

# Relationality and Its Chinese Characteristics

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## Relationality and Post-Western International Relations

China's expanding outreach and diversifying roles have provided a novel context for the ongoing reconsiderations of world politics. As a result, inquiries into how China thinks and in what way its history and traditions inform the idiosyncrasies of China's international outlook have grown into a cottage industry both in International Relations (IR) and across the full spectrum of the humanities and social sciences. In this setting, Beijing's external relations draw attention both because of their agency and due to the specificities of China's individual engagements. What has remained overlooked, however, is that such preoccupation with China has been paralleled by the emergence of a relational turn in IR. One could argue that this is not a mere coincidence. Relationality in IR has become prominent not least because of its simultaneous appropriation by both the so-called Western and non-Western (especially, Chinese) perspectives on world affairs. In this respect, the three books under review seem to have a shared interest in interpreting China's growing significance on the world stage through such relational lenses. Together the three books under review illustrate vividly that the complex patterns of global life resonate with relationality and

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dynamism, rather than the static and spatial arrangements implicit in the fetishized currency of self–other/centre–periphery/hegemon–challenger models underpinning the binary metanarratives of IR.

It is often overlooked that both the Western and the Chinese contributions to the conversations on relationality take as their point of departure the article by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel Nexon (1999). In their study, Jackson and Nexon draw on the work of the sociologist Mustafa Emirbayer in order to draw the outlines of the nascent research agenda on relationality in IR. Borrowing Emirbayer’s distinction between the “substantialist” and “relational” foundations of theory-building, Jackson and Nexon map most of what we call IR theory within the former domain and suggest that the commitment to substantialism provides the common denominator “cut[ting] across conventional divisions in the field, including theories in all the major ‘paradigms’ of IR” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 293). As the three volumes under review indicate, this distinction is rather significant when it comes to the explanation and understanding of China’s international outreach.

Substantialism takes “things” as the foundational “hard core” of its explanation and understanding – namely, only entities are (and can be) treated as units of analysis. In IR this has meant that states (or some other actors) are almost invariably the ontological priors for any kind of theorization. The implication then is that the IR mainstream has been dominated by an atomistic understanding of global life which prioritizes fixed units of analysis (sovereign nation-states) and their discrete dyadic interactions (conflict/balancing in the context of anarchy). Apart from relying on over-generalizations, such substantialism tends to be profoundly essentializing about the actors and processes animating international politics. Not surprisingly, global life is envisioned as a domain of disconnected states, infamously imagined by Arnold Wolfers as “billiard balls.”

On the other hand, relationalism (as its name suggests) takes relations as the priors of any explanation and understanding – namely, it is relations that are the units of analysis. It is *in* and *through* relations that actors emerge and the international roles of these actors will be different in different spaces and times. It is in this context that some of the burgeoning literature on non-Western IR – especially, Chinese IR scholarship – has strived to make its mark by deploying relationality in its strategic narrative. Most prominently, Qin Yaqing, amongst others, has criticized the (Western) IR mainstream for its lack of a theory of relations owing to its monological knowledge production.

In this respect, the claim is that the relational turn has become a defining feature of the so-called post-Western IR theorizing – namely, things in global life are not merely interconnected, but they gain meaning and significance within complex webs of entanglements and encounters with others. The relationality lens helps outline the contested terrain of post-Western IR as a space for dialogical learning, which promises a world that is less hegemonic, more democratic, international and equitable. In particular, such an approach allows scholars to build solidarity between like-minded projects targeting the silencing, hegemony,

patriarchy and violence of the mainstream by treating them as second-order aspects deriving from a first-order problematique – IR’s poignant ontological and epistemic *lack of relationality*. It is the very denial of relationality (first order issue) that perpetuates the imperial, patriarchal and racist attitudes (second order issues) of IR. It is in this vein that the attacks on the latter by critical, feminist and postcolonial theorists overlook the very condition of its possibility – the poignant *lack of relationality* in the IR mainstream.

The three books under review make an important contribution to this relational turn in IR either by directly contributing to the elucidation of its meta-narrative or by illustrating the relational dimensions of current international interactions. It is also significant that the three volumes offer distinct elaborations on (what-might-be-construed-as) the Chinese characteristics of a relational IR. Of the three books under review, it is Feng Zhang’s monograph that offers the most targeted and thoughtful engagement with the relationality paradigm. His is also a rare endeavour owing to Zhang’s intention to bring Western and Chinese takes on relationality into a conversation. On the other hand, both Marcin Kaczmarski’s book and the volume edited by David B. H. Denoon offer insightful illustrations of specific instances of relationality in world affairs. Kaczmarski pivots his account on Russia–China interactions, while the contributors to Denoon’s collection assess the China–US relationship through the prism of their engagements with Central Asian states.

### Theorizing Relationality

Feng Zhang’s work offers a rare opportunity for transcending the difficulties that still seem to stump any IR alternative prefixed by a “non-” or a “post-,” by emphasizing their shared relationality. Such emphasis on relationality acts as a reminder that IR knowledge, just like any knowledge, is acquired and mediated relationally through diverse sets of practices. IR’s denial of ontological relationality has its epistemic effects – perhaps most perniciously evidenced by the imposition of a canon reproduced around the world so that students can contribute to “core” debates, while the inputs of the “periphery” are occluded from the “Anglosphere” of Western IR journals and academia. The inference from Zhang’s work is that knowledge does not exist in isolation; it is not built up atomistically and discretely from scratch; rather to know one thing, you have to know a lot of other things. A relational IR acts simultaneously as a reminder about the multiversal world we inhabit and the composite nature of IR’s episteme. Thus, what makes post-Western IR “post-Western” is its responsiveness and receptivity of other perspectives.

Zhang suggests this potential in his pioneering account of Chinese hegemony that lucidly dispenses with established binaries. In particular, by contextualizing the historical narratives of Sino-Korean, Sino-Japanese and Sino-Mongol relations during the early Ming period in order to uncover the discursive formations of grand strategy, Zhang discloses the experience and promise inherent in the

practices of China's expressive relationality. While most of the IR mainstream tends to focus on the instrumental features of relationality, the Confucian ethos backstopping Chinese strategic culture makes available an expressive alternative that informs the interpretation of the past, the present and the likely trajectories of the future Chinese international outreach. Perhaps the only problematic feature of Zhang's thoughtful study is the suggestion that "to equate relationalism with *guanxi* is to confuse the explanans with the explanandum" (p. 183). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate further on this statement. Zhang merely goes on to state that his own predilection towards relationalism (over *guanxi*) is informed by the fact that the former is a tradition present both in the West and the non-West, while the latter is distinctly Chinese. Yet, this claim seems to miss the point that for quite a number of Chinese political scientists (let alone sociologists and philosophers) there is no distinction between relationalism and *guanxi* – in fact, *guanxi* is relationalism.

Such lack of clarity is unfortunate as it appears so crucial to Zhang's framework of analysis and points to a potential flaw in his otherwise perceptive account – namely, that the instrumental and expressive sides of relationalism (both in the West and China) are not opposite but rather complementary features of a complex sets of relations. Mirroring Zhang's dichotomy, the literature on *guanxi* likewise distinguishes between the expressive and instrumental aspects of its exchanges. The former is often evaluated as the positive side of social bonding, while the instrumental *guanxi* is associated with the negative flavours of relationality such as graft, nepotism and corruption. Yet, as some have recently demonstrated such distinction is misguided – expressive *guanxi* frequently provides material benefits and vice versa instrumental *guanxi* is only possible when the participants share reciprocal commitments (Kavalski 2012, 188). Thus, the outcomes of relationality are compounded and diffuse over time and space. The dichotomized view of its instrumental and expressive aspects seem to deny the nonlinear and contingent nature of relations.

Zhang's bifurcated outlook is also made possible by his preoccupation with actors' quest for legitimacy. Again, it is the literature on *guanxi* that can assist with addressing this quandary. Rather than legitimacy, *guanxi* stresses reputational profile as the main currency of relationality. The cultivation of reputation (a feature that IR observers often subsume within the appellation of status) is the main aim of such international interactions. In this setting, *recognition* emerges as "the core constitutive moment" of relational international interactions – in particular, it rests on the reputation for meeting one's obligations to others. Thus, rather than facilitating the legitimacy of one's actions, the strategic aim of *guanxi* is to enhance the reputation for trustworthiness of actors by providing series of situations in which they can continuously enact (as well as be evaluated upon) their willingness to meet the expectations of others. While this process has generally been interpreted in the literature as part and parcel of any state's quest for international status, the contention here is that it demonstrates the *struggle for recognition* (as opposed to the struggle for power) as the defining feature of international life.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, Zhang's insightful book establishes "*Relational-politik*, as an ethically more defensible alternative, [which] may lead international relations towards a more cooperative and harmonious direction" (p. 182). This demands skills for living (if not, thriving) in a social environment beyond the control of any of the participating actors. At the same time his highly readable and captivating account does not recoil from the ambiguities, controversies and unintended consequences attending the history and practices of Chinese international affairs. The perceptiveness and erudition that characterize Zhang's engagement firmly establish his position as one of the foremost interpreters of China's strategic outlook and culture.

### Practising Relationality

Few would dispute that the relationality turn has generated a lot of intellectual momentum in IR knowledge-production – both in its Western and Chinese variants and, especially, among the burgeoning scholarship intent on trespassing any and all forms of boundary thinking in IR. Yet, such engagement with relationality has been criticized for its presumed failure to elucidate the dynamics of world affairs. Such critique is premised on the assumption that the introduction of a new paradigm changing the meta-narrative of IR is distinct from the project of operationalizing IR insights. It also overlooks the applications of relationality in the study of diplomacy – in fact, one could read Feng Zhang's book as an account of Chinese diplomatic history (especially, its complex institution-building endeavours across East Asia) that also illuminates Beijing's current and prospective international engagements. Not only that, relational theorizing also draws attention to the distinct roles and positions that international actors take in diverse spatial and temporal contexts. Such attention to the varied repertoires of state practices offers a much more nuanced and relevant reading of their distinct interactions rather than the ones premised on states' presumed national interests or perceived material capabilities.

It is precisely to this conversation that Kaczmarek's book and Denoon's volume make thoughtful interventions. In particular, their contribution to the operationalization of the relationality paradigm is the claim that the explanation of the possible trajectories in the relations between international actors are best deciphered not through the discrete study of their bilateral interactions with each other, but through the examination of the character of their associations with third parties. For both Kaczmarek and Denoon, the region of Central Asia offers a particularly relevant locale for uncovering insights (both occluded and new) about China's international roles. This proposition offers a stimulating framework for the examination of China's global outreach and its international interactions. For Kaczmarek, the distinct relational dynamics that have emerged in these regions attest to a qualitative new "status quo" (p. 86), while for the contributors to Denoon's volume they illustrate the complex "multi-vectoral foreign policy" (p. 93) of international actors. Such engagement also challenges the

dominant interpretation of the so-called power transition paradigm in IR by drawing attention to the various dynamics, perceptions and practices animating both global life and the reactions of international actors. Such sensitivity and nuance is possible only by remaining attuned to the contexts and kinds of interactions that these actors develop.

Kaczmarek's account focuses on the Sino-Russian relationship in what he calls "the post-crisis international order" – which is an admittedly awkward shorthand for the period of post-2008 global financial crisis, rather than an indication that contemporary world affairs are bereft of crises. Thus, through repeated and committed interactions with Central Asian and East Asian partners, Beijing and Moscow develop shared understandings about each other's roles and positions. Also, it is in the context of these interactions that reciprocity and recognition of each other's concerns emerge, which have prodded both China and Russia to exercise "accommodation" and "self-restraint towards [one another] at the bilateral, regional, and global levels" (p. 169). In this respect, Kaczmarek's analysis not only illuminates the patterns and practices of Russia's and China's foreign policies, but also radically alters the dominant frameworks within which the debate on their interactions tends to be positioned. What emerges is a far more sophisticated and nuanced narrative of the multiplicity, contingency and unpredictability of Chinese international agency on the world stage.

It is worth pointing that for Kaczmarek, relationality is a particular form of "social interaction" (p. 164), which opens opportunities for "socially negotiated" outcomes in world affairs (p. 4). Thus, in contrast to the strategic rationality ascribed to international actors, his heuristic approach demonstrates the significance of what actors happen to do together. In particular, as the Chinese case demonstrates, shifts in material capabilities do not in and of themselves reveal much about the nature of international interactions unless these are assessed in the contingent context of specific relations. It is such inferences that draw attention to the overlooked relational dimensions of "China's rise" (p. 46) – it involves more than just the dominant actor and the challenger, and does not take place in a vacuum but rather within the complex network of interdependent interactions that animate the dynamics of global life (and for which the very term power transition offers only a partial description). Kaczmarek's attention to the sociality of international actors allows him to draw thoughtful conclusions on the dynamics, logics and policies underpinning the trajectories of the Sino-Russian relationship.

Similar commitment informs the collection edited by Denoon. The 15 chapters in this volume are primarily concerned with the trajectories of Sino-American relations. Yet, unlike most analyses, these are contextualized within the setting of Central Asia and the multiplicity of internal and external actors that China and the US encounter in the region. In this complex web of relations, the volume draws attention to the roles played by the European Union, India, Japan, Korea, Russia and Turkey, as well as the different region-building projects that such diverse sets of actors have fostered. In this way, the volume provides a rare

and pertinent reconsideration of the dominant frameworks for the explanation and understanding of the Sino-American relationship. In particular, the elaboration of “the rise of Chinese influence” (p. 164) – both in Central Asia and globally – reflects the role played not only by legitimacy, but also by reputation which derives from and is embedded in the practices through which it projects its social purpose in global life. It is not coincidental that a number of the contributors emphasize the perception that Washington is “losing its reputation as the protector of political and economic interdependence” (p. 367), which seems to undermine American international outreach.

The critical contribution of the Denoon’s collection is the recognition that rather than merely facilitating access to economic and political resources in the context of a power transition, the experience of Central Asia suggests that that the Sino-American contestation is mainly directed at obtaining and utilising social resources. In this respect, actors (and their agency) have effects only to the extent that they are *in relations* with others (not as a result of material capabilities or fixed subjectivities). As Carolyn Kissane, referring to David Kerr in her chapter, indicates, “the Chinese strategy in Central Asia is just one vision which must coexist with others, notably those emanating from Moscow, Washington, and, perhaps, Brussels... and from Bishkek, Dushanbe, Astana, Tashkent, and Ashgabat as well” (p. 380). Thus, owing to the dynamic nature of regional interactions, what passes for world order is not only constantly changing, but demands ongoing commitment to participating in and maintaining these relations. It is, therefore, the thoughtful analytical and policy engagement with the interplay between Chinese and American strategies in the complex geopolitical setting of Central Asia that sets Denoon’s volume apart. It provides a compelling perspective on the intricate relational patterns within which various international actors hone their strategic “tools of manipulation” (Alisher Khamidov, p. 174). At the same time, rather than looking at dyadic sets of relations as well as the identities and capacity of individual actors, an account attuned to the relationality of global life inheres an IR pivoted on webs of figurations intertwined by a conscious and strategic search for relations with others.

### **Conclusion: China’s Rise in a Gimballed World**

Perhaps few other actors had their standing in international life as profoundly transformed by the end of the Cold War as China. On the one hand, the rash of attention to Beijing’s global outreach seems to confirm the variety of new roles and attitudes that it has extended in world politics. On the other hand, such entrepreneurship on the world stage attests both to the transformations in and the transformative potential of Chinese foreign policy attitudes. It should not be surprising, therefore, that there is so much interest in (as well as anxiety about) the prospective trajectories of Beijing’s international interactions. Although the rendition of China’s international engagements follows different modalities in the accounts by Zhang, Kaczmarek and the contributors to

Denoon's collection, their narratives demonstrate the need for a thoughtful relational examination of Beijing's external relations. Foreign policy, thereby, reflects specific constructions of political rule, economic production, socio-cultural traditions and historical imagination. In this respect, the patterns of China's foreign affairs presents an intriguing intersection of the discursive memory of the past with the contexts of the present and the anticipated tasks of the future.

One of the corollaries that the analyses of the three books under review appear to have in common is the suggestion that the basic ontological condition of international actors is relational. Relationality thereby reflects a condition of intelligibility for the sense-making processes on the world stage. Consequently, as Zhang, Kaczmarks and the contributors to Denoon's volume demonstrate, the viability of any model of international order – regardless of whether it is championed by China, the US, Russia or any other international actor – is contingent on the relational interpretation of the promoter's agency by other actors. In particular, as the dynamism and contextual ubiquity of Central Asian affairs has demonstrated, foreign policy making becomes a contingent outcome of relational interactions between actors – that is, the relational context frames the policy response, and because of its inherent fluidity, policy is expected to fluctuate. The assessments provided by the three books under review offer effective and compelling historical engagement with the conflicting opinions on China's global roles and aspirations as well as a frank and robust assessment of the contending views on whether its alleged rise is a sustainable and positive phenomenon altogether. Thus, it is the very emphasis on and engagement with relationality that allows Zhang, Kaczmarski and the contributors to Denoon's collection to construct a veritable interpretation of the past, current and future trajectories of China's external outlook.

At the same time, such consideration of relationality make a prescient reflection on the dynamics, logics and policies underpinning not only the trajectories of the China's international interactions, but the very patterns of world affairs. Such endeavours engender a rather gimballed view of global life – just like a ship's compass (or a gimbal), the patterns of world affairs are made up of multiple, interdependent and constantly shifting spheres of relations. The result is a multi-scalar framing of global life in which diverse layers of actors and agency (and the various systems, institutions and regimes which they inhabit) animate overlapping levels of contingent aggregation. The emphasis on relationality – and, especially, its Chinese characteristics – illuminates that the complex patterns of global life resonate with relationality and dynamism, rather than the static and spatial arrangements implicit in the self-other/centre-periphery models. In other words, in contrast to the dualistic bifurcations that dominate IR imaginaries, the notion and practices of relationality reframe world order as a gimballed interface suffused with the fragility, fluidity and mutuality of global interactions. Normatively speaking, such an approach intimated that the disciplinary inquiry of IR should be about the cultivation of attentiveness. Such attentiveness will undoubtedly make IR research messy by developing a disposition to encounter and respond to currents, trends and voices that are uncomfortable and are not



easily digestible by established paradigms. In short, a gimballed view involves utterly otherwise than a neutral, invisible and uncommitted mode of inquiry. Thus, engaging the phenomenon of relationality invokes the complexity of possible worlds.

### Biographical note

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