

Theory Talks

Presents

THEORY TALK #45

QIN YAQING ON RULES VS RELATIONS, DRINKING COFFEE AND TEA, AND A CHINESE APPROACH TO GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Theory Talks

is an interactive forum for discussion of debates in International Relations with an emphasis of the underlying theoretical issues. By frequently inviting cutting-edge specialists in the field to elucidate their work and to explain current developments both in IR theory and real-world politics, *Theory Talks* aims to offer both scholars and students a comprehensive view of the field and its most important protagonists.

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Since the end of the Cold War, IR has been preoccupied with the rise of China, yet most analyses of, and theorizing around, China is the product of western scholars; more generally, IR theory is profoundly biased towards western interests, institutions, and ideas. There are however other conceptions of international relations. Much discussed for instance is the so-called ‘ASEAN way’, the success of which seems to hinge more on relations than on rules. In this Talk, the eminent Chinese IR scholar Qin Yaqing not only expands on the oriental or Chinese approach to IR, but also engages the

western bias in IR and, in extension of Chinese values, and argues that any approach to theorizing global governance needs to be first and foremost balanced.

What is, according to you, the biggest challenge or principal debate in current IR? What is your position or answer to this challenge or in this debate?

I think in present IR in terms of debate the most important thing for me is whether we should continue this domination by the Western discourse in IR in particular and in the social sciences more generally. The debate worldwide, it seems to me, is moving toward more pluralistic and plural interaction, so that when people talk about theory or theories, culture or cultures, civilization or civilizations, they tend to use more and different approaches, so that we can see that we have so many theories, cultures, civilizations, ideas in the whole edifice of human knowledge, rather than only one. I myself am always against the idea of any debate arriving at the truth; instead it must be plural and pluralistic. In this kind of situation I think Chinese ideas, Chinese cultures, and Chinese narratives can make contributions to the knowledge edifice of IR and the social sciences. So I think this is an important debate to which the Chinese ideas and narratives can contribute. That does not mean that they will replace others, they simply add something new, something non-Western, so that we can enrich the whole knowledge of IR and the social sciences.

Inside China, this debate is also going on as to whether knowledge is universal, whether social theories are universal, or whether they are not that universal and to some degree they are all

particular. My argument is that social theories must sustain some level of universality but their origin is local, that is to say, they start from practices of a particular community over a long course of history and are accumulated by actors, agents living this social and cultural setting. This is basically my concept of the social sciences, IR, and knowledge in general. Once we have all these things put together, of course we need some kind of integration, but overall it's based on the practices of various communities in the world, rather than on only one community.

If you look at the current theoretical debates, you can see some people thinking about IR in a pluralistic way—including some scholars from Europe, the United States and from other countries—many people think this is the right direction, but in practice—in empirical research—the domination by the Western discourse is still very, very strong. Yet as different communities, different narratives can contribute to IR theory, different practices and different narratives can also offer an alternative way of understanding empirical reality. It is true that human beings are in many ways similar, but from different cultures we do have some distinct ways of thinking.

Let me give an example: In my IR work, I put an emphasis on the importance of relationality, and I believe that what the Western dominant theories and paradigms—especially the three paradigms realism, liberalism, and constructivism—miss is that when they discuss IR, they don't discuss relations: they miss a most important part of it. Mainstream constructivism is a little better, but in its essence it is still very close to rationalism, rationalism in disguise. Rationality is an important concept, and it has encouraged so many research achievements that have developed over three or four hundred years, beginning from Europe; a very systematic framework, with concepts, with definitions, and so on. But this approach doesn't apply equally everywhere. I believe one can divide societies into two main different types: there are more individual societies and more relational societies. So while rationality is a very interesting and important concept for all societies, it is particularly so for Western society, which seems to me more individualistically oriented. As for Oriental societies, like Confucian societies, it's more about relations, so I would like to use the concept of relationality at an ontological level. We can see governance more in relational terms, rather than in purely rule terms, as I argue in the article [Rule, Rules and Relations](#). (introduction [here](#), html)

In it, I put forward the idea that rules are very important for governance, rules including international institutions, international regimes and so on, but if you go to other areas, you'll find examples which cannot be explained by a rationalistic approach. Let me give an example. Over the last few decades, huge transnational firms rose first in Japan to then branch of into Korea and then into China. This practical development forced Asian scholars to focus their attention on relational governance. Unfortunately, this realization has so far been limited to the business management field. In IR, if you discuss individualistic rules and so on, your stress is on the interests, how people can trade off their interests, and how peoples can nurture their interests. But if you go to relational societies, you can observe relational governance; the unit of analysis is no longer individual actors, but relations among them; and the key force is the coordination and the harmonization of relations. So this is the key difference between our different practices. This is an example only.

In my article, I want to show that maybe a more practical way to talk about local governance is the synthetic model of both rules and relations. We cannot avoid using rules, but at the same time, in any culture and in any society, relations are pivotal, too. The difference is that in Oriental societies maybe this is more conspicuous, or more accepted. China has practiced what I term ‘partnership diplomacy,’ which can be traced back to an underlying cultural emphasis on relations. My argument is not to use relational governance to replace rule-based governance, not to displace all the concepts of the already existing IR theory. All these theories provide insights, very interesting and useful insights, but I don’t think that’s enough: there should be pluralism and diversity—that’s the key point of my argument.

How did you arrive at where you currently are in IR?

I completed my education in Political Science in the United States, so when I went to the United States, basically I knew nothing about IR. When I was in China, my major was English, and I was trained by the United Nations as a simultaneous interpreter—a very different career. Then I went to the United States. I soon found that I like interpretation and translation as a hobby, but I did not want to take it as a career, because I think that it challenges your practical skills, but it doesn’t challenge your thinking. So when I went to the States I decided to study something more theoretically challenging, and I began to study IR. I immediately became a follower of Waltz (*Theory Talk* #40). My PhD dissertation (and first book) is a quantitative study, using a regression model combined with hegemonic stability theory, and the whole dissertation relies very much on structural realism, the relative power of different countries and how this works into hegemonic stability. It’s highly positivist, highly quantitative, and highly Waltzian. But before I left the United States, in 1993 or so, I began to read more works in different fields, in IR, in sociology, and also in philosophy. When I came back to China, in the first few years what I did was mainly to introduce Western IR theory to China. That’s where translation came back in: I wrote Chinese introductions to and translations of almost all the major western IR theories.

During this time, I began to participate in East Asian regional integration. Not as a scholar, but as a Track II practitioner, so I attended all these negotiations and talks towards ASEAN, of ASEAN +3, etc. In 2004 I began to be a key figure in NEAT, the Network of East Asian Think Tanks (<http://www.neat.org.cn/english/index.php>). During this whole process, I realized I found something important when I recognized that the questions raised within the major western IR paradigms are so limited; they are not the questions I found to matter in the practice of East Asian regional integration. So my first paper, in fact, which indicated a turning point for my thinking, was about East Asian regional integration. That was in English, and included in a book edited by Robert Ross and Zhu Feng, where I speak about process-oriented regional integration. I asked a question: Why has East Asia experienced more than 30 years’ peace and economic development? Western IR would have difficulties explaining this. I argued that it is the regional processes that produce dynamics socializing powers and spreading norms. And Wang Zhengyi took that into his textbook as part of Chinese scholars’ thinking about International Political Economy. I think we need to emphasize first that this dynamic is process-oriented; secondly, that it is led by small countries, they set the norms and institutions, and third, that it’s informal: you don’t have treaties, you have only declarations.

This process would either escape or seem flawed to western theoreticians: they use very strong rule-based, rule-oriented governance models, they think East Asian regional institutionalism isn't integration. Take for instance Joseph Keohane (*Theory Talk #9*). In a discussion with him, I said 'Professor Keohane, I think what we see in East Asia is soft institutionalism, it's informal.' It's a very different picture from the institutionalized integration process in Europe, as imagined by Keohane and other people, yet it is a converging or integrating dynamic. So from here, I wondered why it is that East Asian nations have taken a different way. The ASEAN States wanted to set up a kind of binding document, which they called a Code of Conduct on the South China Sea, but after repeated discussion, they added something to it: 'Declaration on the Code', to reduce its binding force, to increase its flexibility, and many Western scholars then think this type of regional process is not in fact regional integration.

But I then raise the central question: if you say it's not regional integration, if you say it's not regional cooperation, then how can you explain that given the fact that East Asia is so diversified—it's even more diversified than Europe, especially if you think about the political systems—then why since 1967, when ASEAN first started, there were no wars between its member states? Then came ASEAN +3: despite many disputes, they stuck to this framework without, avoided war with each other, and, even during the period of very tense China-Japanese relations, economic relations continued to do fine. So this I think is very different.

My trajectory was then strongly influenced by reading, firstly, Chinese philosophy and the Chinese ideas about society, and secondly, Western philosophy. The Chinese way stresses informal relations, processes, non-binding consensus: non-binding consensus is part and form of the Chinese concept of tendency, 势 shi. So for example all these leaders, they have meetings, they don't reach binding documents, but they show some consensus, then they create this shi. They believe that within this shi, it is easier to achieve their goal, without the legal precision. In my thinking, I also draw a lot on Western theories but including Chinese and Oriental considerations. I try to find key dynamics underpinning the Chinese way, integrating Oriental ideas and concepts, reinterpreting them in the light of established IR theories and problems. The reinterpretation is based upon a Chinese understanding, a Chinese way of thinking, or a Chinese worldview.

What would a student need to become a specialist in IR?

When we designed a new campus, the chief architect asked us to provide him with some ideas about how to design it. I provided a version, which represents my understanding of education. As we also invited international biddings, we needed an English version, and I gave them three G's.

The first is Global Vision: the Chinese that grow up in IR must have a global vision, rather than a mindset limited only to Chinese affairs.

The second G is Great Learning, from the classical Chinese text, the 大学 Da Xue, or Great Learning. The Da Xue is one of the Six Books of the Confucian tradition. Great Learning means

three things, I told the architect: the learning should be significant—it must not be small, mean, and narrowly defined learning; second, according to Confucius, it must be ‘real-world-relevant’ learning, that is, your learning should be to some extent useful for the world; third, learning needs to be inclusive, not exclusive, learning should be a blending of different ideas, different thoughts, like in the Confucian era, you had one hundred contending schools of thought. That is the second G.

The last G stands for ‘Grand Harmony’, which is taken from the major hall of the Forbidden City, which I changed a little bit: it’s called the ‘Great Hall of Harmony’ which I changed into Grand Harmony, so as to avoid repeating the word ‘Great’. It’s a Chinese concept which has been passed on for generations. I understand Harmony 和 he, in IR as the ideal harmony of interstate relations. Western scholars find it very hard to understand this Harmony, so they say it’s an empty word, only an empty slogan. I think for some leaders it’s really empty or utopian, but for Chinese it’s not, because we have all these steps to realize harmony in traditional Chinese society, for example the so-called 君子 junzi, the scholar-gentleman, such as the profound Professor Tu Weiming, and his moral metaphysics. So when I teach my students, in fact I teach a lot of Western theories—but at the same time I encourage students to study Chinese narratives, see what inspiration they can get from it.

These Three G’s are not only academic abstractions but also embedded in practice: for instance, why do the Chinese like to go for mediation, rather than legal procedures? An example from Taiwan: I had a classmate when I was doing my PhD in the United States, he had a car accident which was not his fault at all, and he was required to go to court, but he refused to go. He explained that local court proceedings are usually put on television, and he thought that if other Taiwanese students saw it, they would go back to Taiwan and tell other people, friends and family, they would think he really did something wrong. Chinese, also in Taiwan, usually go to a mediator, through the Local Neighborhood Committee, working it out as friends and neighbors, so as not to go to court. That is still a very common practice in China.

In one of your recent articles, *International Society as a Process* (pdf), you discuss theoretical challenges that need addressing in order to move beyond the ‘East vs West’ dualism in IR debates. Economic, military and political practice, however, moves ahead at an unrelenting pace according to that same opposition. Do you fear that the pressures of politics may overtake the theoretical discussion, especially within the Chinese scholarly community, and give an advantage to extreme views?

That could be a possibility in the short term, but in the long term I am quite optimistic. Chinese society is very interesting, because since the beginning of the 20th century, the Chinese society has experienced huge and chaotic changes, so now all kinds of ideas prevail. When Yan Fu translated Thomas Huxley’s work, a group of Chinese intellectuals and also many leaders believed that China was so weak because China didn’t follow the Law of the Jungle. That was very attractive during that period of time—they analyzed their own context on the basis of Huxley as follows: that is why all those people, all those reformists failed, why the revolutionaries

succeeded—this Law of the Jungle was highly acceptable when the country was in a chaotic situation, was invaded and was so weak among the strong—or certainly felt it was so weak.

The Western culture definitely came into China and became quite influential since the May Fourth Movement. I think our historical experience of an accumulation of revolutions constitutes an important source of China's modern thinking. Nowadays you see a mixture of both Western and Chinese thinking inside China, and this is an interesting phenomenon: Chinese society is getting more and more pluralistic, and people are thinking a lot in terms of interests—yet unfortunately, Chinese society is changing so rapidly, that sometimes these interests are not confined and constrained by morality. You have a very strong thirst to satisfy interests, yet at the same time you don't have a strong moral confinement. China itself is not prepared for such a rapid change, so what is happening could even be dangerous. But at the same time, if the Chinese could manage both domestic and international—but especially domestic relations—they might go through this time of change and reach a more stable period of political and social progress. So I think this is both an interesting and a critical period for China.

In Chinese history, if something lasts for forty or fifty years, that's not really very special, as Chinese history is so long. In the long run, there are three things that could lead to the reestablishment of Chinese morality. If these three materialize, we could see a very interesting China. The first theme consists of the positive influences of global humanity, including democracy, universal values, and so on. The second theme consists of the positive elements proper to Chinese traditional values, the essence of which I reinterpret in this article: of course the well-known and sometimes problematic Chinese hierarchy is one thing, but another aspect is moral implication—trustfulness, sincerity—good things of Chinese tradition, that's why this culture still exists after so many centuries. Now third and finally, also very important, is how contemporary Chinese should practice these abstract and ancient principles, global values and traditional Chinese values, how they can put them together. If they fail to combine the two, there can be a lot of problems, but if they can blend them in a good fashion, in a benign way, that could mean a very different future China.

The success of this development surely depends in part on the degree to which such a process, such ideas can be spread and are accepted from outside: China can change as much as it likes—after all, countries around the world are constantly changing—but if a certain rhetoric develops in the West, there is little chance for China to say 'stop that and watch our approach'.

China cannot stop that, but there are possibilities of intervention and adjustment. Only the other day, I gave a lecture at Renmin University, and one question was whether China should overthrow the International System, or reform it. I told them I am a reformist; definitely you cannot overthrow the current system, for there is a lot of good in it. The precondition for us is that in changing the international system, we need to avoid more disorder. But you need to add and drop some things, because the international system needs reform. Within that framework, you can do a lot, like including the legitimate interests and demands of the emerging powers—a central challenge for international and global governance. So basically you don't say 'stop that' but you want to blend in good things you have in your practices, in your culture, in your narratives and traditions, into the existing international system.

But in changing global governance, there cannot be excessive use of rules, as the west has it. Starting from the principle that we should all depend completely on rules, for instance, wouldn't work as Chinese society lacks rules. That is not to say it lacks laws: there are so many laws, but many of the laws are useless, because people simply bypass laws. Much rather, they use all kinds of relations to bypass laws, and sometimes people even think this is reasonable. So how to strengthen the enforcement of rules is a big question.

Western societies depend heavily on rules, but there, too, rules aren't everything, that's why for instance we talk about 'corporate cultures'. Why do corporations and businesses develop a specific culture? For although they have many rules, the rules cannot ensure every aspect of their activities. I support the argument that although we have anarchy we do not have chaos. Let me use Rosenau's book *Governance without Government*: we don't have overall government, but we do have rules, we do have governance. Keohane put it this way: even if we don't have a hegemonic power, we still have international institutions, governance, rules and so on. I think that's an interesting part of Western theory. Also, Helen Milner wrote, 'there is no basic qualitative difference between domestic and international society in terms of anarchy.' It's only a difference of degrees, not a difference of essence. So if you depend solely on rules, you preclude so many interesting and important ways of doing.

On the other hand, if you depend too much on relations, you'll have social injustice. So the argument is that you need to combine the two, rules and relations. In fact, in every country, every actor involved in governance, always practices both paths. Businesspeople argue, because they use a lot of economics—transactional cost theory in economics—they say that when you work on a small scale then you depend more on relations. They have done so much fieldwork in Southeast and East Asia, and have found this. But they also argue that once you move on and the business field gets larger and larger, then you must turn to rules, because relations are too costly. Relations when you are small are comparatively less costly. But I don't agree with the idea of one replacing the other: there must be a point where the two balance each other, because you can never eliminate rules, and you can never eliminate relations, because we are human. For example, this year the United States is coming to attend the East Asia Summit in November 2011 in Bali: the norms here were set by ASEAN, and when ASEAN set the norms they included a lot of Confucian elements. So when the US comes, it must understand that in regional governance here, you have some different practices of governance, which sometimes you have to abide by. You cannot say, 'OK, let's use my way of governance to replace your way of governance.' That would not be practical. So in East Asia, my theory predicts that there will be more and more combinations of Western and Eastern approaches to governance. That could be a testing ground for a synthetic model of governance. The US will come, Russia will come, and perhaps more countries will come, so this will be a fascinating area: how they will come together in terms of governance in East Asia and the Pacific?

Chinese IR scholars, including yourself, regularly quote politicians, especially Deng Xiaoping. Is this to some degree out of deference to your country's leaders, or because perhaps they themselves are theoreticians, not just decision-makers?

What is most important for me is that they are the decision-makers. When leaders make decisions, consciously or (most of the time) unconsciously, they reflect some of the Chinese culture because they live this culture. That's for me the most important thing. But usually, for my English articles, I don't quote them a lot. For example, Deng Xiaoping, the leader of the Communist Party until 1992, got a lot of ideas for his reforms from the West, but also from Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore between 1959 and 1990. Lee Kuan Yew is a very interesting person for having tried to practice some Western ideas, while at the same time holding some East Asian values. He always tried to combine the two, but in his heart he perhaps thinks Chinese philosophy is most useful, once he even said something to the effect that if in Singapore 90% of the population were Chinese, it would be a much better society (Currently, approximately 70% of the population of Singapore is of Chinese ethnicity). Currently Singapore's policy is to increase China's influence, not to reduce the proportion of the Chinese in Singaporean society. So these decision-makers reflect some ideas, just like common Chinese people in their everyday behavior. The same is true for me: in my behavior I have a lot of Chinese elements, even though I studied a lot Western theories. For example, I like to drink tea, I enjoy the whole tea ceremony. I like Chinese calligraphy, and I can recite many, many passages of Chinese literature. That is however not to say I dislike coffee, nor the occasional glass of whisky or cognac.

Once I made the opening speech for the Chinese Association of IR and I had been asked to tell them what my approach to IR was, and I said that while much of my reasoning was from the Western theories, the aesthetic spirit is Chinese. I wrote a book together with my wife, a History of American Literature, from the beginnings up to the 20th century. But I also like Chinese literature, and in Chinese literature you can also see very, very beautiful things, so that's what in my theoretical work I call 审美 shenmei, aesthetics or 'spiritual beauty'. That part I think I try to get more from the Chinese tradition and narratives. That's basically what I do. Whether I can be successful or not, that's a different question, but that's what I'm doing. The good thing for me is that I don't have many utilitarian goals; I don't have to get a career promotion, nothing of that sort. What I want to write, I write.

You tend to be inclined toward the English school of IR, which focuses more on international society than on inter-state relations. Is this as much to do with its approach – international society and institutions – as with its national identity?

First let me give you this background: Barry Buzan (*Theory Talk* #35) and I, we have known each other for many years, and I think I know his ideas fairly well. We have debated and discussed in Jilin, in Britain, in Beijing, and in many other places, and we are good friends. And I admire him very much. But I think that Barry Buzan, deeply in his heart, is very Eurocentric. It doesn't matter what he says. After I wrote my article International Society as a Process, he wrote me a long comment, and he said that he tried to be a good man, but ended up being a villain. That was a joke, but anyhow.

In the United States, a very close friend of mine is Peter Katzenstein (*Theory Talk* #15), and between these two excellent scholars, I think that my idea is closer to Peter Katzenstein's – more plural, more pluralistic. I talk with Peter often, and I think of one thing above all: his

understanding of the inter- and intra-civilizational conflict, his idea that any society could go to the extreme, which may go back to his German background. So that tells me, and I'm not quite sure maybe also tells him, that if you always believe in just the One Authority, the One Leader, the One Truth, that would create disaster. Intellectually, it's the same. So you need to open your eyes to different things and different practices, recognize these things as they are, rather than use dark glasses, or to see the world through your own lens.

Finally, to take a broader view, can one speak of something like a Chinese school of IR, or at least an emerging Chinese school of IR, and how should it be characterized?

Then we come to this question of a Chinese school. I think Western IR theories are already established and influential—even taken for granted!—and Chinese IR theories are almost nothing. So we should change this kind of marginalization. Let the good values of the Chinese culture and tradition become part of IR ideational edifice. If you want to do something like that, change the intellectual status quo, you have to sometimes go to some extreme, so as to at least open up a way for it. Otherwise nobody will pay any attention to Chinese ideas. If you wouldn't use the label, other people wouldn't even see them. So you need to use the label. That's the only reason I use the name 'Chinese school'. I don't think it's entirely correct to use a nation's name to for an intellectual school, but if one uses it, it is more as a symbol to express something, there is no harm in that. Although there is no obvious coherence let alone unanimity among Chinese IR scholars, it may be necessary at this stage to speak of it in this way.

And what is a Chinese school as an idea? Nobody can use only the resources of your own tradition to establish a school nowadays. You cannot separate yourself like that. That's why I don't agree with Professor Zhao Tingyang who claims to draw solely from Chinese traditions. Even his work is not pure in the end! Yet on the other end, I don't agree with Professor Yan Xuetong either, as I don't think that IR Theory is always universal. It should attain some degree of universality, but locality, the local practices, are important. The Chinese have debated for over one hundred years the thought 中□□□□□□□ zhongxue wei ti, xixue wei yong – 'Chinese learning as the essence, Western learning as the practical means.' But I am always against that, so I wrote a short article entitled 世界□□□□□□ shijie wei ti, quanqiu wei yong – 'the world as the essence, the globe as the platform for practice'. This has only been published in Chinese. That is, I continue with my idea of a global vision—even in establishing the Chinese school of IR, you cannot avoid using a lot of things you learn from the Western theorizing, approaches, and their ideas, their concepts, yet at the same time you need a modern, contemporary reinterpretation of traditional Chinese narratives. If you don't have this, then you continue to be Western. If you have this, then you may add some value to the Western thought. So that's what I'm thinking about.

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Related links

- Read Yaqing's *Why is there no Chinese IR Theory?* (International Relations of the Asia Pacific, 2007) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Yaqing's *International Society as Progress* (Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2010) [here](#) (pdf)
- Read Yaqing's *National Identity, Strategic Culture and Security Interests: Three Hypotheses on the Interaction between China and International Society* (SIIS Journal, 2003) [here](#) (html)
- Read Yaqing's *Power, Perception and the Cultural Link* (Asian Affairs: An American Review, 2001) [here](#) (html)
- Lecture by Yaqing on *Northeast Asia: Peace or War?* (RSIS Distinguished Public Lecture, February 16 2011), [audio](#) and [video](#)