinese political thought, drawing upon typical ideas from Chinese culture, such as harmony, hierarchy, and order, as well as the notion of *wangdao* (Yan, 2016; Zhang, 2012a). Through this theoretical proposal, Yan emphasizes the role of morality in international politics, acknowledging its crucial influence on a state’s ability to ascend within the international system, while also asserting that this perspective is not antagonistic to Classical Realism, which he argues has never denied the impact of morality on state actions (Yan, 2016).

From realism, this theoretical proposal adopts the idea that power is the primary driver of international politics, conceptualizing the international system as an anarchic system in which each state competes for power and the fulfilment of its interests (Zhang, 2012a). The struggle for power is viewed as a zero-sum game, meaning that conflicts between an emerging power and a dominant power are inevitable (Yan, 2014). In complementarity with traditional elements such as power, national strength (or capabilities), and national interest, this theoretical proposal highlights the role of morality as an independent variable (Yan, 2016). Furthermore, Moral Realism places significant importance on political leadership, considering it one of the key factors behind the rise and decline of states, thereby acting as an agent that brings about changes in the structure of the system (Yan, 2016, 2019).

This theoretical proposal also underscores the role of political leaders’ perceptions in foreign policy – not to redefine national interest, as constructivists propose, but to influence the means chosen to achieve those interests (Yan, 2016;

Zhang, 2012a). Regarding security, Moral Realism challenges the classical realism notion of self-help, suggesting that some states may depend on others for their security and arguing that the security strategies adopted vary according to the category in which each state falls (Yan, 2016).

The primary question underlying Moral Realism is to understand "why some rising states can achieve their goal of becoming the hegemon, while others cannot, and why hegemony may sustain or decline" (Acharya, 2019, p. 476). To this end, this theoretical proposal seeks to investigate "how a rising power can narrow the power gap vis-à-vis existing leading powers while adopting a policy of "leading by example" that is conducive to international order while ensuring its rise into global power and leadership" (ibid.).

In summary, Moral Realism argues that the type of leadership a state possesses directly influences its international credibility, which is an integral part of national interest. This credibility affects the structure and norms of the International Order, in the sense that high credibility helps an emerging state to modify the configuration of that order (Yan, 2016, 2019). International credibility is, in turn, linked to the morality of states – that is, their capacity to govern responsibly and benevolently, to serve as a model, and to offer protection to other states. Thus, as Yan (2016) argues, "Moral realism believes that the international authority of a leading state is established on the basis of its high strategic credibility rather than on that of power" (p. 23).

What Moral Realism envisions is an anarchic yet hierarchical international system, wherein there exists a leading power around which other states are arranged based on their power. This leading power is responsible for ensuring international stability and serving as a model for others, promoting respect for norms and rewarding states that adhere to them while punishing those that do not, thereby ensuring order and harmony (Yan, 2016, 2023; Zhang, 2012a).

### **Gongsheng School**

The concept of *gongsheng* was introduced in IR by Jin (2011), who proposed what he called the "theory of gongsheng" (*gòngshēng lùn*) – also translated as the "theory of symbiosis" or "theory of coexistence" – a lens based on the assumption that the logic of international relations is one of coexistence and interdependence.

According to this theoretical proposal, states act in pursuit of their "self-realization" through the protection of sovereignty, the promotion of development, and the advancement of their national interests (Jin, 2011). However, as this process unfolds within an international environment where states simultaneously pursue similar goals, a balance must be struck between individual and collective interests (Jin, 2011). While

states may seek autonomy and self-sufficiency, prioritizing their own interests, they inevitably participate in networks of coexistence and webs of interdependence, as they do not have all the resources they need at their disposal. Therefore, the logic of international relations is not only one of coexistence, but also of interdependence, with resource scarcity viewed as a factor of cooperation (Jin, 2011).

Jin (2011) highlights that both resource scarcity itself and the tendency of certain states to act against the collective interest can also be sources of conflict, which necessitates the development of mechanisms to promote harmonious development, particularly through norms and institutions. Overall, Jin (2011) views international society as a network of complex interactions, which, equipped with its own tools, can ensure *gongsheng* and advance towards harmonious development.

This theoretical proposal was later developed by two other scholars from Fudan University, Ren Xiao and Su Changhe. Ren's (2013) contributions focus on what he terms the "System of Coexistence" (*gòngshēng tǐxì*) and "Gongsheng Peace" (*gòngshēng hépíng*). Criticizing traditional Western theoretical explanations of the power structure in East Asia, Ren (2013) proposes a perspective centered on the specific dynamics of relationships within this region, which he argues escape Western interpretations. In this sense, Ren (2013) suggests that relations between countries in this region should be understood as a system of coexistence, where different states, regardless of their size and power capabilities, can find their position and role within the system, developing principles and norms to manage their interactions in a mutually beneficial way. Therefore, this order should not be viewed, as traditionally proposed in the West, as a hierarchical order, but rather as a "polycentric" order (Ren, 2013).

Through this reading of relations in East Asia, Ren (2013), like Jin, presents an interpretation of international relations as a system of coexistence and interdependence. The creation of this system, however, depends on the voluntary participation of states, as well as the possession of resources by one party that the other party requires, which constitutes the fundamental condition for establishing a symbiotic relationship (Ren, 2013). The maintenance of an order based on a symbiotic system depends, in turn, on the existence of rules that facilitate the maintenance of peace and ensure non-interference in the internal affairs of other states (Ren, 2013).

Like Ren Xiao, Su (2013) also critiques traditional and Western perspectives in IR, proposing an interpretation based on what he calls the "Symbiotic International System" (*gòngshēng xíng guóji tǐxì*). Arguing that there is a cyclical tendency in the Western-based International System to alternate between multipolarity and bipolarity, which favors wars and conformist alliances (which the author terms the "historical vicious

cycle of Western international relations”, *xīfāng guójì guānxì de lìshǐ guàiquān*), Su (2013) calls for a reassessment of new ways to resolve international issues, proposing the Chinese experience as a source of solutions.

In this sense, Su (2013) advocates for the creation of a “Symbiotic International System,” characterized by the harmonious coexistence of different civilizations, alongside international trust and cooperation. In this model, global powers, instead of confronting each other, should coexist and cooperate to thrive in harmony. This means that rigid military alliances should not exist, and global governance should be shared to address common challenges (Su, 2013). In this regard, Su (2013) advocates for the “formation of partnerships, not alliances” (*jié bān bù jiè mèng*), and a “logic of coexistence” (*gòng cún de luó jī*), which suggests that peaceful coexistence and interdependence are fundamental elements for stable and peaceful global governance (Su, 2013).

In the last ten years, the “theory of gongsheng” has received new contributions. As Ren (2024) emphasizes, the central concept of this theoretical proposal is that international actors coexist, not independently, but in an interconnected and interdependent manner. Thus, the relationships between these actors are conducive to mutual growth, enabling, through symbiosis, the creation of mechanisms that promote international peace and security (Ren, 2024).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the Chinese projects and theoretical proposals in the field of IR with the aim of discussing their contributions to the state of the discipline. We observe that, although IR arrived late in China compared to the West, it has experienced movements of deepening and theoretical development over the past few decades, offering alternatives to Western approaches. Following the failure of initial projects, which were closely linked to a Marxist-Maoist view of international politics, Chinese scholars have sought to recover the Chinese political legacy, synthesizing principles and standards that can be applied to the understanding of contemporary international relations. It is in this context that the two most promising projects related to the “Chinese Theory of International Relations” have emerged – the “Chinese School,” the “Tsinghua Approach” and the “Gongsheng School” – along with the associated proposals, namely Relational Theory, Moral Realism, and Tianxia.

We have thus been able to verify that the “Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics” is a project rather than a fully developed theoretical proposal, as it lacks a clearly identified theoretical core. In contrast, the “Chinese School” is a

broader project encompassing multiple theoretical cores and proposals, with the selection of one in the future potentially leading to the establishment of a fully-fledged school of thought. The “Tsinghua Approach,” on the other hand, is a project with a coherent and robust methodology that has successfully identified a theoretical core through Moral Realism – a proposal still under development. Finally, the “Gongsheng School” can be considered both a theoretical proposal and the project that most closely resembles a traditional school of thought, as its members align themselves around a more or less defined theoretical core and shared assumptions.

Building on this, our research enabled us to identify three key findings. The first is that, despite all the proposals analyzed being based on principles and ideas rooted in Chinese political thought, a clear dichotomy emerges. On one side are those proposals that align more closely with Western positivism, offering a systematic theory capable of interpreting current international issues — notably, the Relational Theory and, above all, Moral Realism. On the other side are those that are more philosophical and relativistic in nature, presenting themselves more as worldviews than as interpretative theories of international reality, particularly Tianxia and the “Gongsheng School.” The second finding is that all these theoretical proposals, although grounded in Chinese political thought, are linked to justifications and frameworks that underpin China’s rise and its international affirmation. This is particularly evident in Moral Realism and even more pronounced in Tianxia and the “Gongsheng School,” the latter aligning more closely with worldviews and proposals for a World Order than with formal theories. Finally, the third finding, and perhaps the most significant considering the aim of this article, is that Chinese IR have experienced a notable theoretical development. This, in contrast to a certain stagnation in the development of new theories in the West, reflects a gradual decentralization and de-Westernization of the discipline, but above all, it presents a window of opportunity to revitalize the discipline and potentially motivate a reinvention of IR.

In this study, we are confronted with the implications that the findings presented here may have for both the academic community and international politics. In the context of academia, the current global geopolitical landscape, coupled with the return of Trump to the White House, could create opportunities for Chinese theoretical proposals to demonstrate their value, their capacity to interpret international events, and even their ability to propose frameworks for a more equitable and stable World Order. Conversely, the growing prominence of these perspectives and alternative theoretical frameworks to those of the West, alongside China’s rising influence within the International System, may indicate a strategic motivation to redefine the World Order. As a result, academics

and policymakers must remain vigilant regarding these theoretical proposals and their evolution, particularly in relation to China's narratives and actions on the global stage.

Despite the findings and implications discussed here, our study is not without limitations. The fact that the Chinese proposals are still in development, coupled with the inherent complexity of Chinese political thought, does not allow us to fully understand the contributions of these theories or their narratives concerning the International Order.

Based on our research, and in conjunction with our third finding, we leave open the possible implications of this de-Westernization for future studies, both in terms of a potential reinvention of the discipline and the future of the International Order.

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