



Aufsätze

Theory of International Relations with Chinese Characteristics

The Tian-Xia System from a Metatheoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyses Zhao Tingyang's (2009) approach to construct a theory of International Relations (IR) with Chinese characteristics. His approach is one of many recent attempts to incorporate a notion of Chineseness into theory-building. Drawing on ancient Chinese philosophy, his approach is built on the ancient Chinese tributary system called Tian-Xia (Chinese for All-under-heaven, essentially referring to all humans on earth). Zhao's Tian-Xia system will be analysed from a meta-theoretical perspective by analyzing key components of philosophy of science criteria inherent in his proposed meta-theory of IR. The components and their underlying ontological assumptions are then compared with Western theories of IR. It is concluded that Zhao's approach provides valuable insights and new perspectives, especially in terms of a differing notion of ontology that does away with the limitations of a Western dualistic worldview and may be food for thought in dealing with contemporary challenges of the globalized world system.

Schlüsselwörter

Zhao Tingyang, International Relations Theory, Metatheory





The goal of this paper is the analysis of recent approaches to form an IR theory with *Chinese characteristics* from a metatheoretical perspective. From the very beginning, it should be noted, however, that there is no such thing as a coherent Chinese IR theory. There have been several attempts to account for *Chineseness* leaning on ideology, Western theories and ancient Chinese philosophy.

Looking back at the evolution of the field of IR in China, the first foreign affairs departments were established in the 1950s, with teachings mostly comprising the interpretation of influential leaders like Mao, Marx and Lenin and their implications for practical policy actions, i.e. »action-oriented« theory (Qin 2007, 315). Starting from the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution and with the opening up of the economy under Deng Xiaoping, IR flourished as a discipline in China, with Western IR theories massively being translated in the 1980s and 1990s. This wave of translations has led to a dominance of Western, especially American IR theories in China (Wang 2006, v). By 2006, IR research and institutions equal that of the US in size (Wang 2006, I–iv).

Still, China did and does not have a theory of IR of its own. Rather, foreign policy tends to be very practically oriented (see Wang Jisi 1994, 438; Chan 1999, 16). The absence of an academic IR theory is due to the fact that China has been separated from the rest of the world for a long time, doing away with the need to have a theory of IR (Qin 2007, 323–4). In addition, China has, in contrast to the West, not been subject to the early influences of Enlightenment. Therefore there has not been a need for rational, abstract analysis (Yu-Lan 1922, 260).

For the past 20 years, there has been a »marathon style« debate (Wang 2008, 341) about theory development in China (see Liang 1994, 15–21; Shi 1996, 518; Chan 1999; Guo 2005; Qin 2005, 7–13; Yan 2010; Noesselt 2010; Cunningham-Cross 2011). While this debate has resulted in a diversity of thoughts and approaches, they all concern the desire to account for a *Chinese way* of conceptualizing IR. Approaches to form a Chinese theory of IR are mainly grounded in three areas: ideology, modernization and ancient philosophy (Qin 2007; Qin 2009; Noesselt 2012) and a combination of the three are seen as the key challenge to construct a unique Chinese theory (Qin 2007).





Background: International Relations in China

In the 1950s, there was only one university that had a foreign affairs department in China: the People's University of China in Beijing (short *Renmin University*). Increased interest triggered by Sino-Soviet conflicts in the early 1960s led to the establishment of international affairs departments at Fudan University in Shanghai and Peking University in Beijing as well, followed by several government controlled research institutes (Song 2001, 62). While Renmin University specialized in the study of Communist movements across the globe and Peking University on national liberation movements taking place in the Third World, Fudan University focused on the Western study of IR (Qin 2007, 315). Teachings mostly comprised the interpretation of influential leaders like Mao, Marx and Lenin and their implications for practical policy actions, i.e. »action-oriented« theory (Qin 2007, 315).

It was not until the 1980s, after the Cultural Revolution and with the opening up of the economy under Deng Xiaoping that IR flourished as a discipline in China. Western theories were introduced and Chinese students studied at Western universities to learn about them. More and more research institutes were established (Song, 2001, 62,63; Qin, 2007, 315-7; Noesselt, 2012,13), massively translating Western IR theories in the 1980s and 1990s. After an initial bias towards Realism in academic discourse, translation focused on other schools like the English school, Constructivism and Liberalism (Qin 2002, 1–7).

Present IR research in China may be divided in three groups: government agencies and institutes focusing on policy-oriented studies, universities that engage in theoretical aspects of international studies and the *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)* in both Beijing and the provinces, engaging in both policy-oriented and theoretical research (Song 2001, 62-3).

Towards a Chinese theory of IR

The desire to establish a unique theory of IR that accounts for *Chinese characteristics* has become increasingly pronounced. China has a rich culture that differs significantly from the West. Culture and history are of great importance to the Chinese and both nationalism and sinocentrism are characteristic features of Chinese society today. In addition, Chinese and Western culture are often regarded





as being characterized by contrasting models of intellectual processes in many respects (Nisbett 2005). With respect to China, this may be due to the isolation in which Chinese civilization developed as well as the very different nature of the Chinese script (Chen 1999), so that Chinese values, for instance, are in essence paradoxical in nature and reflected in language, embracing both extremes of a specific value at the same time (Chen 2001; Fang, 2003, 2006).

With all IR scholarship originating from the West, and being said to focus on relations between Superpowers, far from being universally applicable (see for instance Neumann 1998), it seems logical to investigate and apply the essence of the cultural difference to the field of IR. Having said that, what has to be kept in mind is that Chinese culture is not homogeneous but rather complex: Traditional Chinese culture is made up of a mix of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. In the forceful arrival of the Western world in China, Chinese ancient philosophy was regarded to be backward so that the spirit of Enlightenment, rationality and materialism substituted many aspects in Chinese traditional thinking (Qin 2007, 331). Furthermore, China is changing at a fast pace and what can be observed in all areas of life is a *hybrid culture*- a mix of modernization, Western culture and ancient Chinese culture with China seeking to combine Western modernisation with its very own tradition (see for instance Hexter and Woetzel 2007).

The search for a Chinese theory of IR therefore can be seen against this context as another search for a combination of Western modernization with *Chinese characteristics* because all present attempts are by definition ex post and influenced by knowledge of Western IR scholarship.

Chinese understanding of theory

The more modern Chinese understanding of theory was influenced by Marxism and Leninism, implying that theory should serve to build socialism (Wang Jisi 1994, 482):

»No distinction is actually made between those applied theories leading to the formulation of policy and social science theories with only descriptive, predictive, and explanatory power. According to a standard Chinese defini-





tion, a theory (“lilun”) is ›a system of concepts and principles, or a systematic rational knowledge; a scientific theory is established on the basis of social practice and has been proved and verified by social practice, and is a correct reflection of the essence and laws of objective things. The significance of a scientific theory lies in its ability to guide human behaviour.« (Ci hai, Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House)

Theory, accordingly, should serve to guide foreign policy action (Chan 1999). At present, Chinese scholars distinguish between two types of theory, however: action-oriented theory to guide foreign policy on the one hand, and knowledge-oriented theory on the other hand (Qin 2007, 314). The latter corresponds to the notion of theory in Chinese traditional thinking, where an understanding of the world, i.e. human nature and the natural environment is of central interest (Song 2001, 70).

Song Xinning furthermore distinguishes between younger and more senior scholars regarding their perceptions of the function of theory (Song 2001, 64). For senior scholars, there are two strands of theory: Western theory and Socialist theory (i.e. Marxist-Leninist), which are said to differ in their mutually exclusive underlying theoretical frameworks (Huan 1987, 1; Hu 1991,1), the former representing imperialist interest and the latter socialism (Huan 1987, 50-55). For most younger scholars, IR theory is seen to serve the goal of analysing global politics, with room for differences in opinion regarding the universality of a theory’s explanatory power vs. its practical applicability in specific situations (Yuan 1992, 17-8).

Sources of *Chineseness* for theory building

The need for a unique Chinese theory of IR has already been expressed by Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s with his presentation of *Socialism with Chinese characteristics*. In line with this idea, Zhang Mingqian¹ stated that

1 the State Council’s director of the research department of the Center for International Studies





»It is not the Soviet theory, nor the American theory, nor even the theory that could be easily accepted by the whole world. It must be Chinese opinions of international affairs and the culmination of Chinese understandings of the laws of the international community development« (Zhang Mingqian 1991).

According to Song Xinning, many senior scholars regard Chinese IR theory as being a mixture of the thoughts of China's leaders like Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping in combination with a Marxist-Leninist socialist theory (Song 2001, 65). This theory therefore both includes an approach focusing on capitalism and social classes within states, but also Mao Zedong's *Theory of Intermediate Zones* that guided foreign relations in the 1940s and 1950s (Wang Jisi, 1994, 484, Liang 1997), the *Theory of Three Worlds* (1970s and early 1980s) and the *Principle of Peaceful coexistence* as well as Deng Xiaoping's *Theory of Peace and Development* (since 1982), for example (see Zhang Lili et al. 1989; Wang Jisi 1994, 484, 485). These approaches all define strategic positions towards the main Superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, having been used as a strategic guide in the conduct of foreign policy. They do not propose a new theory in the meta-theoretical sense with a unique ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Other approaches to account for *Chinese characteristics* introduce Chinese traditional thinking stemming from ancient Chinese philosophy and combine it with influential Chinese leaders' thoughts, Marxism and Western theories (see for instance Ni et al., Wang Lian 2006).

Chinese traditional thinking and its implications for IR are enjoying growing support as a basis for theory building (see for example Liu Zhiguang 1992, Song 1997, 1999). These approaches focus on the traditional Chinese understanding of the world order and China in the world system with concepts such as sinocentrism, the tributary system, i.e. China (in the centre) vs. the tribal society (in the periphery) and heaven's mandate or rule of courtesy by the dynasty of heaven as well as Confucianism, Taoism and the Book of Change (*Yi Jing*) stressing virtue and morality, integration and peace (Tang 2007; Song 2001, 70). One such approach, based on the ancient tributary system and Chinese philosophy, is put forward by Zhao Tingyang.





Zhao Tingyang's approach to a Chinese theory of IR

Zhao Tingyang², engaged in the construction of a theory with Chinese characteristics, became famous in China for proposing an IR theory based on Chinese ancient philosophy (Qin 2009; Zhang Feng 2010).

He provides a framework that is built on ancient Chinese philosophical thought for rethinking contemporary global politics. What is unique to his approach is that by presenting his *World Theory*, he contrasts the ancient Chinese political system built on ancient philosophical thought with the contemporary world system. He uncovers differences in ontology and its materialization in the institutionalization of both ancient and present system. With ontology and institutionalization being entangled, they are the key to understanding conflicts in contemporary global politics.

His approach does not provide an explicit analysis of reality *as it is* and an explanation of the key factors that drive and explain present international relations as is done by Western theories like Neorealism, Neoinstitutionalism, New Liberalism or Constructivism. His work in essence consists of two parts: on the one hand, a more or less implicit analysis of contemporary global politics, whose problems he ascribes to the very structure of the international system. On the other hand a normative part that introduces ancient philosophical thinking and the translation to political practice in form of the creation of a world government.

The Tian-Xia view seeks to give an answer to the question of why, in a globalized world, there is no global theory. The Tian-Xia view proposes as an answer a political philosophical theory based on Chinese ancient philosophy as a holist approach for the globalized world system. In essence, Zhao provides a translation from ancient philosophical thought to practical political implementation. The traditional Chinese world system and way of thinking are applied to the current globalized

2 See Zhao Tingyang, *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution* (Tianxia Tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun), Nanjing: Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005, 160 pp; Zhao Tingyang, *Investigations of the Bad World: Political Philosophy as the First Philosophy* (Huai Shijie Yanjiu: Zuwei diyi zhexuede zhengzhi zhexue), Beijing: Renmin Daxue Chubanshe, 2009, 366pp; Zhao Tingyang *A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under-heaven* (Tianxia) 2009 56: 5 Diogenes





world: he suggests principles for a political organisation that would lead to ancient philosophical principles manifesting themselves again for the globalized world. He himself envisages this as a means to rethink current problems in contemporary politics and a contribution of a vision for future governance. In terms of theory development, it provides an approach to incorporate Chinese characteristics from ancient philosophy into contemporary global politics.

The key is the introduction of a holist point of view, a *world-view* from the point of view of the world instead of a Western dualistic view that has its start and end on the level of the nation-state.

»Political philosophy, or political science, will never be complete unless the perspective of the world as a whole is introduced into it. Only then will the problems of world politics be fully understood. The all-under-heaven theory is designed to rethink problems of the world, such as those of world order and governance, conflicts and cooperation, war, peace and cultural clashes; all of which have been usually misconstrued by international theories.« (Zhao 2009, 12)

Zhao argues that the contemporary, globalized world has no core identity of its own. While globalization is said to have done away with the Westphalian system of nation-states, overcoming borders in the formation of a new system that is global in nature, all thinking about the contemporary world still assumes the nation-state as a reference point. According to Zhao, thinking is still limited to the nation state - thinking *inter-national* instead of global. A global conceptualisation, in contrast, is one that concerns the world as a whole.

Referring to the modern World System in Wallerstein's sense, he argues that the notion of a world system again is synthesized by the interests of individual nation states in the form of enforced imperialistic dominance. While such a system that is dominated by powerful states may be regarded as *ruled* by these states, it is still not a system »*of and for* the world or *by* the world« (Zhao 2009,6).

»The difference between philosophy for the world and philosophy of the world is very relevant to the justification of a world-view. Anybody can have a





world philosophy in accordance with his own horizons. Likewise, any nation can have a world philosophy in keeping with national interests. However, we need a world philosophy which speaks on behalf of the world. The world is absent because of our refusal to see it from its own perspective. The failure of world politics is essentially the failure of philosophy. The question is therefore how to take care of the world for the world? « (Zhao 2009,7)

A real world theory, therefore, focuses on the world as a whole rather than that of individual nation-states. It implies seeing a phenomenon for what it is rather than in relation, comparison or conceptualisation of another unit. Zhao argues that this holistic view is lacking in today's politics. What is needed is an institutionalized system for the well-being of the whole world.

The core problem, therefore, in essence is a mismatch between present reality and our conceptual thinking about it. The *problem* is globalization, a new world order, and how to conceptualize this new world.

The Chinese *Tian-Xia* has, as so often the case in Chinese language, different notions of meaning. Simply translated, it means *under heaven* or *world*. However, the meaning of this notion of world comprises three different levels: first, the world in a geographical sense, second, a psychological notion that encompasses people's feeling or sentiment, and third, a political institution of the world. It is only the combination of all three aspects of the word that the meaning of world is complete. The world is not a world unless all three elements are fulfilled (see Qin 2007, 329-31). Therefore, next to a holistic worldview, principles of the *Tian-Xia view* include the ideal of harmony and the idea of order (Qin 2007, 331).

Harmony is a very basic and essential principal in Chinese traditional thought:

»In Chinese theory, harmony is the necessary ontological condition for different things to exist and develop, usually defined as reciprocal dependence, reciprocal improvement or the perfect fitting for different things, as opposed to the sameness of things (Zhao 2009,14).«





Harmony, therefore, is more than an ideal but rather a condition for of substance of life. It is a logical condition in a world where opposites belong together. It implies a *oneness* of man and nature and moral selflessness (Qin 2007, 330).

It involves the combination of different elements in such a way that their combination is harmonic. This suggests the importance of relationships in Chinese thinking, not one single thing, but its relation to others determines the whole. As an example, Zhao mentions a well-cooked soup or music – it is the combination of ingredients and contrasting sounds that turns the whole into harmony.

In ancient Chinese thinking, harmony is considered the ultimate political goal because it represents ideal cooperation. It goes further than cooperation, however, for it additionally includes the strive for improvement.

Qin Yaqing (2007, 330) compares harmony in the Chinese understanding to Keohane's notion of cooperation and conflict, where harmony is just one very unlikely possibility following from an inherent dichotomy of opposites. Zhao (2009), in turn, presents harmony in a game by introducing what he calls *Confucian equilibrium* and *Confucian improvement*: they are the result of a cooperation game between X and Y, whereby both players gain when one of the players gain and lose when the other loses. This principle extends until it will become the dominant strategy to improve the other player's gain.

The notion of *order*, central to Confucianist thinking (He et al. 1991), is another component of the concept of *All-under-heaven*. In a Confucianist order, societal relationships are defined in hierarchical terms of family relationships, all governed by moral and ethical codes of conduct (Qin 2007, 330, 331). Qin Yaqing contrasts this understanding of society ruled by morals and rituals with a Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian notion of society whose underlying assumptions are inherently different: »Rather, it was that between father and sons in the Confucian family, unequal but benign.« (Qin 2007, 330)

Meta-theoretical analysis of Zhao Tingyang's approach

In contrast to a positivist metatheory, being the basis for Neoinstitutionalist, Neo-liberal or Neorealist theory, for example, Zhao's analysis of the current system





and the Tian-Xia system is non-positivist and assumes, similar to World-Systems-Analysis, a holistic ontology as well as methodological holism and an interpretive epistemology. Being non-positivist, the Tian-Xia view is built on implicit constructivist assumptions. The Chinese view distinguishes between the *scientific* and the *social* world, with the latter being subject of research and discussion in politics. Reality, therefore, is socially constructed. The *social factors* that are key to the *Tian-Xia system* are ethics, hierarchy and identity that are shared amongst all people in the world. Since any thing has being only in relation to others, there is no fixed notion of reality. Instead, reality is constantly changing. The existence of unobservable structures in this context is inevitable.

However, as opposed to scientific realism, it is not implied that this structure exists independent of the mind. Any individual being part of a constellation of relations by definition will affect this situation and therefore the existence of the other. Subjects are generally aware of the constellation, so it might be argued that social kinds »know themselves«, but, in contrast to the notion of reflexivity introduced by Wendt (Wendt 1999, 76), this does not inevitably lead to a need to change it. This suggests that the subject-object distinction is not applicable, since the essence of one thing depends on the other and vice versa. This is a significant difference from Wendt's assumption of philosophical materialism inherent in social constructivism (see Wendt 1999, 72).

Yet collective ideas are equally important in Zhao's analysis and the Tian-Xia view. The idea about one's identity as well as ethics – or aggregated as culture representing an ideational quality that is shared amongst everyone in the ideal system – is in line with Wendt's notion of a cultural structure and a collective, socially constructed reality as suggested by Wallerstein (Wallerstein 2004). (For an analysis of Neoinstitutionalist, Neoliberal and Neorealist theory as well as World- Systems Theory and Social Constructivism see Spindler 2012.)

Zhao's *Tian-Xia system* refers to the reality of ancient China, with the ancient tributary system, characterized by a monarchic system with aristocratic elements, in which one central government governs the core values of international politics. In case the world government abuses its power, it may be overthrown through revolution (see Zhao 2009).





This system essentially has been built on a Chinese understanding of the world and ancient thinking that forms the basis of Chinese metaphysics (Liu Jee Loo 2011). This worldview provides a distinct ontological basis that is different in nature to Western dual ontological perspective. In the ancient Chinese understanding, *the world* meant everything under heaven. However, rather than seeing several different states on earth in an interconnected world system in the Waltzian sense, in the Chinese understanding the notion of space is different. It might be compared to a set of circles or the structure of an atom, or, as Qin describes it, the Forbidden City and the city of Beijing built around it, with one centre and a periphery that evolves gradually from the centre Yaqing (Qin 2007, 322). And, similar to that picture, a notion of time, with different generations that stretch out forward and backward from the present into past and future (Hall and Ames 2005, 11–13).

The idea of a centre that extends in the infinite in both space and time also applies to relations between people as between states (Qin 2007, 323): the emperor in the centre ruled over the land with princes governing parts of the land, somewhat similar to the system of monarch and vassal. Back then, China, as the centre of what is now South East Asia, acted as a sole governing authority over the region for the provision of goods, ensuring stability and trade with flows from the centre to the attached dependent states (Fairbank 1968; Fairbank and Reischauer 1989; Swaine and Tellis 2000).

The tributary system therefore not only refers to a political system or societal organization but also to the view of society and the world held by the Chinese in ancient times, based on Chinese metaphysics. The institutionalization of a government may be seen as a materialization of philosophical thought and everyday understanding of the organization of social life.

Therefore, on an individual level, the notion of a centre that extends in the periphery also has ontological implications. It implies that the periphery is not different from the centre, but it is the centre itself, it is part of the centre. Accordingly, another individual is also part of this same *one* that is everywhere.

»The extended self, although having the same ontological status in nature, was not the same in social status. Distance away from the centre made the





difference in social status. This difference in status constituted the ordering principle of the Tributary System. The essence of the Tributary System was the radiation of the ego, China as the 'I' at the centre while other tributary states at the periphery paid tributes to the centre. This is a system in which there was no distinction between the ego and the alter. The ontological status of the units of the system was at the same time the ontological status of the centre.« (Qin 2007, 323)

There is no clear cut between subject and object, nor is there an objective, constant reality: »The Chinese worldview is an integrated system of subject and object: the individual is placed in the spatial-temporal location of the world, with her experiences, values and expectations constantly shaping as well as being shaped by the world. « (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 4)

The notion of *All-under-one-heaven* thus goes deeper than a geographical divide and social hierarchy. It conveys an intrinsically holist worldview, as in the presence of the one that is all, there is no division between self and other (Feng 1991) or subject and object (Qin 2007, 330):

»As a result, in the Chinese mind, there could be something far away in time and space, but there was never something that was opposite, intolerant, and needed conquering. The far-away was indeed an extension of the self, like great grandfather and the great grandson sons in the temporal framework or the centre of a ripple and its gradually spreading circles in the spatial framework. This holist worldview is different from the Western dualistic view of the two opposites, where an inevitable conflict is implied. «

Laws of nature are understood differently in Chinese metaphysics as compared to a Western understanding. In the former, there is no distinction between the world of nature and the human world. Consequently, problems inherent in the Western approaches stemming from a dichotomy between the two worlds like the mind-body problem, the question of free will vs. determinism etc. do not apply (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 4-7).





In ancient Chinese thinking, relationships are central to being, they are the key to existence and the world is thought of in relational terms rather than in scientific terms. Therefore, Zhao argues, political philosophy is at the heart of metaphysics, rather than ontology. Or, put differently, answering the ontological question: *What is?*, the answer would be: *The world is relationships*. From this basis follows a political, or, in Zhao's words, a »political-oriented epistemology«. It distinguishes between things and facts, the former representing influences on our lives, implying *what-has-been-done*. The latter cannot be controlled by people and exist independently, i.e. are *what they are*.

With such a centrality of relationships, a thing has no existence independent of its context. It comes into being only in relation to the situation or other people. What is and what is true, therefore is volatile and changing. From this follows that *to be is to do* – it is only by action that a thing's being becomes apparent. Regarding epistemology, whereas there is a distinction between epistemology (being considered equal to knowing) and ethics (equal to being) in Western philosophical thinking, in line with the inseparability of subject and object in the Chinese Confucianist tradition, knowing and acting essentially belong together (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 7-9). »Chinese philosophy deals more with the problems of relations and the heart, whereas Western philosophy concentrates more on the truth and the mind.« (Zhao 2009,10)

Western philosophy from the time of the ancient Greeks and especially from Descartes on, has regarded more highly the systematic construction of philosophic knowledge. »By contrast, thinkers in the Chinese tradition have put more emphasis on the pursuit of certain paths or goals in order to realize one's virtue or efficacy« (Tang 2007, 37). Still, according to Liu (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 6-7), one would be mistaken to regard the two as following totally different intellectual goals. Even though assumptions differ, Chinese philosophy does also follow the pursuit of knowledge about the world.

In summary, then, there is an ontological distinction between two notions of the world: on the one hand the world in the scientific sense, which 'is simply out there' and cannot be changed and therefore is not of interest. And on the other hand the world that is made up of social relationships. This world consists of changing situ-





ations and contexts that involve different behaviours. »As a result, relations, and not *essence* define what something is. « (Zhao 2009,10). » Relations are thus the ontological condition for a thing to be present as such.« (Zhao 2009,15)

Since the *scientific, given* world is not of interest and what matters and can be controlled is action, the question of interest is how this world can be controlled by action, which is where ethics and the ideal of the *Tian-Xia-view* -the great harmony between all people- come into play. The system was based on the Confucian notion of the family implying that the world was basically one big family (Qin 2007, 323). In essence, the tributary system is a system that materializes Confucianism with morals and the view of *All-under-heaven*. The Confucian values are considered facts: »The moral realism established in Confucian metaphysics places humans at the centre of the world of real values: humans do not create values; values are instantiated in the world of nature itself. Values are thus facts« (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 5). As Neville puts it, » (t)he Chinese tradition is a powerful antidote for the fact/value distinction « (Neville 2003, 318).

Regarding assumptions about actors and structure³, Zhao implicitly considers the central actors in the present international system to be individual nation-states. At the same time, the system is socially constructed, consisting of social relations. The ontological assumptions about actors' properties as states in the present system is that they maximize individual (i.e. state-) utility. This behaviour is not purely internally-driven and rational, however, like assumed by Waltz' proposal of Neorealism (Waltz 1979, 2000), because ideational factors do play a significant, if not key role in the explanation of state behaviour. The structure of the international system influences agents' behaviour. External factors, then, derived from structure, in the end explain outcomes in global politics. Methodological statism is the logical consequence.

With structure being the key factor to explain behaviour in the interaction between states, so does the structure of the *Tian-Xia* system have consequences for agency. It is somewhat problematic to speak of *agency* at all, however, because the holist approach assumes in essence ontological holism as well: the states *are* the centre; they are extensions of the centre and all part of the world and therefore

3 *Assumptions about actors and structure* is a category of Philosophy of Science criteria put forward by Spindler, 2012





all one. The lowest unit that exists in this system is the family as opposed to the individual in today's (Western) system. Yet the family is part of the bigger system comprising everyone on earth, too. This very structure of all being one works top-down in the sense that its uniting property has consequences for the behaviour between states – harmony rather than conflict will be their main driving force. The system's structure, therefore, affects behaviour.

At the same time, the norms that drive behaviour in the Tian-Xia view may be considered internal to agents (being defined as the family as the smallest unit) as well since their origin lies in the family, the lowest unit of analysis, and works its way upwards. The ethics and morals that are fostered at the family level support the motivational incentive stemming from structure. These two forces mutually constitute and reinforce each other.

This sounds similar to Structuration Theory and Wendt's assumption of a mutual dependency of structure and agency (Wendt 1987). The underlying ontological assumption about the nature of agents differs, however. While there is no ontological priority of one over the other, Wendt (Wendt 1987, 1992, 1999) and Giddens (Giddens 1979, 1984) do assume that agents and structure do have an ontologically distinct existence. In the Chinese view, there is no agency, as the family, being in a sense the periphery of the centre, is regarded to be part of the structure. Yet the family does work to support the structure, so there the notion of mutual constitution inherent in Structuration theory is nonetheless present.

To illustrate this difference, consider the following graphical representations:

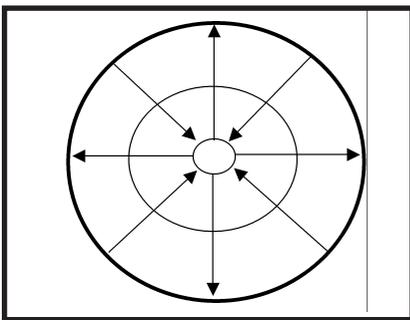


Figure 1: Tian-Xia system

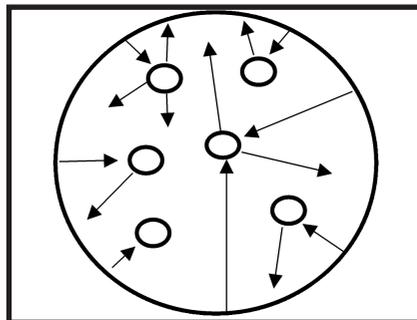


Figure 2: Structuration theory





In figure 1, there are two forces at work, one from within to the outside, the other from the periphery to the inside. Yet there is only one entity. In figure 2, there are also two forces at work, with the broader structure affecting the units and vice versa. But structures and units do have distinct entities.

Since the underlying assumption is still that structure explains international phenomena, shaping individuals' actions, the Tian-Xia view may be regarded to be methodologically holist. Due to the differing underlying ontological assumptions, this holism enjoys a somewhat different quality than World-Systems-Analysis, for example (for an analysis of World- Systems-Analysis see Spindler 2012). Whereas the latter denies any influence of agency, the Tian-Xia view does ascribe a constituting force to the periphery. This periphery of the centre, the agency that is not an agency, is the new element that differentiates the Tian-Xia view from both World-Systems theory and Structuration theory. In the end, it remains a structure-centered explanation, though. Wendt's criticism on World-Systems-theory of being reductionist doesn't apply, however, as it doesn't assume ontological priority of structure since both centre-structure and periphery-structure are one.

In sum, similar to Wallerstein (Wallerstein 2004) in his introduction of World Systems Analysis, Zhao calls for the adoption of a holistic view, whereby the world in itself acts the unit of analysis. However the Tian-Xia system, as described by Zhao, consists of both top-down and bottom-up forces, being political governance and ethics respectively. In the proposed system, therefore, agency and structure are mutually constitutive similar to Structuration theory as introduced by Wendt (Wendt 1987; see also Wendt 1992,1999). Different from the Western order, though, it is not the individual or the state that is assumed to be the agent. The smallest unit in the system is made up of the family.

Whereas Wallerstein (Wallerstein 2004) claims that states *are* not the basic unit of analysis at present, Zhao regards the present being characterized by a focus on nation-states as the cause of conflict.

Regarding the ontological question of what determines structure, Zhao clearly considers ideational factors to be guiding structure which explains the international system and distribution of power inherent in it. However, as he takes the





world system as a whole i.e. the anarchical system with individual nation states as problematic, he takes one step back: He does not, like IR theories typically do, analyse and explain interactions within this given framework, emphasizing norms of material power like Neoinstitutionalism and Neorealism respectively, for instance. Instead, he argues that the given structure itself causes an imbalance in incentives so he proposes an alternative framework.

In the present state of the system, the notion of separation of one state towards the other is the cause of conflict – there is no common ground, no common leader to unite interests and motivation. So the structure of individual states in anarchy in essence implies a lack of common identity, or positively formulated, limited individual identities in a disoriented competition. So Zhao in effect adopts a system-level analysis: conflicts in cooperation in the international system have their root cause in the systemic level.

In the *Tian-Xia system*, in contrast, the world government provides guidance and a common identity that acts as a productive force by uniting interests. The solution to problems is to be found on the systemic level.

The structure of the system, from centre extending into the periphery, shapes the *units* below, both in terms of physical existence as well as being a constraining and enabling force on individual action. Ethics, originating at the family level, also constitute the structure, though.

The structure itself is understood partly the way Wendt does: a generative part (top-down, or working from the center towards the periphery) that defines and determines all individual parts of the structure. These parts, in turn, depend on the structure for their existence. The *internal structure* in the Wendtian sense, in the *Tian-Xia system* consists of ethics, on the one hand, working their way upwards, and reflect the social organization of hierarchy and harmony that effectively prevails at every level of the system. Like Wendt (Wendt 1987, 363, 370), so does Zhao implicitly assume that social structures are inherently ideational and in which shared ideas, or rather feelings of identity, play a significant role. The difference between the two lies in Wendt's adherence to scientific realism and the





concept of harmony inherent in the *Tian-Xia system*, involving a very emotional component.

Looking at the nature of explanation and causality⁴ that is inherent in Zhao's approach, it can be said that by placing the root of conflict on the system-level, Zhao implicitly applies constitutive theory. Rather than making the cause depend on time as a historical, causal analysis would (Wendt 1999,84) and instead of searching for generally applicable rules and laws, Zhao suggests a narrative form of explanation (see Ruggie 1998,34). He explains the properties of state behaviour (i.e. conflict versus harmony) as being constituted by the structure of the world system. In the present system, anarchy constitutes competitive and conflicting behaviour of nation-states. In the *Tian-Xia system* it is families and states that are made possible by the social structure that in turn consists of a central, political governance from the centre for the well-being of all, hierarchical structures on all levels and ethics originating from the family level.

Zhao analyses the contemporary system constitutively, considering the structure of the international system to be the root of international conflict. Structure affects ideas and identity. A solution would be the adoption of the *Tian-Xia system*, in which the global structure is replaced by a world government. Regarding a normative perspective on progress and change of humanity⁵, it therefore follows from Zhao's argumentation that progress essentially depends on overcoming the present structure of the system and adopting a holist viewpoint and institutionalization.

Zhao translates the ontological principle of the world system, in which centre and periphery and everyone in it are one, into a normative guide in order to achieve this philosophical principle by means of institutionalization/ identity building.

Regarding the scope of the system, translated from ontology to a normative point of view, Zhao suggests that it should include everyone in the world, because if

4 *Nature of explanation and causality* is a category of Philosophy of Science criteria put forward by Spindler, 2012

5 The category *Normative perspective on progress and change of humanity* is in line with the categorization a category of Philosophy of Science criteria put forward by Spindler, 2012





there are no *outsiders*, all belong to one *home*. It is the basic idea of *all sitting in one boat together*; the goal is the creation of an extended family.

In line with this, there has to be an institution representing the world as a whole. In this way, states will be part of the central leading organ, being *branches*. Zhao stresses the necessity of the world being the very starting point. The Tian-Xia system therefore envisions a top-down system, whereby governance is transmitted through different layers to the states and then to families as the smallest unit. This structure is different from a Western design in which levels are made up of nation-states, communities and individuals. Zhao's Chinese thinking recognizes the absence of a *leader*, someone »to take care of the world« and its consequence being the inability to solve international conflicts. It is the lack of a holist, world perspective that leads to conflicts because national interests are competing, they are not *part of one boat*. The focus on the nation-state from the Westphalian system essentially leads to a compromise in a cooperation whereby each state seeks to maximize its own national interest. There is no *ideal cooperation*. With the *Tian-Xia system* it becomes possible to adopt a broader view on global problems.

Zhao argues that legitimate political institutions should be universally applicable. The underlying idea is that the macro level conditions the micro level, and there will only be peace and order internally if there is peace and order externally, i.e. on the global level. Therefore, good governance should be transmitted top-down, from the central political leadership to the individual states. This overarching institution on a higher level to which the lower levels belong is missing in a system of individual nation states. There is in a sense no *belonging* or *common goal*, resulting in competition and conflict between the individual states. An analogy is to consider a company as an example: Within a large company, there are several individual departments. They all seek to promote the company's overall well-being while they are all part of one company culture. Opposed to that imagine several small companies competing in the market. Conflict is much more likely to arise in the latter case.

There is a second force in this universal political structure that complements the top-down governance and works the other way around: it is the principal of ethics that works bottom-up. Based on the Confucian idea that the world should be





ruled like a family and the idea that peace stems from the family model, it starts at the lowest level, the family, and extends upwards to all people on the world. A legitimate political system essentially consists of both a governing political and an ethical system. This idea is in contrast to the Western idea of absolute individuality, in which *the other* is likely to be regarded as the enemy, resulting in conflict.

»The all-under-heaven system [in contrast, BH] [...] proposes politics of harmony for a world in which relations prevail far and near among nations, as opposed to hostility differentiating between the self and others. In a world with no enemies, or *hostis*, harmony becomes possible.« (Schmitt 1996, 28, quoted in Zhao 2009, 14)

Zhao argues that while one might be tempted to associate the UN with a world government, this is not accurate since the UN itself is no more than a negotiation platform for national interests. In addition, it is a government without a people. While the principle of rational communication promoted by the UN does enhance understanding, this does not automatically imply mutual acceptance, which is a precondition for true agreement (Zhao 2009, 16). The international system, in essence, then, remains an individualist one with conflicts arising from this very basic structure of dualistic thinking of one against the other, or, as Zhao puts it: »The truth is that there is no necessary transition from the mutual understanding of minds to the mutual acceptance of hearts. We also need to be aware that the problem of the other is actually a problem of other hearts rather than other minds, since hearts are not open to concession. « (Zhao 2009, 19)

While the UN might be a government without people, what we face today is – equally incomplete- a people without government. Globalisation has affected everyone in the world and led the world to be *disoriented*. Without an institution responsible for the world's well-being, there cannot be peace and order. »The physical world was created, but a humanized world still remains to be made.« (Zhao 2009, 17)

Present relevance of the Tian-Xia system

In several areas it can be seen that the underlying assumptions of the Tian-Xia view are still relevant in the present reality of a changing and globalized world:





for example in key principles of Chinese foreign policy, a from Westerners distinct reasoning and perception style of Asians as well as new discoveries about the very essence of being in quantumtheory.

Regarding the question if ancient views still influence present Chinese foreign policy, scholars are divided into two groups, one adhering and one rejecting the idea of a continuity of ancient thoughts (Cranmer-Byng 1973).

After all, the tribunal system eventually broke down and with it the traditional Confucianism. And it was the forceful arrival of the Western world in China that has led to the breakdown of the Chinese ancient system and philosophical thinking, which was regarded as unequal and backward (Qin 2007, 331). Equality in the spirit of Enlightenment substituted the tributary system and rationality and materialism substituted the centrality of relationships in Chinese traditional thinking (Qin 2007, 331). The result was an intellectual divide between Neo-confucianists on the one hand and the Western Enlightenment school of thought (Qin 2007, 325). It should also be noted that both Marxism and Mao distinguish between one and other, friend and enemy, implying dichotomy has entered Chinese thought (Qin 2007, 322).

Taking the above as given, it is interesting to note that the later Communist, more practical oriented Chinese theories also exhibit elements that are inherent in ancient philosophical thought. For example, there has been an emphasis on constant change in international relations (Wang Jisi 1994, 488) that might be said to correspond to the ancient understanding of reality as being inherently dynamic and by its very nature constituted by relationships. International politics are perceived as constantly changing and foreign policy is adjusted according to the specific situation at hand (Wang Jisi 1994, 488). In addition, this changing political reality is conceptualised in terms of contradictions: socialists vs. capitalists in the 1950s, the Third World against the US and UdSSR in the 1960s and 70s and the notions of East vs. West and North vs. South relations in the 1980s (Wang Jisi 1994, 488,489). The changing reality is further characterized by changing relations, allying and grouping: »International forces will manage to manoeuvre among various political groupings, disperse and regroup, and keep changing in order to adapt to the changing situation.« (Yao Yun 1990, 32). And the last relational force at





work involves a concept similar to a changing balance of power, in line with the Leninist philosophy that balance is temporary while imbalance is constant (Wang Jisi 1994, 490).

So relationships and a changing reality are key elements of foreign policy after the foundation of the PRC until the present, where »in the Chinese mind, wise and far-sighted statesmen are those who can adroitly guide action according to circumstances« (Wang Jisi 1994,490).

There is ample evidence that the Chinese way of reasoning today significantly differs from the Western way, with the Chinese reasoning in a holistic as opposed to an analytical way that is exhibited by Westerners (see Choi, Nisbett and Norenzayan 1999; Choi and Nisbett 2000; Nisbett 2005).

»East Asians are held to reason holistically, attending to the field in which objects are embedded and attributing causality to interactions between the object and the field. Their belief in complexity leads East Asians to expect apparent contradictions, and their mode of dealing with contradiction is to find the *middle way*, that is, to discover how two opposing propositions might both have some truth. There has been no tradition of formal logic in East Asia (Liu, 1974, in Choi and Nisbett 2000, 890); instead, there is a preference for dialectical reasoning, which is accepting of the seeming contradictions. In contrast, Westerners are held to think analytically, attending primarily to the object and paying relatively little attention to the field and preferring to attribute causality to properties of the object. Since the classical period of Greece, Western thought has been guided by the *law of non-contradiction*, whereby it is seen as necessary to reject one of the two opposing propositions.« (Choi and Nisbett 2000, 890)

This suggests that the notion of epistemology inherent in ancient Chinese philosophy still exists in contemporary Chinese mindset:

»In view of the manner and spirit of Western thought ever since Aristotle, Westerners have seemed to need departmentalization—analysis—of the totality of truth [...] into what the West has come to think of as the basic separate





or at least separable aspects of the knowledge [...]. However, [...] Chinese philosophers, more than those in any other philosophical tradition, past and present, look at life and philosophy in its totality, not in parts«. (Moore 1968,3)

Because of this different way of reasoning, Choi and Nisbett (2001) suggest that Chinese are less prone to make the fundamental attribution error, the tendency to ascribe the reason of behavior to a person's personality traits rather than contextual factors (see also Choi, Nisbett, et al., 1999). "More specifically, East Asians are more likely to explain human social behavior in terms of person-situation interactions, whereas Americans are more likely to rely on presumed personal attributes to explain the same behaviors"(Choi and Nisbett, 2000, 891; See also Nisbett, 2005). This implies that the perception of the other in a given context and the meaning that is attached to the other's action can be expected to be different regarding a Chinese perceiver as compared to a Westerner. "Given the importance of relationships and contexts to Chinese people and the importance of the object and its properties to Americans, the two groups could be expected to organize the world differently" (Ji, Nisbett, Zhang, 2004, 58). Ji, Nisbett and Zhang (2004) find that culture significantly affects people's reasoning and their values:

»Chinese people value interpersonal relationships and pay more attention to the social environment than do Americans (e.g., Fung, 1983; Hedden et al., 2000; Hsu, 1981; Ji, Schwarz, & Nisbett, 2000). This tendency to attend to the social environment and interpersonal relationships is reinforced in family and school and then may be carried over to all environments and relationships in general (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, Americans value individual autonomy and freedom« (Ji, Nisbett and Zhang, 2004, 64).

This might have practical implications for IR in the interaction with China as well as conceptual consequences for an understanding of IR in the contemporary world system.

The absence of a distinction between subject and object as well as the dynamic conception of reality are much in line with recent findings in quantum theory (see for example Wendt's (2006) approach on theorizing about IR from a perspective





based on quantum theory). Liu Jee Loo points to the notion of time in Chinese traditional understanding:

»Time is not a container for the flow of human affairs; rather, time is embedded in different temporal points at which the agent finds herself, from which events are being observed, interpreted and acted upon. This notion of time in Chinese philosophy is highly compatible with the observer-relative approach in quantum physics. « (Liu Jee Loo 2011, 10)

Bohr even said that the development of the quantum theories he put forward was influenced by his knowledge of Eastern philosophy (see Choi and Nisbett 2000, 902).

Choi and Nisbett (Choi and Nisbett 1999, 902) mention that it might be the very holist understanding of the world that stands in the way of scientific development, because the holist worldview is complex and accepts contradictions, so that it is harder to formulate simple, testable theories. Yet they remain cautious with this statement for it might be the case that Chinese thinking is suitable for the development of other forms of science, such as chaos-theory. Benesch and Wilner, in turn, argue that there is a *continuum logic* inherent in Chinese ancient thought that »this continuum logic has particular relevance for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding in philosophy and the sciences in contemporary ›participant/spectator‹ views of the universe.« (Benesch and Wilner 2002, 471) The implications of these different notions of ontology may result in a new wave of thinking and conceptualizing IR.

Conclusion

The core assumptions and principles in Zhao's analysis might have conceptual consequences for an understanding of IR in the contemporary world system as well as practical implications for IR in the interaction with China.

Zhao's analysis allows fresh *out-of-the-box-thinking*, which can be very useful in a world where the very essence of reality is dynamic. While on first sight, his argument might seem over-idealistic, it nonetheless provides valuable insights and new perspectives, especially in terms of a differing notion of ontology that may be





food for thought in dealing with contemporary challenges of a globalized world system. Callahan shares this thought by suggesting that Chinese approaches can be used not only to account for *Chineseness* but rather in a broader context can be seen as »part of the globalization of IR theory«. (Callahan 2001, 86)

While the role of culture and identity is basically non-existent in traditional (Western) approaches, with Neorealism assuming states being identical *units* and Neo-liberal theory focusing on interests that are material in nature, it has been shown that in the Chinese foreign policy context, both cultural and psychological factors – especially constructions of self-image- play a crucial role in explaining behavior.

Gaining insights in to the above-mentioned different influencing factors by looking at ancient philosophy, psychology, linguistics etc. therefore may also be the key to balanced relations with China in a globalized world. As the ancient tributary system didn't conceive of the concept of sovereignty or that of equality, this cultural influence may just be one of the factors that make up China's view on contemporary politics.

Zhao's notion of *Confucian improvement*, for example, is not as far-fetched as it may seem on first sight. In today's China, it is still normal to take care of elders and friends whereby their well-being has the highest priority. Parents and friends are protected and taken care of even if this means to suffer oneself.

With regard to the normative, practical part of Zhao's analysis, the implementation of a holistic view of the world would imply a reform towards a true world system. While Zhao recognizes that it might not be realistic to fully adopt the Tian-Xia system, he nonetheless suggests considering its elements in the reinterpretation of current global issues and in the creation of some form of new global governance the globalized world is in need of. This might be a fusion of ancient Greek and Chinese characteristics, whose reference point should be the people of the world rather than individual nation states.

Implicit is the suggestion to look beyond our culturally inherited horizon, to be open for new ideas and solutions and to consider and incorporate the globalized people of the world *as one*.





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