

**BEYOND DEMOCRATIC PEACE:  
CHINESE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY  
AS AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM FOR GLOBAL STABILITY**

TAHIROU SIRIFO ADAMOU RACHID\*  
ZHU GUICHANG\*\*

**Abstract.** This article offers a critical reassessment of the Democratic Peace paradigm, which has shaped Western foreign policy discourse since the end of the Cold War. Although grounded in the normative and institutional logic of liberal democracies, this framework faces growing theoretical and empirical limitations, particularly in light of military interventions conducted in the name of liberalism and the rise of non-democratic actors such as China. In this context, the article explores Chinese International Relations theory, based on a relational and moral ontology, as a paradigmatic alternative for conceptualizing global stability beyond ideological convergence. Embedded within the Global IR project, this approach recognizes non-Western intellectual traditions as legitimate sources of theorization. It enables a reconfiguration of the disciplinary field, in which normative diversity is not treated as a deviation to be corrected, but as a conceptual resource for rethinking the conditions of peace in a post-liberal world.

**Keywords:** *Chinese International Relations; Democratic Peace Theory; International Stability; Relational Ontology; Normative Pluralism; Global IR; Post-liberal Order*

*Introduction: Rethinking Peace Beyond Liberalism*

Since the end of the Cold War, Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) has emerged as one of the dominant paradigms in International Relations. It asserts that liberal democracies, due to their political institutions and shared norms, are structurally less inclined to wage war against one another. This idea, which has become a pillar of Western foreign policy, is based on dual logic: normative (the spread of common values) and institutional (democratic checks and balances) (Doyle, 1986, pp. 1151-1169). It has helped to legitimize the expansion of liberal democracy as a pathway to global stability.

---

\* PhD candidate, School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, Qingdao Campus, China.

\*\* Professor of International Politics, School of Political Science and Public Administration, Shandong University, Qingdao Campus, China.

However, this paradigm is now the subject of growing criticism. Military interventions by democracies in non-democratic contexts, as well as studies highlighting the civilizational and Eurocentric biases of the theory (Hobson, 2012; Vitalis, 2015; Rathbun et al., 2025), challenge the idea that peace is intrinsically linked to democracy. At the same time, the rise of non-liberal actors such as China, in a multipolar international system, invites us to reconsider the supposed universality of liberal norms. In a context marked by the pluralization of normative poles, the central question then becomes: Is the liberal paradigm capable of accommodating the diversity of political traditions, or does it tend to subsume them under a particular normative horizon?

In this context, Chinese International Relations theory (IR) offers a theoretical alternative, grounded in a relational and moral ontology (Kavalski, 2018, pp. 233-251). Articulated around the concepts of harmony (和), relationality (关系), symbiosis (共生), and moral hierarchy (天下), it develops a vision of peace based on the quality of relationships, moral compatibility, and differentiated responsibility (Pan & Kavalski, 2022). Rooted in Confucian, Taoist, and Moist traditions, this approach is part of the Global International Relations project, which aims to pluralize the theoretical foundations of the discipline by integrating non-Western perspectives (Acharya & Buzan, 2019).

This article aims to examine Chinese thinking on International Relations as an alternative paradigm to DPT. By doing so, its epistemological foundations, normative philosophy, and diplomatic applicability will be reviewed. The central hypothesis posits that global stability cannot be based exclusively on the ideological convergence of regimes. Rather, it can emerge from relational, pluralistic, and ethical governance. Drawing on the works of Qin Yaqing, Ren Xiao, Grydehøj, Anne Cheng, etc, the article proposes a reinterpretation of International Relations through a Chinese ontology. It will also critically assess its potential and limitations in a post-liberal world.

*Foundations of Chinese International Relations  
Thought: Ontology, Philosophy, and Normativity Relational  
and Moral Ontology: Process, Compatibility, Ethical Responsibility*

Doyle (1986) points out that the DPT is based on an individualistic and rationalist ontology, in which states are conceived as autonomous entities with fixed identities and stable interests. Peace is seen as the product of internal institutional mechanisms (transparency, electoral accountability) and liberal norms shared among democratic regimes. Upon examination of its implicit foundations, this approach reveals a tendency to reify states and universalize the normative standards of political liberalism. It assumes, in essence, that ideological convergence is itself the condition for international stability.

Breaking with this perspective, Chinese IR theory proposes an alternative ontology based on relationality, morality, compatibility, and ethical responsibility. Qin Yaqing (2018) develops a theory of processual constructivism. According to this theory, identities, norms, and state behaviors are co-constructed through

interaction. Relationships are not secondary to actors. But they are the basic conditions of their existence. The social process is dynamic and normatively transformative, opening space for dimensions often neglected by Western paradigms, such as identity fluidity, emotional convergence, and contextual adaptation.

The concept of harmony, fundamental to this ontology, does not aim to impose normative uniformity; rather, it seeks to foster balance among differences. As Grydehøj and Su (2022) emphasize, this pluralistic conception of harmony can structure a more inclusive world order, whose essential pillars include mutual recognition and complementary roles. In this view, peace does not stem from ideological conformity but emerges from relational stability rooted in the quality of the relationships and the shared responsibility.

By mobilizing assumptions such as process, compatibility, and responsibility, Chinese thought offers a comprehensive epistemology capable of redefining the foundations of global peace. It presents a theoretical alternative to DPT by affirming that stability can emerge from normative diversity, provided ethical and context-sensitive relationships frame it.

#### *Philosophy of the World: Tianxia and Moral Hierarchy*

*Tianxia*, a foundational concept in Chinese political philosophy, offers a distinctive normative lens for interpreting global order. In International Relations, the concept refers not to a fixed territorial system, but to an ethical framework structured by moral hierarchy and relational responsibility (Zhao Tingyang, 2005). Far from being a mere geopolitical metaphor, *Tianxia* articulates a paradigm in which central authority is defined less by coercive control than by its capacity to care for and harmonize with peripheral actors. This vision contrasts sharply with the Westphalian logic of sovereignty, which privileges autonomy over independence. Moreover, the Westphalian system rests on an individualistic and juridico-territorial conception of international order.

The Westphalian order and the Chinese concept propose two divergent world architectures. The Westphalian system is based on territorial sovereignty and the legal equality of states, which corresponds to a universalized Western ‘political imaginary’ (Česnakas, 2022). In contrast, the *Tianxia* paradigm perceives the world as a hierarchical and morally integrated whole where legitimacy arises from harmony rather than borders. This thinking oscillates between adaptation and the formulation of post-Westphalian alternatives based on relationality (Wang, 2015), of which the New Silk Roads initiative is a concrete manifestation (Tsirigotis, 2025). By proposing stability disconnected from the nature of political regimes, the Chinese model seeks to transcend the limits of classical sovereignty and DPT in favour of the ‘relational quality’ of the global system.

Within the *Tianxia* model, hierarchy is not synonymous with domination, but envisioned as a moral architecture. The central actor, often idealized as “benevolent power”, leads through ethical example, reciprocity, and relational commitment. Its legitimacy derives more from its ability to embody and diffuse values of harmony, responsibility, and care than from coercive power. This conception reinterprets leadership not as a function of force or compulsion, but as a quality

acquired through moral consistency and relational depth. Such a framework challenges the liberal assumption that equality among states is the only path to peace. Instead, it proposes a differentiated order in which asymmetry can be ethically justified, provided it serves the collective good. As Callahan (2008) notes, *Tianxia* envisions global governance not as hegemonic or anarchic, but as structured by moral obligations and cultural resonance.

For scholars of international relations, this model prompts a re-evaluation of normative hierarchies. It suggests that stability may emerge not from the suppressing of normative differences, but from their orchestration within a shared ethical horizon. In this sense, *Tianxia* is not a rejection of pluralism, but a proposition for its regulation through relational ethics. Peace, in this framework, does not result from ideological convergence but from mutual adjustment among differentiated entities. Grounded in Confucian, Taoist, and Mohist traditions, this philosophy offers a theoretical foundation for imagining a post-liberal order based on ethical compatibility and differentiated responsibility (Zhao, 2009; Tchang, 2017).

This conception stands in contrast to the universalist logic of democratic peace, which tends to homogenize political regimes and marginalize those that diverge from liberal norms. As Anne Cheng emphasizes, Chinese universality does not rest on normative imposition, but on a civilizational logic of inclusion, where the center radiates toward the periphery without negating its diversity.

*Chinese International Relations Thought:  
An Alternative to Democratic Peace Theory A Normative  
Reconfiguration: From Democratic Peace to Relational Stability*

Democratic Peace Theory rests on an assumption that has become central to Western liberal thought: liberal democracies do not wage war against one another (Doyle, 1986; Russett, 1993). Two main arguments support this idea. First, democracies are generally considered to share norms of tolerance, compromise, and mutual recognition, which diminishes the risk of conflict (Owen, 1994). Second, their political institutions, such as transparency, checks and balances, and electoral accountability, are believed to make it more difficult to go to war (Russett, 1993; Doyle, 1997). These logics assume that peace stems from the internal nature of political regimes, independently of the relational dynamics that connect them to the broader international system.

However, this approach presents several theoretical and empirical limitations. Rasler and Thompson (2005, pp. 3-4) identify three major flaws: the absence of explanatory consensus, the confusion between cause and consequence, and the bias of presentism. While the empirical link between democracy and peace is acknowledged, the proposed explanations (whether normative, institutional, or economic) remain multiple and often contradictory. By attributing peace to democracy without questioning the historical processes that enabled the emergence of democratic regimes, the theory tends to naturalize a historically situated phenomenon. Moreover, it obscures older systemic logics, which are often invisible but structuring.

Russett and Oneal reinforced the DPT thesis by advancing the idea of a “peace triangle” based on democracy, economic interdependence, and participation in international organizations (Russett & Oneal, 2001, pp. 38-41). However, this explanation is based on an implicit assumption: that all genuine peace is necessarily democratic. Such a perspective reduces the diversity of peaceful trajectories observed in the history of international relations and limits the theory’s ability to consider the plurality of forms of stability.

A theoretical broadening is therefore necessary, not in the form of a superficial questioning, but through an analysis of the underlying logic that makes DPT both appealing and problematic. This article advances two critical angles that reveal the internal tensions and normative assumptions of this approach. These angles move beyond institutional and normative explanations by interrogating the geopolitical conditions, strategic interests, and epistemological biases that underpin peace among democracies.

The first critical angle rests on the idea that the democratic peace is embedded in the liberal international order. Beyond institutional mechanisms and shared values, peace among democracies can be interpreted as the product of an implicit convention aimed at preserving the liberal order that they themselves helped construct. In this regard, Stephen Walt (1990) argues that states with similar regimes do not ally themselves because of shared values, but because they perceive the same threats. The “ideological alliances” he describes are in fact reactions to the collapse of an established order or the rise of a common danger. This reading suggests that peace between democracies appears less as a property of the regime than as a structural effect of preserving the liberal order. Because conflict among them would destabilize a global system that serves their economic, political, and normative interests.

In the same logic, Benjamin Brice (2015) points out that liberal democracies have historically converged around three pillars: commerce, political representation, and universal justice. However, these mechanisms can also generate dynamics of oppression, domination, and imperialism, especially when they are mobilized to maintain an order favorable to liberal powers. From this perspective, democratic peace appears to be a strategic pact aimed at preserving the cohesion of the liberal bloc and containing the emergence of an alternative order, potentially led by non-democratic powers. Rasler and Thompson (2005) further show that peace among democracies depends on their level of satisfaction with the international status quo. When they benefit from a global order that reflects their interests, they have little incentive to challenge that equilibrium through war.

A body of recent work converges to show that DPT rests on fragile empirical and normative foundations. Walt (2025) argues that democratic peace has never been a universal law, but rather the product of a particular historical moment: American hegemony and the consolidation of the liberal order after the Cold War. With the erosion of this order, the rise of geopolitical rivalries, and democratic decline within the “zone of peace” itself, the theory loses its explanatory power. Banta (2025) goes further by showing that this crisis is also philosophical: DPT is based on a truncated reading of Kant, reducing *Perpetual Peace* to a positivist

hypothesis and ignoring the moral, critical, and systemic dimensions of Kant's project. This reduction has led the theory to overlook the violence exercised by democracies outside the dyad and to produce a moral blind spot regarding their own excesses.

This logic echoes Ikenberry's analysis (2001, p. 20), according to which the liberal international order is built on two "bargains": a realist bargain, inherited from the Cold War, in which the United States offers security and economic access in exchange for strategic loyalty; and a liberal bargain, where American power is institutionalized through common rules, consultation mechanisms, and multilateral institutions. In 2024, Ikenberry recognized that this order is in crisis and its survival depends on the ability of democracies to manage their internal conflict and competition with non-liberal powers. (Ikenberry, 2024, pp. 61-62). In this context, peace among democracies does not stem from normative equality, but from strategic interdependence. The political, economic, and symbolic cost of intra-liberal conflict would be such that it could jeopardize the legitimacy of the democratic model itself. Democratic peace thus appears as instrumental peace, embedded in a functional hierarchy, where the preservation of a liberal order in flux conditions stability.

While Walt, Rastler, and Thompson criticize DPT from macro-systemic and structural perspectives, the study of Rathbun, Parker, and Pomeroy (2025) introduces a crucial shift toward a micro-domestic dimension. Their experimental methodology, focused on the individual attitudes of the American public, demonstrates that 'democratic peace' relies less on institutional or structural mechanisms than on cognitive and racial biases deeply rooted in Western societies. By revealing that the term "democracy" spontaneously activates associations of whiteness and civilisational proximity, their analysis demonstrates that reluctance to use force against democracies is a psychological and cultural phenomenon, not an effect of the political regime itself. This domestic perspective complements systemic critiques by demonstrating that DPT is weakened across structural, normative, and socio-psychological levels of analysis.

The second critical angle the article advances challenges the normative bias and strategic instrumentalization inherent in DPT. By defining peace as the absence of war between liberal democracies, this theory implicitly excludes non-democratic regimes from any peaceful legitimacy. This exclusion produces a normative hierarchy in which democracy becomes the only possible source of peace, and other regimes are perceived as inherently unstable or threatening. DPT, therefore, does not merely describe an empirical phenomenon: It constructs a normative framework that orders the world according to the categories of liberalism.

From this perspective, Lake and Wiener's (2026) analysis sheds light on the structural and hierarchical dimension of liberal order. They distinguish between *corestates*, *peripheralstates*, and *rejectioniststates*. By associating this distinction with the DPT, this study emphasizes that peace between democracies is closely linked to the preservation of a liberal order from which they derive disproportionate benefits. States considered "rejectionist" are often subject to pressure, sanctions,

or attempts at regime change in the name of democracy, revealing the normative and instrumentalized nature of DPT. This dyadic conception, centered on relations between similar regimes, ignores the systemic dynamics (rivalries, power asymmetries, challenges to the liberal order) that nevertheless structure state behavior beyond regime type (Rasler & Thompson, 2005). By reducing peace to an internal attribute of regimes, DPT obscures the power relations that really determine international stability and renders invisible the costs imposed on non-aligned states. In a post-liberal world, this reduction appears increasingly untenable.

This normative reduction is not without consequence. It tends to essentialize democracy as the only path to peace. Such a view contributes to the legitimization of interventionist policies and regime change efforts by democratic actors. This is precisely the concern raised by Mearsheimer (2018). He notes that *liberal states are often prone to intervening in the affairs of other countries to promote liberal values, often through regime change* (p. 7). The examples of Afghanistan and Libya, as well as various Cold War interventions, demonstrate this pattern.

The military intervention in Iraq (2003), led by the United States and the United Kingdom, was justified through normative arguments, such as protecting human rights and fighting against weapons of mass destruction. However, in light of factual outcomes, it resulted in long-term regional stability. Similarly, the intervention in Libya (2011), supported by France, the UK, and the US, led to the collapse of the Libyan state and a fragmentation of power, despite democratic rhetoric. More recently, in January 2026, international media reported that Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro was seized during a U.S. military operation, an episode widely described as raising serious concerns regarding international law. These examples demonstrate that democracies, when they attempt to impose political norms on culturally distinct contexts, can be sources of instability rather than peace.

This criticism is reinforced by the work of Femke E. Bakker (2020), who questions the behavioral microfoundations of DPT. Her empirical study demonstrates that “Hawkish decision-makers are more likely to go to war, regardless of regime type” (Bakker 2020, p. 8). This evidence invites scholars to reconsider the assumption that democratic norms are sufficient to restrain belligerent behavior. In reality, threat perceptions and individual preferences often override democratic norms, raising questions about whether democracy is inherently pacifying. Thus, even at the micro level, DPT fails to explain the actual behavior of decision-makers, further undermining its explanatory power.

In this context, it is legitimate to question the paradoxical effects of democratizing peace. In their attempt to universalize a normative model, liberal powers have at times contributed to the instability they sought to prevent. Democratic peace thus appears not as a universal reality, but as a strategic instrument in the service of a selective liberal order, where stability is conditioned by ideological conformity rather than pluralistic recognition of political trajectories. It is precisely this normative impasse that opens the way to alternative approaches capable of conceiving of peace beyond liberalism.

*Tianxia and Guanxi: Toward a Relational Ontology of Global Peace*

The DPT, like several established Western theories, rests on partial and normatively charged interpretations that struggle to account for central contemporary phenomena such as democratic decline within the very ‘zone of peace’ (Banta, 2025). By relying on a truncated reading of Kant and a positivist epistemology that overlooks democratic violence outside the dyad, the DPT exposes its own structural limitations (*Ibidem*) as a theory long presented as universal (Doyle, 1986; Russett, 1993). This critique is in line with Acharya’s (2014) argument that mainstream IR theory suffers from a persistent “Western parochialism” that elevates region-specific historical experiences to the status of universal laws. In this context, Banta calls for a “critical cosmology of peace”, based on a holistic, evolutionary, and normative understanding of political order. In this perspective, peace is not a stable condition guaranteed by liberal institutions, but a permanent process of reflexivity, transformation, and ethical responsibility. This orientation closely resonates with Chinese IR theory, such as Qin Yaqing’s relationality and Yan Xuetong’s symbiotic theory, which assume the intertwining of ontology, explanation, and normativity.

Chinese IR theory reconceptualizes peace not as a simple absence of conflict within liberal dyads, but as a dynamic process of relational harmony. Through concepts such as *Tianxia* (Zhao, 2009) and *Guanxi* (Zhang, 2016), it advances a normative ontology rooted in moral compatibility, ethical responsibility, and interdependence. These principles offer a coherent alternative to the constraints of the Westphalian and liberal paradigms and DPT. They also offer a distinct pathway toward global stability, providing a relational and processual understanding of global order. In this sense, Chinese theoretical frameworks do not stand as cultural outliers but as robust conceptual responses to the limitations of the DPT, articulating precisely the kind of global and transformative vision that Banta calls for.

Moreover, Zhao Tingyang’s concept of *Tianxia* introduces a key epistemological distinction. This distinction reshapes the normative ambitions of global governance, creating room for alternative ethical imaginaries. “Internationality” refers to the pragmatic management of relations between sovereign states. In contrast, “worldness” refers to a normative horizon, namely the pursuit of universal well-being that goes beyond national interests (Zhao, 2021). This approach invites us to conceive of the world not as a collection of autonomous entities in competition, but as a relational whole, where peace results from constructed harmony rather than imposed order.

This framework questions the liberal assumption that equality among states is the only path to peace. Instead, it suggests a different order where asymmetry can be ethically justified if it serves the collective good. As Callahan (2008) observes, *Tianxia* sees global governance not as hegemonic or anarchic, but as shaped by moral obligations and cultural resonance. For scholars of international relations, this model encourages a reexamination of normative hierarchies. It suggests that stability may emerge not from the suppression of normative differences, but from their orchestration within a shared ethical horizon. In this sense, *Tianxia*

is not a rejection of pluralism. It can be considered as a proposition for regulating it through relational ethics.

In this framework, peace is not the outcome of ideological convergence. In fact, it emerges through mutual adjustment among different entities. This philosophy, grounded in Confucian, Taoist, and Mohist traditions, offers a theoretical foundation for imagining a post-liberal order based on ethical compatibility and differentiated responsibility (Zhao, 2009; Tchang, 2017). This conception contrasts with the universalist idea of democratic peace, which tends to homogenize and standardize political regimes, marginalizing those that differ from liberal norms. As Anne Cheng emphasizes, Chinese universality is not built on normative imposition. It rests on a civilizational logic of inclusion, where the center radiates toward the periphery without negating its diversity.

*Democracy vs. Harmony: An Epistemological Confrontation*

The confrontation between DPT and the Chinese perspective on International Relations exposes a fundamental epistemological difference. This divergence is rooted, on the one hand, in distinct ontologies and, on the other hand, in opposing conceptions of rationality, state identity, and international normativity. These two paradigms present incompatible worldviews, which influence not only the way peace is conceived but also diplomatic practices and the normative architectures of the world order.

*Strategic rationality vs. relational rationality:* It is worth noting that democratic peace is grounded on strategic rationality, a concept derived from Western political liberalism. It is also a paradigm that conceives states as autonomous actors with stable interests and fixed identities. The theorists of democratic peace emphasize that states act according to a logic of rational calculation. Furthermore, democracy is viewed as a universal norm, intended to produce peaceful behavior through institutional transparency and electoral accountability. This approach values not only predictability and ideological convergence but also the reduction of uncertainty through internal mechanisms.

In contrast, Chinese thought proposes a relational rationality based on the idea that state identities and interests are co-constructed through interaction and mutual influence. Qin Yaqing (2018) argues that relationality constitutes an independent epistemological core, which allows international relations to be understood as dynamic networks of practices and meanings. In practice, this logic is evident in Chinese diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Rather than emphasizing ideological alliances, the Chinese government favors bilateral relations based on trust, reciprocity, and contextual adaptation. Unlike the United States, which approaches the region with a logic of strategic counterweight, China mobilizes the concept of *guanxi* to build flexible and sustainable partnerships (Zhang, 2016).

*Fixed identity vs. constructed identity:* DPT posits that democratic states share a stable political identity based on liberal values. This common identity is said to be the source of their peaceful behavior. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this conception overlooks the fact that state identities are

historically and socially constructed through interaction. This is why Chinese thinking considers that a state's identity evolves through its external relations. The example of Sino-African cooperation illustrates this point. Through the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), China and African states have redefined their respective roles within a South-South framework based on non-interference, mutual development, and mutual recognition of moral principles. These interactions have contributed to the transformation of the diplomatic identities of several African states, which now position themselves as strategic partners within a post-Western order (Alden & Large, 2018).

*Towards Global International Relations:  
Decenter the Discipline and Legitimize Chinese thought*

The discipline of International Relations has historically been built around Western paradigms based on rationalist, individualist, and liberal assumptions. Mainstream IR theory is structured by a deeply Eurocentric ontology that associates political modernity, rationality, and peaceful order with the historical experience of Europe and North America (Hobson, 2012). DPT reflects this dominant normative hegemony. By universalizing liberal standards, it marginalizes non-Western intellectual traditions and contributes to an uneven theoretical landscape. As a result, certain voices are recognized as producers of knowledge while others remain peripheral.

In response to this persistent imbalance, the Global IR project led by Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan proposes a fundamental reconfiguration of the discipline. It emphasizes the need to recognize the plurality of intellectual traditions and theorize them within their historical and cultural contexts. Rather than rejecting existing paradigms, global IR seeks to pluralize them by integrating alternative epistemologies and experiences that the Western canon has long marginalized (Acharya, 2014).

Within this broader movement, Chinese International Relations theory is emerging as a major contribution. Far from being a geopolitical discourse, it articulates a relational ontology, a normative philosophy, and a worldview rooted in millennia-old intellectual traditions. Concepts such as *harmony*, *relationality*, *symbiosis*, and *moral hierarchy* provide a coherent theoretical alternative for rethinking global order and peace beyond liberal assumptions. Therefore, decentering IR entails not only expanding the range of actors and cases studied, but also rethinking the epistemological foundations of the discipline.

The decentering of IR theories is an epistemological imperative for overcoming the Western parochialism that has long restricted the analysis of peace to the liberal trajectory alone (Acharya, 2014). By incorporating non-Western ontologies, the pluralization challenges the monopoly of the Westphalian model based on state individualism. Qin's (2018) relational theory shows that state identities are not fixed essences but products of continuous interactional processes, enabling

a conception of “relational peace” grounded in harmony and moral responsibility rather than institutional liberalism.

Despite its contributions to decentering the discipline, the Chinese School of IR faces significant scrutiny. Critics such as Lim and Ikenberry (2024) and Guzzini, Jahn et al. (2024) argue that concepts like “harmony” and “moral hierarchy” function as ideological instruments designed to normalize an “illiberal hierarchy”. From this perspective, the Chinese paradigm does not seek to pluralize IR theory but rather to substitute Western liberal hegemony with a “civilizational hegemony” centered on China as a moral pivot. Furthermore, Guzzini (2024) identifies a structural tension in Qin’s relationality, noting that it frequently slides from an observational theory to a normative diplomatic strategy.

However, a fundamental limitation of this critique is that it relies on Western epistemological norms presented as universal. This imbrication is manifest across various global intellectual traditions: in Confucianism, knowing the world implies acting morally within it (Tu Weiming, 1985); in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu*, identity is inherently relational and carries an ethical responsibility toward the other (Ramose, 1999); and in classical Islamic thought, knowledge (*ilm*) only gains meaning when translated into action (*amal*) (Al-Ghazali, 2010).

From this perspective, the perceived “polyvalence” of Qin’s relationality is not an inconsistency, but the expression of a holistic epistemology in which understanding, being, and acting form a continuum. At the same time, a more explicit dialogue with theories of recognition (Honneth, Taylor, Ricoeur) would help for a more systematic integration of impersonal forms of power and status, thereby reinforcing the coherence of relationality without reducing its broader ambition.

Nevertheless, as Perez Mena (2024) astutely observes, this unity of knowledge and action, while epistemologically coherent, also serves a pragmatic function of strategic depoliticization. By replacing revolutionary rhetoric with a language of harmony and relationality, the Chinese School legitimizes the state’s political autonomy and stabilizes its rise within the existing order. Thus, the Chinese paradigm offers a “relational peace” that is less about imposing a new empire than about providing a framework for coexistence in a multipolar world where stability takes precedence over ideological conversion.

The added value of this shift lies in its capacity to integrate what Bilgin and Smith (2024) call “perspectives of a world of worlds,” in which global stability depends not on regime homogeneity but on the management of interdependencies. Echoing Tickner and Blaney’s (2012) call for a truly global discipline, recent scholarship suggests that Chinese thought does not seek to overturn the existing order but to articulate a form of normative pluralism better suited to stabilizing a multipolar world (Shani & Bajpal, 2022). Decentering IR thus transforms our understanding of peace: no longer the absence of conflict between democracies, it becomes an evolving process of coexistence within a deeply interconnected and heterogeneous global structure.

*Applicability and Harmonious Diplomacy:  
Towards a Post-Liberal Order*

Chinese International Relations theory goes beyond abstract theories. It is expressed through active diplomacy rooted in relational and ethical principles. This approach aims to create a stable international environment that does not rely on universal normative standards. Its harmonious diplomacy employs mechanisms such as mutual imitation of best practices, Confucian improvement via cooperation, and the moral responsibility of central powers. The Belt and Road Initiative illustrates this approach through a flexible model of cooperation (Tsirigotis, 2025). In this model, projects are negotiated based on local needs that align with the priorities of partner governments and are carried out without political conditionality (as is the case with Western partners and liberal institutions). This flexibility allows China to cooperate with authoritarian, democratic, or hybrid regimes by prioritizing relational stability over ideological conformity. Unlike democratic peace, which tends to homogenize regimes (and exclude those that do not share liberal norms), the BRI adopts a logic of contextual compatibility and differentiated cooperation. This logic is also reflected in the policy of a “community with a shared future for mankind”, which translates Chinese relational ontology by articulating interdependence, moral compatibility, and differentiated responsibility.

Similarly, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) serves as a privileged space for redefining diplomatic identities within a South-South framework. Far from normative injunctions, China and African states are forging relationships shaped by non-interference, mutual development, and moral recognition. These interactions do not merely produce bilateral cooperation schemes. In reality, they transform the respective roles of the actors, promoting diplomacy with pillars of complementarity, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. This harmonic diplomacy forms part of a normative vision inspired by the philosophy of *Tianxia*, where it is important to understand that hierarchy is not synonymous with domination. It signifies the ethical responsibility assumed by the central powers. In this framework, China plays a civilizational role: it does not impose its norms, but fosters integration and harmony among differences in an inclusive manner. As Anne Cheng observes, Chinese universality is based on a logic of civilizational inclusion, where the center extends the periphery without denying its diversity.

Contrary to some critical analyses, this approach does not reject the Westphalian system. We argue that it seeks to transcend it. It recognizes state sovereignty while placing it within a relational dynamic, where stability no longer relies on formal legal equality but on the quality of relationships and moral coordination. This compatibility with the current international system reinforces the diplomatic credibility of Chinese thought, which does not propose a disruptive rupture but gradual transition towards a post-liberal order. In this regard, Zhao Tingyang (2021) distinguishes between a “philosophy for the world” and a “philosophy of the world.” The former seeks to organize the international environment according to external principles, which are often normative and instrumental. The theory of

democratic peace aligns with this logic because, according to its premise, democracy is the universal condition for peace.

Conversely, the “philosophy of the world” sees the world as a moral, interconnected, and meaningful entity. The concepts of *Tianxia* and *Guanxi*, which fall under this approach, value stability rooted in contextual compatibility and ethical responsibility. This epistemological distinction invites us to think of global peace not as an imposed norm, but as an evolving and pluralistic concept process rooted in relationships.

The notion of *Gongsheng*, or symbiotic coexistence, further develops this perspective. It conceptualizes peace as the outcome of ethical interdependence, based on moral coordination between distinct entities. This approach offers a credible alternative to the democratic peace, particularly in contexts of systemic transition characterized by the erosion of the liberal order (Ikenberry, 2024) and the rise of non-Western powers (Acharya, 2014, p. 649). Its applicability is clearly illustrated in the recent work of Li (2025), who employs Symbiotic theory to analyze the failure of the European security order in the face of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Li demonstrates that the European Union’s insistence on an exclusive liberal order, grounded in Democratic Peace, exacerbated tensions by failing to integrate political differences. In response, he proposes a transition toward a “Symbiotic Security Order,” where stability no longer rests on the homogeneity of political regimes, but on the pragmatic management of interdependencies and the recognition of indivisible security.

This perspective aligns with Xiao Ren’s argument that social, economic, and political interconnection, alongside the complementarity induced by *Gongsheng* (Symbiosis), can ensure peace without requiring the intervention of a hegemonic superpower. Far from being a radical or entirely foreign invention, this logic is deeply rooted in the original “European idea”, tested successfully through the system of the European Communities, which was built upon the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity among its members.

In this sense, *Gongsheng* in International Relations, which implies a profound degree of interdependence between state actors, has already functioned as a successful model within the European Union for decades. The “unity in diversity” championed by Xiao Ren directly echoes the EU’s own motto. Thus, this case study proves that Chinese concepts of relationality and symbiosis are not mere cultural abstractions; they are robust analytical tools capable of stabilizing zones of friction where the rigid requirements of liberal homogeneity have reached their limits.

Thus, Chinese international relations theory, far from being a cultural abstraction, asserts itself as an operational normative framework for a post-liberal world order. It proposes a model of stability based on the quality of relations, regime plurality, and differentiated responsibility. By rehabilitating the ethical and contextual dimensions of international interactions, it paves the way for a diplomacy that is more attentive to singularities, interdependencies, and moral balances. However, it’s crucial to acknowledge that the influence of these approaches on Chinese foreign policy remains indirect. Decision-making is still primarily driven by pragmatic, bureaucratic, and geo-economic considerations. And these theories function more as discursive repertoires than as prescriptive doctrines (Johnston, 2019).

### *Conclusion: Pluralizing Peace in a Post-Liberal World*

Chinese theory of International Relations presents a theoretical and normative alternative grounded in relationality, moral compatibility, and ethical responsibility. It also develops a relational ontology that conceives of peace not as the product of regime convergence but as the outcome of contextual stability, moral coordination, and recognition of asymmetries. This approach extends beyond the critique of liberalism. It values the plurality of regimes, adaptation to local contexts, and differentiated responsibility among central powers. By comparing the Chinese perspective to democratic peace theory, this article demonstrates that pluralization paradigms are not only possible but also necessary. In an unstable and culturally pluralistic world, peace cannot be shaped by ideological uniformity. Still, it must be built through relational harmony, mutual recognition, and the ethical co-construction of an inclusive global order.

Chinese theory does not seek to supplant Western paradigms. On the contrary, it aims to enrich the theoretical field through a relational ontology applicable to diverse contexts. By emphasizing moral compatibility and mutual recognition, it offers relevant analytical tools for thinking about peace in regions marked by normative plurality (Francophone Africa, South Asia, or Latin America). This openness enables us to move beyond culturalist interpretations and engage with Chinese thought on its own terms. Conceived within a logic epistemic dialogue rather than normative imposition, it may offer a universalizable contribution to the pluralistic reconfiguration of the world order.

However, this relational paradigm is not without critics. Some researchers highlight the risk of indirectly legitimizing authoritarianism, insofar as political non-conditionality can reinforce regimes that are unconcerned with fundamental rights (Bhattacharya, 2025). Similarly, the concept of *Tianxia* raises questions about its normative ambiguity. Presented as inclusive and ethical, it can be perceived as a form of civilizational centrality that masks the implicit logic of influence or hierarchy (Callahan, 2008). Finally, the flexibility of *guanxi*, although adaptatively, can lead to diplomatic opacity and power asymmetries that are difficult to regulate (Kernen and Lam, 2014). These criticisms invite us not to idealize Chinese thought, but to question it as a situated contribution, marked by internal tensions and practical challenges. They also call for engaging it in an open theoretical dialogue, attentive to the normative pluralities of the contemporary world.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acharya, A., "Global international relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies", *International Studies Quarterly*, 58(4), 2014, 647-659, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12171>;
- Acharya, A., & Buzan, B. (eds.), *Non-Western international relations theory: Perspectives on and beyond Asia*, Routledge, 2009;
- Acharya, A., & Buzan, B., *The making of global international relations: Origins and evolution of IR at its centenary*, Cambridge University Press, 2019;
- Al-Ghazali, A. H., *Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn [The revival of the religious sciences]* (M. Mahdi, Éd.). Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 2010 (Original version published in 1105);

- Alden, C., & Large, D. (eds.), *New directions in Africa-China studies*, Routledge, 2018;
- Ames, R. T. & Rosemont, H., *The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation*, Ballantine Books, 1998;
- Bakker, F. E., *Hawks and doves: Democratic peace theory revisited*, International Peace Research Association Foundation, 2018;
- Bakker, F. E., "The microfoundations of normative democratic peace theory: Experiments in the US, Russia and China", *Political Research Exchange*, 2 (1), 2020, Article 1753084;
- Banta, B., "From democratic peace theory to a Kantian critical cosmology of peace", *International Theory*, 1-28, 2025;
- Bhattacharya, S., "China is exporting its model of political authoritarianism to Africa", *The Strategist*, 2025, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/china-is-exporting-its-model-of-political-authoritarianism-to-africa>;
- Bilgin, P., & Smith, K., *Thinking globally about world politics: Beyond global IR*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024;
- Brice, B., *La fin de la guerre? Les ambiguïtés de la paix démocratique: intérêts, passions et idées* [Thèse de doctorat, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales], Centre Raymond Aron, 2015;
- Callahan, W. A., "Chinese visions of world order: Post-hegemonic or a new hegemony?", *International Studies Review*, 10(4), 2008, 749-761. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00830.x>;
- Callahan, W. A., "Sino-speak: Chinese exceptionalism and the politics of history", *Journal of Asian Studies*, 71(1), 2012, 33-55;
- Èsnaqas, G., "The collective imagination and the limitations for the Tianxia to replace the Westphalian world order", *Politologija*, 105(1), 2022, 133-166;
- Cheng, A., *Histoire de la pensée chinoise*, Éditions du Seuil, 1997;
- Doyle, M. W., "Liberalism and world politics", *American Political Science Review*, 80(4), 1996, 1151-1169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1960861>;
- Grydehøj, A. & Su, P., *China and the pursuit of harmony in world politics: Understanding Chinese international relations theory*. Routledge, 2021;
- Guzzini, S., "Relationalism(s) unpacked: Engaging Yaqing Qin's theory of world politics", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 17(2), 2024, 187-205;
- Hobson, J. M., *The Eurocentric conception of world politics: Western international theory, 1760-2010*, Cambridge University Press, 2012;
- Ikenberry, G. J., "American grand strategy in the age of terror", *Survival*, 43(4), 2001, 19-34;
- Ikenberry, G. J., *A world safe for democracy: Liberal internationalism and the crises of global order*, Yale University Press, 2020;
- Ikenberry, G. J., "L'ordre libéral international a-t-il un avenir?" (B. Viennot, Trad.), *Revue Défense Nationale*, 871(6), 2024, 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.871.0049>;
- Johnston, A. I., Cunningham, F. S., & Taylor, M., "China in a world of orders: Rethinking compliance and challenge in Beijing's international relations", *International Security*, 44(2), 2019, 9-60;
- Kavalski, E., "The Guanxi of relational international affairs", *Chinese Political Science Review*, 3(3), 2018, 233-251.
- Kavalski, E., *Relational IR theories with Sinophone characteristics*, 2023;
- Kernen, A. & Lam, K. N., "La diplomatie du guanxi: les relations sino-africaines à l'épreuve des réseaux personnels. *Politique africaine*, 135(3), 2014, 23-44, <https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.135.0023>;
- Lake, D. A. & Wiener, A., *Deep contestations of the liberal international order*, 2026;
- Li, H., "New pathways for paradigm shifts in EU foreign and security policy: From the liberal international order to symbiotic security order", *Chinese Political Science Review*, 2025, 1-30;
- Lim, D. J. & Ikenberry, G. J., "China and the logic of illiberal hegemony", *Security Studies*, 32(1), 2023, 1-31.
- Lim, D. J. & Ikenberry, G. J., "China and hegemony: An exchange – The authors reply", *Security Studies*, 33(1), 2024, 160-164;
- Lu, P., Ren, X., Erskine, T., Guzzini, S., Buzan, B., Jahn, B. & Rosenberg, J., "Debating the Chinese school(s) of IR theory", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 17(3), 2024, 277-305;

- Mearsheimer, J. J., *The great delusion: Liberal dreams and international realities*, Yale University Press, 2018;
- Owen, J. M., "How liberalism produces democratic peace", *International Security*, 19(2), 87-125, 1994, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539198>;
- Pan, C., & Kavalski, E., "Introduction: The rise of China and its challenges to international relations theory", *China's Rise and Rethinking International Relations Theory*, Bristol University Press, 2022, pp. 1-20;
- Perez Mena, F., "Farewell to revolution: The 'Chinese School of IR' and the depoliticisation of IR theory in post-Mao China", *International Politics*, 61(4), 2024, 703-717;
- Qin, Y., "The Chinese school of international relations theory: Possibility and necessity of its emergence" [国际关系理论中国学派: 生成的可能和必然], *World Economics and Politics*, (3), 2006, 7-13;
- Qin, Y., "Relationality and processual construction: Bringing Chinese ideas into international relations theory", *Social Sciences in China*, 30(4), 2009, 5-20;
- Ramose, M. B., *African philosophy through Ubuntu*, Mond Books, 1999;
- Rasler, K. & Thompson, W. R., *Puzzles of the democratic peace: Theory, geopolitics and the transformation of world politics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005;
- Rathbun, B. C., Parker, C. S. & Pomeroy, C., "Separate but unequal: Ethnocentrism and racialization explain the "democratic" peace in public opinion, *American Political Science Review*, 119(2), 2025, 621-636;
- Ren, X., Men, H., Liu, X., Wang, Y., He, H. & Tan, Z., "Theoretical contributions, empirical responses, and future prospects of the theory of international symbiosis" [国际共生理论的理论贡献、现实回应和未来展望], *World Economics and Politics*, (6), 2023, 4-19;
- Russett, B., *Grasping the democratic peace: Principles for a post-Cold War world*. Princeton University Press, 1993;
- Russett, B., & Oneal, J. R., *Triangulating peace: Democracy, interdependence, and international organizations*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2001;
- Shani, G., & Behera, N. C., "Provincialising International Relations through a reading of dharma", *Review of International Studies*, 48(5), 2022, 837-856;
- Tchang, J.-P., "Le «Tianxia» selon Zhao Tingyang", *Monde chinois*, 49, 2017, 14-19;
- Tickner, A. B. & Blaney, D. L. (eds.), *Thinking international relations differently*, Routledge, 2012;
- Tsirigotis, D., "Beyond Westphalia: Tianxia, the Belt and Road, and the Quest for a Non-Western IR Paradigm", *Comparative Political Theory*, 1, 2025, 1-40;
- Tu, W., *Confucian thought: Selfhood as creative transformation*, SUNY Press, 1985;
- Vitalis, R., *White world order, Black power politics: The birth of American international relations*, Cornell University Press, 2015;
- Walt, S. M., *The origins of alliances*, Cornell University Press, 1990;
- Wang, F. L., "From Tianxia to Westphalia: The evolving Chinese conception of sovereignty and world order", in G. J. Ikenberry, W. Jisi, & Z. Feng (eds.), *America, China, and the Struggle for World Order*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 43-68, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137508317\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137508317_3);
- Wang, Y., "The rise of China and Chinese international relations scholarship", *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 6(1), 2013, 1-28;
- Weart, S. R., *Never at war: Why democracies will not fight one another*, Yale University Press, 2000;
- Xiao, R., "Why there is now non-Western international relations theory", *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 17(3), 2024, 262-276;
- Zhang, Y., & Chang, T.-C. (eds.), *Constructing a Chinese school of international relations: Ongoing debates and sociological realities*, Routledge, 2016;
- Zhao, T., *De la contemporanéité du Tianxia*, Citic Press, 2005;
- Zhao, T., *The Tianxia system: An introduction to the philosophy of a world institution*, China CITIC Press, 2009;
- Zhao, T., Harroff, J. E., & Westad, O. A., "All under heaven: The Tianxia system for a possible world", *Great Transformations*, 3(1), 2021;
- Walt, S. M., "Democratic peace theory, R.I.P.: The rise, and potential fall, of a mainstay academic theory", *Foreign Policy*, 28 octobre, 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/10/28/democratic-peace-theory-definition-democracy-international-relations-us/>.