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Chinese Approaches to Peace: Beyond the Liberal Peace?

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Abstract

The article analyzes conceptions of peace in Chinese theories of International Relations, focusing on the work of Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing. It questions how these conceptions contrast with the premises of Western liberal peace. The article argues that Chinese theories offer a distinct view of peace centered on harmony and relational stability as opposed to the Western emphasis on promoting liberal-democratic values. However, there are under-explored issues in the Chinese contributions, particularly regarding the practical operationalization of concepts and the possibility of new international hierarchies. To support its argument, the article employs a qualitative literature review of selected sources, combined with a comparative analysis of the key concepts of Chinese theories vis-à-vis the postulates of liberal peace.

Keywords: Chinese Theories; Liberal-Democratic Peace; Tianxia; Relational Theory; Qin Yaqing; Zhao Tingyang.

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Introduction

The rise of China has been one of the most debated phenomena in contemporary international relations. Scholars have explored the multifaceted implications of this phenomenon, examining it through diverse lenses. These analyses range from evaluating the effects of the United States–China rivalry (e.g., Shambaugh 2018) to examining China’s emergence as a model of 21st-century socialism (e.g., Jabbour and Gabriele 2021), or exploring how China provides an alternative to Western neoliberal globalization (e.g., Vadell and Jabbour 2024). However, despite the expressive quality and quantity of works on China, a dimension that is still under-explored is the Chinese rise as an event that generates new theories (Pan and Kavalski 2018; Kavalski and Pan 2022).

In the field of Peace Studies, we find a similar situation, closely related to the hegemony of the liberal peace, which associates global stability with the spread of democracy, the free market and international institutions. However, this model of peace has been criticized in recent years, given its difficulties in stabilizing countries emerging from conflicts (e.g. Richmond 2005; Mac Ginty 2011; Gomes 2014). In light of China's growing influence in international relations, this article explores the following question: how do Chinese theories of international relations offer a distinct view of peace compared to the liberal peace model?

Through qualitative literature review of selected sources, combined with a comparative analysis of the key concepts, this article sets out to discuss the conception of peace in the contributions of Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqing, and to compare them with the liberal peace. The central argument is that Chinese theories offer a distinct vision of peace, centered on relational harmony and stability, as opposed to the Western emphasis on promoting liberal-democratic values. However, the practical operationalization of such ideas and the possibility of new international hierarchies are questions that remain open in Chinese approaches.

The article contributes to the literature on the Chinese model of peacebuilding, but in a different way, given the greater emphasis on analyzing Chinese practices in the field. For example, works such as those by Yuan (2022) and Wong (2021) argue for the existence of a Chinese *developmental peace*, centered on economic development and non-coercive means, but not paying attention to dimensions such as human rights and non-economic causes of conflicts. Furthermore, through empirical analyses of Chinese actions in Africa and Myanmar, Benabdallah (2016) and Adhikari (2021) state that China prioritizes economic development programs, but that this approach may not be enough to produce sustainable peace, since it strengthens economic elites and does not pay due attention to local needs.

Apart from this introduction and the conclusion, the article is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the liberal peace. Next, it examines how theories of international relations have developed in China. Then, it explores Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia concept and Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory. This analysis is organized around three themes: (1) the definition of peace, (2) how to achieve it, and (3) the agents promoting it. Lastly, the article compares the Chinese and liberal peace approaches.

The Liberal Peace

One of the hallmarks of the field of Peace Studies is the seminal distinction between negative peace and positive peace, introduced at the end of the 1960s by Johan Galtung (1969). This distinction inaugurated what Oliveira (2017) calls epistemologies for peace research, since negative peace refers to the absence of physical violence and, consequently, investigates ways to achieve the end of direct conflicts. On the other hand, positive peace illuminates the structural roots of violence, including economic injustice and social oppression, prompting us to consider how to dismantle the

systems that engender and perpetuate violent acts. Consequently, while negative peace represents a crucial first step, neglecting the structural dimensions of violence risks its resurgence.

Within the discussion on stabilizing interstate and intrastate conflicts, and overcoming violence in its direct and structural dimensions, the concept of liberal peace has stood out over the last three decades. This idea echoes the well-known debate on democratic peace, which links international stability to the political regime of countries and supports the argument that “democracies will rarely fight or even threaten each other” (Russett and Oneal 2001, 91). According to Owen (1994), explanations for this phenomenon have two dimensions. Firstly, structural arguments claim that the legal and constitutional arrangements of the democratic system impose constraints on the unilateral action of the executive in declaring war. Secondly, democratic culture and norms would also prevent states from going to war with each other. In short, democratic countries tend to show their norms of tolerance and compromise in international relations.

While the discussion on democratic peace has focused on the sphere of inter-state conflicts, the debate on liberal peace is particularly concerned with intra-state conflicts. As Mac Ginty (2006) argues, advocates of liberal peace propose democratization and liberal economic reforms as policy solutions, applying the democratic peace thesis to foster stability in the international system and nations recovering from civil conflicts. In the political sphere, this thesis gained prominence in the 1990s, when the UN, through the publication of the documents *An Agenda for Peace* (1992), *An Agenda for Development* (1994) and *An Agenda for Democratization* (1996), began to defend the connection between democratic practices and “the realization of a true peace and security in any new and stable political order” (Ghali 1992, 31). Thus, the liberal peace refers to the dominant form of peacemaking promoted by great powers, international organizations and international financial institutions through their peace support interventions (Mac Ginty 2011).

The post-9/11 context reinforced the endorsement of the liberal peace, especially through the so-called need to rebuild states in face of the danger of the proliferation of terrorist groups in failed states (e.g. Fukuyama 2005). Market-oriented reforms were proposed to enable individual emancipation, which state economic dominance frequently obstructed, mirroring the role of democratization and elections in managing political transitions and institutionalizing social disputes (Mac Ginty 2006). Thus, the liberal peace would produce negative peace through short-term military interventions, but would contribute to positive peace through the construction of liberal and democratic institutions which, with the support of local populations, would create the conditions for sustainable peace.

Nevertheless, the failures of more than twenty years of liberal intervention, exemplified by the Taliban’s return in Afghanistan (Abbas 2023) and Iraq’s persistent political turmoil (Dodge 2020), stand as stark contradictions to the liberal peace thesis. Critiques of the liberal peace’s shortcomings are diverse, centering on: the need for implementation reform (e.g., Paris 2004), the inherent conflict-sustaining nature of its logic (e.g., Chandler 2006), and the crucial role of local dynamics in successful peacebuilding (e.g., Lederach 1995; Mac Ginty 2011).

Reflecting on the criticisms and challenges to the liberal peace, Mac Ginty (2011) identifies its ethnocentric bias, its focus on technical solutions over structural change, and its superficial approach as key weaknesses. Additionally, he underscores the competition from alternative peacebuilding frameworks advanced by nations like India, Russia, and China. Considering the recognized limitations of liberal peace, coupled with analyses predicting the decline of the liberal international order (Mearsheimer 2019) and the ascendance of illiberal peacebuilding paradigms (e.g., Lewis et al. 2019; Mitchell 2023), examining these alternative models is essential.

The so-called “Chinese School of International Relations” has emerged as a movement that seeks to integrate traditional Chinese philosophy and Chinese political thought, offering alternatives to the dominant Western approaches (Grachikov 2019). Among the central concepts of this school are the Relational Theory of Qin Yaqing (2016), which points out the importance of social relations and interactions in international politics, as well as the concept of *Tianxia*, developed by Zhao Tingyang, which proposes a world order based on harmony, inclusion and cooperation between all states and peoples (Zhao 2009). In this sense, the next section discusses the emergence of theories of International Relations in China, aiming to provide a brief historical context for the selected contributions.

Chinese Theories of International Relations

The development of Chinese theories of International Relations can be understood through a brief historical overview. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the study of international politics was conducted mainly by political elites linked to the state, with Marxism-Leninism as the main theoretical framework (Guan and Guimarães 2024). The foremost figure of this period is what Kristensen and Nielsen (2013) call the scientific socialists, who emphasized Mao Zedong’s theories for the analysis of International Relations. From the 1980s onwards, especially after the process of political opening led by Deng Xiaoping, we see the emergence of social scientists. These were academics who had returned from the United States and who, in opposition to the scientific socialists, favored traditional social science approaches for examining international politics (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013).

During the 1990-2000s, there was an effort to institutionalize the academic field of International Relations in China, seeking greater autonomy from the state. According to Lima (2021), from this moment on, we see the importation of International Relations theories from the West, particularly the Realist and Liberal traditions. This period also saw a significant effort to translate works by foreign authors, as well as the incorporation of International Relations subjects into university curricula (Guan and Guimarães 2024). However, Kristensen and Nielsen (2013) point out that there was growing pressure for internal theoretical innovation. Simply mastering Western theories or making empirical applications would not be enough to be

considered original. Closer to the 2000s, discussions deepened on how to build a truly Chinese theory for International Relations.

After the 2000s, Kristensen and Nielsen (2013) draw attention to the debate involving culturalist and universalist approaches. According to culturalists, theories bear geographical, cultural and civilizational marks. Authors such as Qin Yaquin seek to extract elements from the Chinese philosophical tradition to enrich International Relations theories and try to use Chinese ideas as the core of their approaches, combining them with Western methodologies. On the other hand, universalists, such as Yan Xuetong, argue that all sciences, including social sciences, should be universal. Although they research traditional Chinese thought, they do not advocate the creation of a Chinese School *a priori*, believing that theories should be developed before labeling them.

Finally, there is also the theoretical debate on China's peaceful rise, a topic of interest to several academics in the country (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013; Guan and Guimarães 2024). As opposed to the Realist theoretical interpretation, which argues that the rise of a new power could be a destabilizing element for the international system, academics claim that the Chinese experience of recent decades highlights the possibility of the peaceful development of a new global superpower.

Considering the synthesis presented above, it is possible to divide the explanatory factors for the development of International Relations theories in China along three axes. In the ideational dimension, there is the incorporation of classical Chinese philosophy into modern frameworks due, above all, to dissatisfaction with Western theories of International Relations and the belief that such Chinese contributions could produce analytical gains (Guan and Guimarães 2024). In addition, there is also pressure for theoretical originality, not merely the application of theoretical frameworks developed elsewhere, as well as the search for international recognition of Chinese theoretical production (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013).

In material terms, it is important to highlight the increase in investment and the expansion of institutional autonomy to produce Chinese international relations theories. Increased funding for universities, as well as reforms to the academic system, have given scholars greater control over the discipline and increased the emphasis on qualifications and performance, such as publications and formal training, over seniority and political credentials. Government support is still important as it recognizes the role of academia in guiding China's thinking and diplomatic strategies (Kristensen and Nielsen 2013).

Finally, in terms of the international context, China's geopolitical rise, especially since the late 1980s and early 1990s, coupled with the rejection of narratives that pointed to the Chinese danger were significant incentives (Lima 2021; Kristensen and Nielsen 2013). Therefore, the combination of a competitive domestic academic environment that values distinction and innovation, growing material support for research and academic careers, and the geopolitical context of China's rise are some of the elements that help us understand the development of Chinese theories of International Relations. It is against this backdrop that we intend to explore the conceptions of peace in Chinese approaches, which we will do in the following section.

Chinese Theories and Peacebuilding

Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia System

Zhao Tingyang, a distinguished Chinese philosopher and intellectual, earned degrees from Renmin University and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). As a full professor at CASS's Institute of Philosophy, he has also held visiting professorships internationally. His extensive academic output spans metaphysics, political philosophy, and ethics¹.

One of Zhao's main contributions to International Relations and Peace Studies is the proposition of the *Tianxia* system (天下), which literally means "Everything under Heaven". This concept, which comes from ancient Chinese philosophy, is given new life in Zhao's hands as a vision of global governance that transcends the model of state sovereignty, proposing a universal and inclusive approach to world order. According to Zhao, today's world is marked by fragmentation and competitiveness between states, which prevents the building of lasting peace. In contrast, the *Tianxia* system aims to create a "worldness", which Zhao considers essential for true global governance (Zhao 2019).

The concept of *Tianxia* dates back to the period of the Zhou dynasty (approximately 1046-256 BCE), where it was developed as a solution for the unification and governance of a China made up of diverse tribes and cultures. At the time, the notion of *Tianxia* offered a cosmopolitan vision for the political order, establishing the idea that a universal system would be more effective than the simple domination of one group over another. Zhao argues that this idea can be adapted to today's context, promoting a world order where cultural differences and local interests are respected within a framework that values collective well-being (Zhao 2006).

The *Tianxia* system, according to Zhao, is based on a triad of elements: the territory (the Earth in its entirety), the heart and acceptance of all peoples, and a universal political structure. The latter represents an institution that works in a comprehensive and integrated way to promote the common good and global harmony. Unlike Western notions, where international relations are limited to a structure between sovereign nations, *Tianxia* promotes a comprehensive vision in which all peoples and states are parts of an inclusive order (Zhao 2009).

Zhao criticizes the contemporary international system as a "non-world" - a space where competition between states nullifies the possibility of genuine peace. He suggests that the concept of *Tianxia* offers an alternative solution by proposing a system of governance that goes beyond the limitations of national sovereignty, incorporating an inclusive vision where all peoples and nations contribute to a universal common good (Zhao 2019). This structure would be especially relevant for tackling modern global challenges, such as climate change, economic crises and international conflicts, which demand a collective and cooperative approach. Interdependence between states

¹ Information on Zhao Tingyang's curriculum was obtained from the Institute of Philosophy's website, CASS. Available at: < http://philosophy.ac.cn/yjxr/xbwy/202005/t20200505_5122704.html > Accessed on: March 3, 2025.

in the *Tianxia* system encourages the building of ties that transcend mere peaceful coexistence, promoting active collaboration aimed at global sustainability and stability (Zhao 2021).

Confucian thought exerts a central influence on Zhao's conception of *Tianxia*, especially in its appreciation of social harmony and the idea of interdependence. In Confucian philosophy, harmony is achieved when each individual fulfills their social obligations, respecting the positions and roles of others within society. Zhao adapts this idea to the international system, suggesting that global peace depends on an order where states operate not as independent units, but as interconnected elements of a global network of harmonious relationships. Thus, the Confucian ideal of harmony is amplified to the international level, where interactions between states aim at the common good, avoiding the hegemony of any one nation over others (Zhao 2021).

For Zhao, Confucianism offers an ethical perspective in which the interests of each state must be subordinated to global well-being. He notes that the *Tianxia* system suggests a "relational rationality", in which the maximization of mutual well-being is prioritized over the maximization of each state's individual interests. This contrast is especially evident when compared to Western realpolitik, which traditionally values sovereignty and national interests as central elements of international politics (Zhao 2021).

However, Zhao's proposal is not without its critics. In his analysis, William Callahan (2008) suggests that the *Tianxia* system, despite presenting itself as an inclusive and cosmopolitan alternative, may conceal a subtle form of cultural hegemony. According to Callahan, Zhao promotes a "conversion of differences", in which diverse cultures are brought into line with a centralized, normative paradigm, which he compares to the imperialist desire to universalize a particular worldview. He questions whether Zhao's ideal actually welcomes diversity or converts these differences into a Sinocentric cultural uniformity, elevating Chinese culture as the universal standard (Callahan 2008).

Furthermore, Callahan highlights the risk that the *Tianxia* system could, in practice, become a new form of hegemony by promoting a hierarchical world order in which the inclusion of "Others" occurs in a subordinate way. Rather than transcending the hegemonic order, as Zhao proposes, Callahan suggests that *Tianxia* reproduces an updated version of ancient Chinese imperial governance, in which hierarchy and the centrality of a superior culture still prevail. This raises doubts about the effective capacity of Zhao's model to respect the cultural autonomies of other nations and individuals (Callahan 2008).

Qin Yaqin's Relational Theory

Qin Yaqin, President and Professor of International Studies at China Foreign Affairs University, and Chancellor of the China Diplomatic Academy, earned his doctorate in Political Science from the University of Missouri-Columbia. His scholarly contributions primarily address International Relations Theories and Global Governance, evidenced by his extensive publications. In addition to his academic achievements, he has participated in key international initiatives, including the

UN High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (2003-2004) and served as Special Assistant to the Chinese Eminent Person, China-ASEAN Eminent Persons Group (2005)².

As mentioned earlier, Qin Yaqin belongs to a generation of Chinese authors who were exposed to Western academia. These authors seek to combine their training with Chinese philosophy to achieve new analytical insights and bring greater originality to theories of international relations. Consequently, the concept of harmony occupies a central position in his Relational Theory, representing a substantial contribution of Chinese cultural traditions to the field of International Relations.

In contrast to Western theories, which often place the individual as the primary unit of analysis and focus on the material and rational capacities of actors, Qin's perspective seeks to understand international interactions as a system of interconnected relationships, which are built and evolve through continuous social processes. For Qin, relationships, or *Guanxi* (关系), are the starting point for understanding international politics and the very identity of actors within the international system (Qin 2009b; 2016).

Qin points out that the relationships between actors are both constitutive and dynamic. This means that the identity and interests of states are not given, but are formed and constantly reconfigured from the interactions that these actors have with each other. The concept of "relationality" in Qin's theory directly challenges traditional conceptions of state sovereignty and independence. Instead, he argues that states are in fact "actors-in-relationships", whose actions and identities are inseparable from the networks of relations in which they are embedded (Qin 2011; 2009a).

This focus on relationality is a reflection of Confucian influence, where harmony is a social ideal that guides both interpersonal interactions and interactions between states. For Confucianism, harmony is achieved when everyone respects their mutual positions and obligations. Qin adapts this vision to International Relations, suggesting that peace and stability in the international system can only be achieved when states recognize and respect the interdependencies between them. Instead of seeking unilateral advantages, states should prioritize the maintenance of harmonious relations, in which the actions of one state take into account the needs and interests of others (Qin 2009a; 2016).

Qin (2016) argues that in a complex and interconnected international system, where the actions of one actor have significant consequences for others, adopting a relational approach that favors harmony is more effective in maintaining stability and avoiding conflicts. Moreover, this harmony does not mean the absence of differences, but rather the ability to coexist with respect and mutual understanding, even in the midst of a diversity of interests and values.

Another fundamental aspect of Qin's Relational Theory is interdependence, seen as an essential basis for building peace. For Qin, peace cannot be conceived solely as the absence of conflict,

² The information on Qin Yaqin was obtained from the Chinese Foreign Affairs University website. Available at: < <https://en.cfau.edu.cn/col2485/col2516/col2689/col2702/71509.htm> > Accessed on: March 3, 2025.

but must be understood as an active process of building relationships of cooperation and mutual understanding (Qin 2016). Interdependence between states means that the security, prosperity and stability of one state are intrinsically linked to those of others. In a context of interdependence, the idea of “winning” at the expense of another loses its meaning, as the well-being of one state contributes directly to the well-being of others.

Qin (2016) points out that the notion of interdependence is an ancient feature of Chinese political thought, strongly influenced by the concept of “*Tianxia*” (天下), proposed by Zhao Tingyang. Qin adapts this concept to the contemporary scenario, arguing that lasting peace can only be achieved if states recognize and cultivate their mutual interdependence. In this way, interdependence is both an ethical principle and a practical strategy to avoid fragmentation and conflict in the international system (Qin 2007; 2016).

In his theory, Qin (2016) suggests that instead of seeing interdependence as a limitation on sovereignty or as a threat to the autonomy of states, it should be seen as a positive force that promotes peace. Instead of focusing on military capabilities and strategic alliances to guarantee security, states should cultivate economic, cultural and political ties that increase interdependence and, consequently, strengthen international stability. From this perspective, peace is not static, but a process that is built and maintained through cooperative and interdependent interactions.

Grachikov (2019) notes that Qin Yaqing’s Relational Theory not only proposes a theoretical model, but also serves as a practical basis for Chinese foreign policy, especially in the establishment of strategic partnerships. This theory, centered on building relationships rather than rigid norms, allows China to develop a “network of relationships” that adapts according to the changes and needs of the global scenario. Rather than relying on formal agreements and fixed rules, Chinese diplomacy, based on *Guanxi* (relationships), emphasizes consensus and flexibility, which makes its alliances more resilient and sustainable in times of uncertainty (Grachikov 2019).

Another important aspect, according to Grachikov (2019), is the “procedural constructivism” that Qin Yaqing introduces as a method of analysis within this theory. This concept emphasizes that states’ identities and interests are shaped by continuous and dynamic interactions, reinforcing the importance of “relationships” rather than the capabilities of individual actors. This pattern of partnerships allows China not only to protect its national interests, but also to expand its influence and create a more inclusive and cohesive diplomatic network (Grachikov 2019).

Grachikov (2019) also points out that this relationship-based diplomacy allows China to promote its vision of peace and security without relying on confrontation or the imposition of Western models of governance. The relational approach facilitates the construction of a world order where collective interests and harmony are prioritized, creating a contrast with liberal approaches that generally prioritize democratic values and institutions. With this strategy, China reinforces its global identity in a way that supports its foreign policy and minimizes conflicts, promoting a peace that is in line with the interdependence and harmony advocated by Qin Yaqing (Grachikov 2019).

Although acknowledging the contributions of Relational Theory, Guzzini (2024) identifies several unresolved issues within Qin's framework. Qin's approach seeks to synthesize distinct levels of theoretical inquiry, including a non-Western ontological foundation, a theory of political actor behavior, a hermeneutic bridge for interpreting Chinese foreign policy actions, and a Confucian-informed evaluative paradigm. However, Guzzini argues that this ambitious endeavor results in an underutilization of the relational ontology's potential, a neglect of the conflict dimension in international relations, and an overestimation of the attainability of international harmony.

What is peace?

For Qin Yaqing, peace is intrinsically linked to the concept of harmony (和 - *he*), which has strong roots in the Confucian tradition (Qin 2016). Unlike Western theories that often privilege the negative dimension of peace, Qin emphasizes that peace should be conceived as a continuous process of building balanced ties, where relationships are carefully nurtured to avoid imbalances and resentment. Peace, from this perspective, is not just an end state, but the result of positive and constant interactions between states where each party recognizes their interdependence and seeks to adjust to each other in a cooperative way (Qin 2011). Thus, relational peace suggests that if each actor is actively concerned about the well-being of the other, even when there are disagreements, the possibility of violent conflicts decreases. Ultimately, harmony does not deny the existence of differences, but proposes the respectful coexistence of these differences in a web of interconnected relationships (Qin 2007).

Zhao Tingyang, in his reflection on the *Tianxia* system (天下), offers a conception of peace based on an inclusive and universal world order. Unlike the current international system, characterized by state sovereignty and competition, Zhao proposes that true peace would emerge from a "comprehensive political structure" that transcends the rigid borders of the nation-state (Zhao 2009). For Zhao, genuine peace cannot flourish in a system marked by anarchic logic, as this favors competition and the balance of power over harmony.

In the *Tianxia* model, everyone is "under the same sky" and therefore shares the same "relational rationality" that prioritizes the common good over selfish interests. This "globality" is both ethical and political: it involves mutual respect, collective responsibility and the adoption of global institutional structures that avoid hegemonic disputes (Zhao 2006). In other words, Zhao conceives of peace as a state of universal governance where each society finds its place without being forced to compete for survival or supremacy. The idea of "world peace" would then be inseparable from a vision of a "unified world" (*Tianxia*) in which harmony is the basic organizing principle (Zhao 2019).

How to achieve peace?

For Qin Yaqing, achieving peace first means cultivating relationships (*Guanxi*) in a continuous and profound way. Instead of relying on one-off agreements or treaties that reinforce mutual distrust,

Relational Theory argues that states' identities and interests are constructed and reconstructed through constant social interactions (Qin 2016). In this way, international stability does not only depend on balances of power or formal institutions, but above all on interpersonal and diplomatic ties that promote trust and reciprocity. In practice, this implies that states should invest in economic cooperation, cultural exchange and permanent communication channels to strengthen their ties. Furthermore, inspired by Confucian ethics, each state should recognize that its well-being also depends on the well-being of others, valuing mechanisms for coordination and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

In Zhao Tingyang's case, achieving peace depends on transcending the current international model, based on sovereign states competing for power and resources. Instead, we need to build an "order of globality", where all peoples recognize themselves as part of the same community. To this end, Zhao suggests that as long as the international system remains anarchic (every state for itself), there will be no real incentive for universal cooperation. By placing "everything under the same sky", *Tianxia* establishes a political structure in which there is no "outside" or "other" - everyone is included in a common project (Zhao 2021).

Instead of fragmented international organizations, Zhao aims for something that functions as a "universal government", but without the unilateral hegemony of a single state. Following Confucian ethics, global harmony requires shared responsibility and mutual respect. Each culture or nation would contribute its own point of view, but always for the sake of the universal common good (Zhao 2006). This process, according to Zhao, also requires a cultural and philosophical evolution, as it involves changing the way political actors think about their interests - moving away from the "win-lose" paradigm to a "win-win" perspective.

However, it should be noted that operationalization is an open question in the approaches mentioned above. Although Qin presents practical guidelines for achieving peace, particularly actions relating to economic development, these points are underexplored. Furthermore, as the literature on Peace Studies points out (e.g. Ramsbotham 2024), not all conflicts have exclusively economic causes, and the emphasis on economic development, while important, can privilege elites to the detriment of the local population. Finally, Callahan's (2008) criticism of Zhao's *Tianxia* system persists, given that such globalization can imply the creation of new international hierarchies, despite the emphasis on interdependence and respect for others.

Who are the promoters of peace?

In Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory, the state remains a relevant actor, but not as an isolated unit. It is an "actor-in-relationships" that gains meaning from the interaction networks it establishes (Qin 2011). In other words, the state can only promote and maintain peace if it is willing to invest in building reliable ties (*Guanxi*) with other states and international actors. In this sense, China's diplomacy, which seeks broad partnerships on several continents, reflects this logic: it is not only based on formal treaties, but also on personal relationships, multilateral meetings and

economic initiatives that intensify interdependence. The so-called “New Silk Road” (*Belt and Road Initiative*) exemplifies how China develops infrastructure and trade projects in dozens of countries, creating a network of agreements that reinforce its influence and simultaneously seek to promote interconnection (Grachikov 2019).

In the *Tianxia* system, the agent promoting peace is not limited to the sovereign state. Zhao Tingyang’s proposal starts from the principle that peace depends on an inclusive political structure, capable of sheltering everyone “under the same sky” (Zhao 2006). Thus, instead of “various agents” competing, there would be a single world community in which each culture or nation plays a role, but no one is “left out”. It is a form of governance that transcends national borders, seeking to respond to global challenges such as climate change, economic inequalities, pandemics and international security.

In both Qin Yaqing and Zhao Tingyang, there is a strong emphasis on Confucian ethics and social relationships, which suggests that not only governments, but also informal institutions, NGOs, companies and community networks can influence the promotion of peace. The Confucian tradition values the family, the local community and interpersonal connections, so that peace is built “from the bottom up” as much as “from the top down”. Therefore, the logic of the two theories extends the concept of “peace agent” to a broader spectrum, involving both formal actors (states, intergovernmental organizations) and informal actors (individuals, private networks, cultural associations).

Comparing the approaches

Based on our previous discussion, we prepared the following table, which summarizes the main differences between the liberal peace and the approaches of Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqin.

Table 1 – Comparing the approaches to peace

Liberal Peace vs. Chinese Theories			
Criteria	Liberal Peace	Tianxia system	Relational Theory
Definition of peace	Emphasis on stabilization and the absence of direct violence	<i>World peace as a unified world</i> Global harmony in an inclusive world order, with a political structure that transcends nation states and a “relational rationality” that prioritizes the common good	<i>Relational peace</i> The result of positive and constant interactions between agents, in which each party recognizes their interdependence and seeks to adjust to each other in a cooperative manner

Continue

Continuation

Construction method	Democratization and market-oriented reforms, sometimes carried out through military interventions	Peace depends on building a “world order” that transcends the current international system of sovereign states. Principle of non-interference Practical implementation is an open question	Peace is achieved by continuously cultivating deep relations (Guanxi), investing in economic cooperation and cultural exchange, and recognizing the interdependence between states, based on Confucian ethics. Principle of non-interference Practical implementation is an open question
Promoting agents	States and international organizations	Both formal actors, such as states and intergovernmental organizations, and informal actors, such as individuals, private networks, cultural associations, among others	Both formal actors, such as states and intergovernmental organizations, and informal actors, such as individuals, private networks, cultural associations, among others
Emphasis	Individual rights and democratic values	Collectivity, interdependence and the common good	Collectivity, interdependence and the common good

Source: Authors’ elaboration, based on analysis of sources

The first point to highlight in this comparison is the similarity of the approaches. While both liberal peace and Chinese theories value stability in the international system, the methods for achieving this goal differ. Liberal peace favors an individualistic ontology that emphasizes the link between a more stable international system and the political regimes of countries. This explains the emphasis on reforming political and economic institutions and democratic values and the belief that liberal democracy and market economy are the only viable options (Paris 2004).

Unlike approaches that focus on individual rights, Chinese theories inspired by Confucian ethics (Zhao 2006; Sun and Zhang 2021; Magalhães 2012) promote a relational approach. According to this perspective, stability and harmony are achieved by fulfilling mutual roles and obligations. This perspective rejects the imposition of external values, advocating that each nation follow a development path aligned with its traditions and cultural context. Chinese theories aim for a harmonious, inclusive order in which all states coexist interdependently. This system is based on hierarchy and interdependence, emphasizing the “common good” and harmony among nations. Qin Yaqing’s Relational Theory emphasizes this vision by understanding international stability as the result of networks of interdependent relations between states.

Cooperation is a central goal for both the liberal peace and Chinese theories, but it is articulated differently. The Western view encourages cooperation through multilateral organizations, such as the UN, to deal with threats to peace and promote stability through international treaties

and sanctions (Chandler 2017). The liberal peace sees global institutions as essential for promoting a “collective security system” that allows economic and political cooperation between states.

For Chinese theories, cooperation is intrinsically linked to the idea of interdependence and harmony. China uses the concept of “Peace through Development”, emphasizing that economic and social development in partner countries promotes sustainable peace (Sun and Zhang 2021). This approach suggests that nations should cooperate not only to end conflicts, but to ensure mutual prosperity, reinforcing a “community of interests”. The concept of *Guanxi*, central to Qin’s Relational Theory, indicates that peace is achieved by building networks of trust and mutual respect, thus avoiding the need for structural or normative impositions.

Furthermore, the liberal peace is often based on military interventions to protect human rights, even if this intervention involves a breach of state sovereignty. This is seen, for example, in Western interventions in post-Cold War conflicts, justified by the need to protect civilians and promote democratic values (Chandler 2017; Magalhães 2012). Meanwhile, Chinese foreign policy is marked by the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, reflecting a stance of respect for sovereignty and self-determination (Cabral 2021). Although China participates in UN peacekeeping operations³, it tends to avoid direct involvement in other nations’ internal conflicts and rejects actions that impose regime change or political systems. Through its “Peace through Development” policy, China seeks to promote peace by offering economic assistance and infrastructure, aiming for development without directly interfering in the governance of other nations (Sun and Zhang 2021).

It should also be noted that Chinese theories align with critical perspectives on peacebuilding (Lederach 1995; Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). These approaches emphasize the importance of building peace from a perspective sensitive to the cultural nuances of countries and regions. However, despite this common ground, some critical perspectives on peacebuilding seem closer to an individualistic ontology, emphasizing individual rights and viewing the local as something that must be included in the analysis rather than as something that emerges from or is reinforced by encounters between the local and the international (Toledo 2022). In contrast, Chinese theories emphasize sensitivity to the local context from a collectivist perspective, viewing the whole as the fundamental unit of analysis rather than the part.

Conclusion

Chinese conceptions of peace, based on principles such as harmony, interdependence and relationality, present significant challenges to prevailing Western theories, especially the liberal

³ Updated data available on the official United Nations website indicates that China contributes 1,792 uniformed personnel to peacekeeping missions, including 1,711 troops, 23 *experts on mission* and 20 *individual police*. These contributions reinforce the country’s commitment to peacekeeping, even if, in absolute numbers, its participation is lower than that of other nations with large contingents. Available at: <<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>> . Accessed on: 22 Feb. 2025.

peace model. While liberal peace emphasizes the promotion of democratic institutions, human rights and market economies as universal paths to stability and peace, Chinese theories propose alternative approaches that value social relations, collective harmony and inclusion.

A central critique concerns the assumption of universal Western liberal values. Qin Yaqing's Relational Theory offers an alternative, arguing that peace is constructed through interdependent networks, with state identities and interests evolving through ongoing interactions (Qin 2016). This challenges the Western view that often seeks to impose standardized democratic models without considering the cultural and historical specificities of local contexts. Furthermore, Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system proposes a world order based on inclusion and universal harmony, contrasting with the anarchic and competitive international system described by Western realist theories (Zhao 2006). This perspective suggests that global peace cannot be achieved through hegemony or the imposition of values, but rather through global governance that recognizes the interconnectedness and collective responsibility of all actors.

These Chinese conceptions also have practical implications for peacebuilding policies. By emphasizing the importance of relationships and harmony, they encourage the valorization of contextual solutions and the integration of diverse cultural perspectives. This contrasts with Western approaches, which often apply universal solutions without adapting to local realities, leading to unsatisfactory or even counterproductive results (Gomes 2014).

Despite the potential of such theories, there are important challenges in terms of practical application. For example, in an international environment marked by divergent interests, how can the "logic of harmony" be reconciled with real geopolitical disputes? In addition, William Callahan's criticisms highlight the danger that the *Tianxia* model will end up reproducing a hierarchical or hegemonic logic. In the case of Qin, scholars question whether relational diplomacy is sufficient to deal with acute international crises, especially in situations where actors do not share the same ethical principles (Grachikov 2019). Answering such questions is important to find out if, in terms of means and results, Chinese approaches really go beyond liberal peace.

Finally, this article is a first step towards a larger research agenda. Future developments stemming from the first results point to at least two potential paths. The first, of a theoretical nature, is to deepen the discussion on the concept of peace in the works of Zhao Tingyang and Qin Yaqin, as well as in other Chinese references. In addition to advancing these understandings, this path adds to the understanding of the so-called Chinese School of International Relations (Lu 2019; Grachikov 2019; Wang and Buzan 2014). A second possibility is the contrast between Chinese peacebuilding theories and practices. For example, is the so-called Chinese developmental peace (Yuan 2022; Wong 2021) a translation of peace principles drawn from specific theories, or is it something different? In a world increasingly marked by escalating inter- and intra-state conflicts, such debates are necessary for a more refined understanding of world peace and security.

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