



Beyond IR? Relationality, complementarity and entangled systems: response to Shih Chih-yu

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Abstract

This contribution revisits Shih's mission of relational IR and the Chinese relational school from the perspective of the parallel between quantum physics and ancient Asian philosophies, such as Buddhism and Daoism, asking questions about the significance of relational IR as a contradiction or complementarity, the nature of relational systems, and the role of conversation and translation in an unfolding world. It concludes with a reflection on time, memory and emotion as it relates to a past of empire.

Keywords Quantum social theory · Daoism · Buddhism · Relationality · Complementarity · Entanglement

While reading Chih-yu Shih's thought provoking piece, a number of questions came to mind which I hope to unpack in what follows. Is relational IR a contradiction in terms? Who is the relator or the relata that he refers to and what is the significance of this distinction for how they relate? How do we know a relational system—as opposed to something else—when we see one? Drawing on insights from my recent book, *Snapshots from Home: Mind, Agency and Strategy in an Uncertain World* (2022), which explores the parallel between quantum physics and ancient Asian philosophies, and a three year project, *Mapping the Empire: the Contemporary Legacy of Historical Trauma and Forced Displacement* (Fierke and Mackay 2022, 2023; Fierke 2024), the essay explores these questions.

Shih is critical of Chinese IR for either seeking a universal and explanatory science or an IR with national characteristics, which is more normative. The contrast is reminiscent of Westphalian IR and maps onto the binary hierarchy between Western science, which seeks generalization, and other non-Western knowledge practices, which are considered culture and thus non-science. From this perspective, it is useful to recast the problem in terms of two different conceptions of science and the

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parallel of one of them to ancient Asian philosophies. The parallel drawn by many physicists over the last century between quantum physics and Asian philosophies, such as Daoism and Buddhism, provides a physical basis for a relational world and a ‘reality’ that differs from that of classical Western physics, and by extension, social science (Fierke 2022). The repositioning is also useful for exploring the ‘ambivalence’ expressed by some feminist and critical theorists regarding the need to bring in quantum science (Sjorberg 2020), given that, among others, many of the conceptual tools, and relationality in particular, have long been developed in these literatures. The Asian philosophies point to much older traditions of thinking relationally, while the parallel connects the ‘science’ to conceptions of mind, action and strategy at the macroscopic level. In what follows, I explore whether or how the parallel between quantum physics and Buddhism and Daoism might shed further light on some of the concerns about relational IR raised in and by Shih’s piece.

Relational IR

Relational IR poses a question of whether once we enter the pluriverse, we begin to move toward something other than International Relations in so far as the foundations of this system lie in a range of ontological, legal and historically informed assumptions, which are grounded in Newtonian physics. In conventional conceptions of International Relations, states are said to exist as apriori separate and independent units, prior to an international system, which is regulated by a mechanistic balance of power that is a source of order (Waltz 1979). States have jurisdiction over territorial spaces that others cannot enter and which are secured with material power. Diplomacy arose from these separate and alienated units and from a need to cobble together a set of rules to facilitate communication and to minimize the worst excesses of engagement between them (DerDerian 1987). The scientist observer seeks to identify linear causal relations and law-like generalizations in a world that is assumed to exist independently of the observer. The logic is deterministic and mechanistic.

The atomism, determinism, locality and mechanism of classical Newtonian physics, not to mention the insides and outsides that distinguish selves from strangers, contrasts with notions of relationality, indeterminism, complementarity and non-local entanglement associated with quantum physics (Wendt 2015). The significance of the contrast between the ontological underpinnings of the two sciences for a notion of relationality is most clearly evident in the distinction made by Karen Barad (2007, 139) between, on the one hand, an inter-action, which is primarily a transactional engagement between separate parts, which leaves the interacting units intact, and, on the other hand, what she refers to as ‘intra-action,’ by which parts are mutually constituted and transformed through the encounter, as they become entangled in a whole. Entanglement does not refer to just any connection, interweaving or enmeshment, but points to an experience of inseparability between phenomena such that the ‘other’—the constitutively excluded—is always already within,’ even when separated by great distance, and ‘dispersed/diffracted through being and time’ (Barad 2017, 80).



The contrast between inter-action and intra-action rests on a distinction between the individual ontology that underpins classical physics and the relational ontology of quantum physics. Inter-action and intra-action involve two different types of relation, i.e., the transactional and the entangled. Who are the relators in an entangled relation? The notion that states are atomistic units, prior to the relations between them, assumes a pre-existing actor who acts upon the world. The latter has made it into some constructivist accounts of an agent who constructs, which makes any notion of mutual constitution impossible (Wendt 2015, 260). Judith Butler (1993) criticized constructivist accounts that assume a constructor, arguing instead that relations or their identities, in their case defined by gender, emerge from a performance. Butler builds on Derrida's (2002) argument about the American people who only came into being through the signing of the Declaration of Independence.¹ Similarly Barad (2007, 140) argues that relata do not precede relations. Relata are generated out of relations but have no substance or being apart from this. Relata disappear into relationship as boundaries become insides of outsides and outsides of insides. Consider the analogy to a ball of yarn, where the material threads are the relata; all boundaries become insides of outsides or outsides of insides; they disappear into a series of relationships that connect the parts to the whole, which in themselves dissolve into the constituent properties of the yarn, down to the fibers which are made up of molecules.

Complementarity

Relational IR raises a question of whether the concept is simply redundant, i.e., IR as we know it but with relational tacked on the front or is a contradiction in terms and, if the latter, what to make of the contradiction. As an either/or contradiction, IR either prioritizes the separateness of the units, or collapses into its opposite, e.g., the relational empire where parts are subsumed by the whole. A better alternative is to escape the either or choice, and Aristotle's law of non-contradiction, and approach the contradiction as a complementarity, which is a central concept of quantum physics. The Danish physicist Niels Bohr, who made a foundational contribution to quantum theory, identified a parallel between his concept of complementarity, and Daoist *yinyang*, in the claim that opposites are complementary (Fierke 2019). Complementary opposites are entangled and mutually implicated within a whole, even while remaining mutually exclusive and difficult to observe at the same time, a relation of presence and non-presence, or seen and unseen, which, in different ways, is also expressed by Butler's performance, Derrida's hauntology or Wittgenstein's Duck/Rabbit image, among others. A notion of relational IR that is not redundant requires an ability to go beyond the binary construction of individual or relational, i.e., states as ontologically separate and prior to the system, or relations as subsuming the parts to the whole, to some form of complementarity.

¹ His text, which was published as 'Declarations of Independence' in *Negotiations* (2002). was first presented in 1976 at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville as a preface to a lecture on Nietzsche.



Complementarity and *yinyang* necessarily shift the perspective such that autonomy and security rest on a recognition of relationality, which then makes mutual preservation a shared interest. Lily Ling (2014) brought this notion of complementarity to her understanding of the relationality of *yinyang*, which does not involve a loss of autonomy or distinctiveness of the parts. If everything is in everything else then, West is in East and East is in West (Ling 2013). Yin is always in yang, as part of a whole, yet they are also separate and defined by oppositional qualities. The relationship is not static but continuously changing. Ying and yang are not separate ‘things,’ but rather a relationship of presence and non-presence (Wang 2012, 17; Fierke 2022, 122–125), bound together in their continuous becoming and transformation. Like the wave-particle relationship in quantum physics, *yinyang* is a relationship between seen and unseen, what is observable and has our attention, and that which is only seen once attention is refocused. Yang (the present) does not have priority over yin (the non-present)—indeed, yin may be the more significant factor, just as the hidden root is the source from which the visible plant emerges (Fierke 2022, 126). The becoming happens through the dynamic relationship and the creativity this generates. Yin and yang also do not express an essence of evil or good in any one subject, but rather the potentials for both in all. An ethics of complementarity arises less from a comparison of the universal with a normative standard (Zanotti 2019) than how to maximize the good potentials in an efficient and effective way, in order to navigate a dialectical ‘reality’ that is in a continuously unfolding becoming (Fierke 2022).

Relational systems

While this complementarity is implicit in what Shih constructs, the discussion of relational systems and strangers seems to bring a notion of clearly demarcated insides and outsides to bear, of mine and yours constructed in binary terms. Complementarity, or Daoist *yinyang* makes it possible to conceive of autonomy or separateness within relationality, such that boundaries are necessary to life but also necessarily permeable, which like the porous boundaries of a cell, require an exchange of energy with that which is outside, but is also in motion given the dynamic creative forces that emerge from the dialectical relationship between opposites. The idea that boundaries might be forever changing is anathema to the practitioners of International Relations and the stuff of civil and international wars. But this then gets to the further question of what constitutes a relational system? Is a relational system ever more than a limited phenomenon, positioned in time and space? Once one moves beyond a notion of static relations-between-things ‘to ‘relations-in-things’ (Pan 2020) in continuous movement, it would seem difficult, as Shih suggests, to speak of boundaries in any permanent sense.

A notion of multiple intersecting relationalities is less problematic from the perspective of non-Newtonian systems, as reflected in Asian philosophy. Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism have combined and informed each other in different geographical contexts. Buddhism was introduced to China, where it blended with more indigenous traditions, through encounters on the ancient Silk Roads (Frankopan



2015). The key issue regards distinct ways of thinking about relationality in terms of Newtonian ‘thingness’ vs. quantum/Daoist/critical action, intra-action and movement. Given that international politics requires some notion of order, distribution of goods, and rules and norms, what is the practical significance of relations in motion? Hobbes (1561[1958, 118–122) identified unceasing motion as the main problem of the ‘state of nature,’ and his social contract was a spatial means to hold it in place (see Fierke 2022, 60). The prospect of changing boundaries brings to mind fears of empire emanating out from a center, and exercising authority over others who would prefer to stay outside. Modern day states are themselves products of the relational phenomena of empire, which were often brutal in the appropriation of land, people and nature, and of war. Empire is *not* the relationality that is invoked by the relational turn. The relational turn suggests a potential openness, encounter and positive entanglement, rather than domination and control.

It would seem that relationality is less a matter of whether the agent is an individual entity, an empire or a system—all of these are *relata* within Barad’s conception, albeit different in kind. Relations are always there and the form they take has an impact on future potentials. The stranger also is not a thing, but becomes manifest in many different forms. We may be strangers to those we live with or to ourselves, or others with whom we share aspects of an identity. Strangers are performed, along with ‘selves,’ in moments, in context. It is the separateness or fragmentation that is illusory. Life is constituted through relations rather than brute matter, which then raises the final question of what kind of relations and what role do any of us play in shaping the relational dynamic of any one system, not to mention between them? How do particular forms of action impact on the further unfolding of *relata*? What kinds of emotions do they generate and must we also then take into account *relata* across generations, those transgenerational experiences of movement, of becoming strangers through the crossing of borders, of forced displacements, often arising from the othering of war, and subsequent traumatic displacements of self and memory?

There are different ways to relate. The relationality of sub-atomic phenomena in a scientific laboratory is not the same as relationality at the global level, yet, as the theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (2021, 119) states, ‘there are not quantum phenomena only in laboratories and non-quantum phenomena elsewhere: All phenomena are quantum phenomena.’ Phenomena arise from *relata* in movement. Quantum relating highlights action and intra-action, a verb, rather than engagement between beings or things, which are nouns. My relationality is different as I engage with my surroundings, looking in different directions. This might on the surface appear to suggest a form of solipsism or a construction where only the ‘I’ is the point of engagement, but this is not necessarily the case, if the ‘I’ itself is a phenomenon, less an essence than usually assumed, but rather entangled with inter-subjective structures of meaning and other *relata* that extend backward and forward. The relational ‘I’ is re-formed with each entangled encounter or ‘intra-action.’ Britain is the exception that expresses the rule, the empire that almost dominated the entire globe but is very difficult to pin down as a collective ‘I.’ The ‘I’ changes in moving from the separate constituent parts, i.e., Wales, England, Scotland, to its larger expression as the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, or further back in time



to include all of Ireland, or its time as part of the larger co-sovereign entity of the European Union, or the leader of the Commonwealth, as the first among equals in a global historical construction that was founded on empire and inequality. The ‘I’ as the colonizer that appropriated and enslaved and the ‘I’ as the benevolent home of human rights and democracy. What is Britain aside from a positional phenomenon that changes in space and time, lacking any essence of ‘I,’ but full of contradictions (see Sanghera 2021), or complementarities, including potentials to do both good and harm.

Conversation and translation

Do ‘I’ and ‘you’ constitute a relational system, more or less grounded, attached to place, custom, family, community, the planet, yet never a ‘thing’? Is conversing and translating a part of navigating life? The back and forth of unfolding phenomenon can itself illustrate the importance of conversation (Fierke and Jabri 2019) and translation, both of which involve the continuous refocusing of attention from one intra-acting subject to another. Conversation and translation are mutually implicated but not the same. A meaningful conversation that seeks to engage difference requires an ability to comprehend and translate forms of life that may be cast in meanings that rely on very different cosmologies or assumptions about how the world works.

How is the conversation and translation of communities navigated when the starting point is always intra-acting phenomena rather than interacting things, phenomena constituted through relations rather than an essential self? Here, Buddhism potentially maps onto the discussion of *relata* that become relations as distinct from ‘things’ that interact. The notion that the self, whether human or community, is both real and non-real, begins with a notion that we all carry a notion of ‘I,’ but this I is not an essence. The ‘I’ is a product of all the relations, causes and conditions that produced it. The second century Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna refers to the production of relational selves as ‘dependent origination,’ which further assumes a category of ‘emptiness,’ a quantum void-like space, from which ‘relations-in-things’ emerge and pass away, in their impermanence.

You, I, strangers, citizens, states, empires, relations and even emptiness itself are empty in that they lack a permanent essence and are contingent and are constructed and will suffer along the way, not least from anxiety about the impermanence! (Rovelli 2018; Shimizu 2024). Because of this anxiety, we build walls and fortresses to keep away the suffering or any reminder of it, or try to expand the self in the hope of greater safety, while in the process trampling on others. The three poisons of ignorance, greed and hatred arise, in Buddhism, from the ‘self-grasping’ of the appropriating ‘I’ (Ganeri 2012, 198). I take from you and other strangers in the hope of increasing my wealth and safety at the expense of yours. The logic has worked through centuries of empire and International Relations, but has become an obstacle to any prospect of addressing climate emergency, among other global threats, and the threat they pose to life on the planet, the whole (Fierke and Mackay 2023).

Shih states that pluriversalism is not necessarily beautiful, if a binary consciousness prevails strangers will remain discursively segregated. Wang Chen



(Sawyer 1999, 18–19), in the *Dao of Peace*, points to the human tendency to conceptualize as the start of division and distinction, from which emotions, strangers and war emerge. He states that ‘as soon as things have names and people emotions, love and hate arise and attack each other, warfare flourishes.’ How do we use language in such a way as to not construct relations of difference that matter in violent ways, but instead generate the dynamic opposition and creativity of conversation and translation, which may intersect and combine in unique ways?

Within any one tradition, such as Buddhism, rituals and cultural practices change significantly as they travel across communities or time (see Said 1983). The same can be said of indigenous rituals and practices, even while the underlying cosmologies often share a family resemblance across non-Western knowledge systems, which arose in different corners of the world yet express what Francesca Mason Boring (2012, 28) refers to as an ‘universal indigene.’ What does a conversation and translation look like, from the perspective of, for instance, scientific knowledge, and the more active conception of knowing and seeing found in indigenous and ancient Asian traditions? Knowing of this kind is simultaneous, immediate, experienced by an entangled observer, and it may also be emotional, as contrasted with knowledge of facts in a world assumed to exist independently of them.

Or how would one converse or translate a very different conception of land? Indigenous traditions, where humans belong to the land, and thus have an interest in sustaining a shared habitat, can be contrasted with a modern emphasis on property and owning land, and thus keeping others out. As Brigg et al. (2021: 16) state in regard to the indigenous, ‘landscape serves as a template for the socio-political ordering of relations among individuals (through the kinship system) and groups (through a system of ‘sections’ correlated with and crosscutting kinship systems as well as ancestor tracks embedded in landscape that connect groups with one another. The contrasting approaches to land have significant implications for the relationship between selves and others. As Barad (2017, 76–7) notes, ‘Landscape is not merely visually akin to a body; it is the skin of the earth. Land is not property or territory; it is time being marked by its own wounds and vitality, a layered material, geo-neuro-biography—of bones and bodies, ashes and earth, where death and life meet. Land occupation, as a mode of empire building, was and continues to be tied to a logic of the void that land devoid of property ownership and territorial sovereignty is unpopulated (Barad 2017: 77).

Cosmologies that assume the relationality of systems long precede quantum physics. Quantum theory, in contrast to the emphasis of classic physics on non-sentient matter and mechanisms, contains notions of duality, action, relations and ‘fields, which resonate with many non-Western and indigenous traditions. Yet, science, whether Newtonian or quantum, represents objective knowledge while indigenous knowing traditions, along with nature, have been victim to practices of control and destruction by modern state/empires shaped by Newtonian ontologies of science and politics. To open up to indigenous knowledge requires ‘rethinking thinking,’ which Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018, 24) approaches as a fundamentally decolonial move that rests on a conviction that ‘all human beings are not born into a knowledge system but are legitimate knowers and producers of legitimate knowledge.’



Time, memory and emotion

There has thus far been intermittent reference to International Relations, which assumes separate states as the fundamental constituents of the international system, as opposed to empires as relational phenomena that stretch out from a center to a periphery, an appropriating 'I' (Ganeri 2012) which relationally subsumes others in the process of expansion. The relational empire is among the generative fears of International Relations. Relationality of this kind threatens the sovereignty of individual states. International relations often assumes a distinction between empire in the past in contrast to the sovereign state system of modernity. One might, however, consistent with Ling's Daoist logic, see the empire in IR and IR in empire. Relationality is not merely a spatial configuration in the present, but a temporal orientation to the past, and all that has come before, as well as the world/s we are creating for future generations (Fierke 2024).

The relationship between time, memory and emotions is a crucial part of the relational equation. Much of what we are able to hear or see, or turn away from within the international, is a byproduct of an often brutal past, which has been hidden away behind collective stories about who any one 'self' is, often containing 'collective agreements not to know' (Fierke and Mackay 2023) and defined in relation to strangers who have in the past been harmed by or been a source of harm to the 'self.' Within the context of the Covid pandemic, which was itself a global trauma, memories of historical trauma were particularly active, whether the memories of transatlantic enslavement brought to the surface by George Floyd's murder, at the hands of a white policeman in Minnesota in 2020, or the role of memories of Opium Wars, Chinese and British empires in the context of the Hong Kong protests in the same year; or the storming of the U.S. Capital on 6 January 2022, surrounded by recurring themes of revolutionary war against British empire or the later civil war over the enslavement of those who were not considered free and equal, or the demands for apology, reparations and/or the return of artefacts to former colonies, or to memories of Nazi invasions during World War II, as well as memories of Russian empire, in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and later, in 2023, of Holocaust and genocide, in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel and the sustained bombing of Gaza that followed. In all of these contexts, intrusions of memory and unacknowledged grief or guilt have fuelled division and/or war.

The intrusions of memory suggest that continuing legacies of past violence, which have been selectively grieved by collective selves, solidify the boundaries distinguishing self and stranger, and an entangled relationship to ungrivable and unseen others. The memories and emotions have become the fodder of existing and emerging wars or the breakdown of societies across the world. A reckoning with this past as a global whole, building, for instance, on the acknowledgment of the 2022 COP 27 meeting that there is a relationship between colonialism and climate change, is an important place to start. The stark either/or divisions that deepen as states participate in war, will only reinforce the selectivity of hate, and the grief or guilt that hides behind it (Fierke and Mackay 2023). The division of the world into a binary 'mine' or 'yours' has become an existential threat to life on the planet. A key question for a relational 'rethinking thinking' is how to 're-member,' and reconstitute



broken relations, which, Robbie Shilliam (2015, 149) notes, is central to the task of healing, and, in the process, to transform the Hobbesian logic of the state of nature, i.e., ‘I am threatened because you are,’ into a relationality more akin to that of African Ubuntu, ‘I am because you are’ (Mbiti 1990), before it is too late.

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