Summary

Based on the conviction that global life outlines a complex mesh of contingent interactions, the contributions to the relational turns in international relations (IR) draw attention to the ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure, and order among the diversity of agency, form, and matter implicated in, enacting, and enabling global life. Inhabiting a relational universe reveals the interdependence between international actors and also their mutual implication in each other's interactions and roles, in addition to the overwhelming embeddedness of these relations in the world. The relational research agenda has sought simultaneously to unravel the atomistic individualism dominating the IR mainstream and reimagine the international as a dynamic space for dialogical learning, which promises a world that is less hegemonic, more democratic, and equitable. Two of the dominant trends that have come to define the “relational revolution” in IR are the simultaneous decentering of its Eurocentrism and its anthropocentrism. As such, the relational knowledge production underpinning the study of global life mandates tolerance of at least as much diversity and contradictions as evident in the social relations being narrated.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, Eurocentrism, global life, global international relations, just coexistence, post-Western international relations, relational agenda, relational cosmology, relational ethics

Subjects: International Relations Theory

Introduction

It is difficult to overlook references to relationality in early 21st-century international relations (IR) discourse. It seems that there is a relational reading of nearly any topic in the study and practice of world politics (Jackson & Nexon, 2019; Kavalski, 2018b; Nordin et al., 2019; Querejazu, 2022; Shih et al., 2019; Torrent, 2021; Trownsell et al., 2021). Yet, such proliferation of relational scholarship should not be misunderstood as a suggestion that there is a grand theory of relationality out there on which such accounts draw. On the contrary, different proponents of relationality will often have contending, if not contradictory, understandings of what they have in mind when they claim to be engaging in relational analysis. Thus, in the absence of a unifying theory of relationality, some have suggested that—at the basic level of theoretical construction—the glue that binds the fragmented IR relational research agenda is the assertion that despite its alleged preoccupation with “relations” and “interactions,” the disciplinary study of world politics has instead tended to prioritize the actors involved. Thereby, the proponents of relationality aver that the IR mainstream has become an exclusively substantialist endeavor, one
that is in an urgent need of revision. As such, relationality in IR represents a “family of theories united by an emphasis on the theoretical and analytical significance of connections, ties, transactions, and other kinds of relations” (Jackson & Nexon, 2019, p. 2).

Some have labeled these moves as a “relational turn” (Epple, 2020; Kavalski, 2018b; Selg, 2016) in the discipline; others have called it an outright “relational revolution” (Kurki, 2022). Yet, to speak of world affairs as “relational” might appear to be no more than an unnecessary truism; all modes of theorizing account, reflect, and draw on specific kinds of interactions for their explanation and understanding. In fact, most modes of knowledge production would fit quite comfortably within a “larger family of relational social theory” (Jackson & Nexon, 1999, p. 293).

Yet, the point made in the scholarship on relationality is that the vast majority of IR approaches view relations as something that happens “between” or “among” separated social entities (e.g., states) that happen to have relations with another actor (Selg, 2016). In this respect, the promulgation of relationality in the study of world affairs both acts as a corrective to the substantialist IR metanarrative and aims to draw attention to a distinct, conscious, and targeted troubling of the core assumptions of IR inquiry. The point of departure for the different versions of relationality in IR is the challenge to the fundamental assumption that the entities, things, and actors that populate the stage of world affairs—be they states, international organizations, terrorist groups, etc.—exist prior to and outside of the interactions in which they engage (McCourt, 2016).

Instead, proponents of relationality posit that IR analyses appear to put the cart before the horse—that is, actors or entities emerge in contingent processes of interactions, and their identities and interests (in addition to the roles that they play) will be different in different spaces and times. At the same time, relational perspectives seek to uncover and account for the possibilities attendant in living in an abundant yet profoundly entangled world. Brimming with the coexistence of multiple “worlds,” “domains,” “projects,” and “texts” of ongoing and overlapping interconnections, the insistence on the relationality of global life draws attention to the mercurial entanglements in which any occurrence does not exist merely in isolation but, rather, reflects a nexus of innumerable interactions that interpenetrate one another in the shifting tapestry of social relations (Cudworth et al., 2018; Kavalski, 2015).

The recognition of such interwovenness of life invokes the “international” not merely as a stage for small, middle, regional, and great powers but also as an ever-changing and polyphonic pattern of fluid exchanges and social transactions that percolate and gain salience in the context of ongoing interactions and encounters with others (Kavalski, 2018a). This article take stock of some of the more prominent contributions to the “relationalizing” project in IR. The aim here is neither to deny the complexity and diversity of voices and views nor impose coherence on what is a variegated and polyphonic field but, rather, to present an account of the current state of the art on relationality in IR that both gestures toward a systematic definition and will allow for meaningful conversations and synergies across perspectives and approaches. The section on “Relationalizing International Relations” briefly sketches some of the intellectual provocations that have backstopped the current relational turns in the discipline. The analysis outlines two of the dominant trends that have come to define the “relationalization” of IR—namely the simultaneous decentering of its Eurocentrism and its anthropocentrism.
The necessary caveat is that these relational endeavors should not be misunderstood as a call for new hegemonic hierarchies privileging one lived reality over another. Instead, relational perspectives do not proscribe antagonism, nor do they suggest that its elimination is required (Querejazu, 2016). Difference—including radical difference—is not merely desirable, it is the very condition of possibility for the self-organizing emergence of global life (Pan, 2018). Instead, the point of departure for much of the “relationalizing” project is the acknowledgment that due to its pervasive substantialism, IR has struggled to foster different ways of seeing and encountering the world that can help it generate meaningful answers to the pressing questions of the current times. Hence, there is an urgent need for a change in perception, outlook, and vision that can help uncover new modes of thinking and doing world affairs that transcend established paradigms and practices.

### Relationalizing International Relations

Relational approaches of different ilk have challenged the substantialist metanarrative of international relation’s (IR) mainstream by proposing a relational ontology in which global life resonates with and through complex and interpenetrating presences whose sociability is infused with the contingent opportunities inherent in the encounter with the other. The very claim that the world is populated by and emerges through the continuous interactions between plentiful varieties of life and matter calls for the positing of alternative ontologies that exceed what is possible (and imaginable) under the substantialist research agenda of IR. Although the overwhelming majority of the proponents of relationality in IR have sought to actively contribute to various projects of decentering disciplinary inquiry, the spur for the current wave of relationalization has been prompted by a seminal article coauthored by Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon (1999).

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that multiple feminist, Indigenous, postcolonial, postmodern, and critical approaches to the study of world affairs have advocated the relational research agenda before and alongside the analysis by Jackson and Nexon (1999). Quite a few of those working in this vein have taken on a Levinasian or Heideggerian approach to relationality for the conceptualization of a meaningful encounter with “Otherness” through the practices of recognition, mutuality, respect, etc. of “entangled humanism” (Blaney & Tickner, 2017; Campbell, 1992; Pin-Fat, 2010; Sylvester, 1995). Many of the proponents of these perspectives tend to draw particular attention to contending gendered ontologies of relatedness in IR. Namely, one is a feminized ontology predicated on an underlying reliance on the care of Others, and the other is a masculinized one, which tends to interpret Otherness as mostly threatening. Vivienne Jabri (1999) articulates this as a “dualism between . . . an ‘ethic of justice’ identified with a Kantian ontological project of autonomous personhood and a contradictory ‘ethic of care,’ the ontological project of which is centred on the relational self” (p. 41). In this setting, “care can be both moral principle and practice in global politics” (Robinson, 1999, p. 31). The embodied ethic of care promulgated by such approaches outlines “an engaged and visionary standpoint” for
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simultaneously changing and challenging the narratives dominating the IR purview (Ruddick, 1990, p. 12), while at the same time furnishing perspectives grounded in experience rather than abstract reasoning.

It is this attention to the ethics of care that emphasizes the relational as a crucial component of any feminist analysis of economic, social, or political phenomena (Hirschmann, 1989). Relationality proffers a powerful alternative to hierarchy, exclusion, greed, and the lack of care by supplanting them with principles such as empathy, reciprocity, restraint, attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, trust, and respect owing to the interweaving between the interests of the self with those of others (Gilligan, 1982; Keller, 1997; Noddings, 1986; Sjoberg, 2006). This articulation of the self “as intrinsically connected with, as part of, both the community and nature . . . as dependent on others, as defined through relationships to others, as perceiving self-interest to lie in the welfare of the relational complex” prompts a radical redefinition of the notions of political freedom and legal liberties that rejects the “Eurocentric,” “androcentric,” and “male-dominated” normative framework of “rule-governed adjudication of competing rights between self-interested, autonomous others” (Harding, 1986, pp. 165–171).

Although such gendered perspectives on relationality were not accounted for in the nascent stages of the relationalization of IR, they have since been gaining prominence in the development of distinctive forms of groundedness, responsibility, and ordering that remain rooted in “one’s (self-constituting) relations” and entail forms of reciprocity that “enmesh (human and non-human) selves with one another” (Trownsell et al., 2021, p. 38). Such modalities of relational groundedness do not merely seek to challenge the “essential placelessness of capitalism” but also offer potent resources for reclaiming agency and “resubjectification” as sets of embodied interventions that strive to confront, reshape, and reimagine everyday practices, interactions with others, and relations to land, locality, place, the global, and the planetary (Gibson-Graham, 2002, pp. 30–34). These analytical moves tend to be associated with relational cosmologies attuned to nuanced modalities of order in which human political and legal systems in non-Western (and, especially, in Indigenous) traditions are often embedded in, fit into, and co-adapted with the interrelationships and interdependencies that comprise the ecologies of particular territories (Brigg et al., 2022).

A prominent example of this gendered tradition of relationality, which has managed to gain some traction in the initial development of the relational turn in IR, is the work of Louiza Odysseos (2007). Taking as her point of departure the ontology of separation, Odysseos observes that the substantialist accounts of IR treat the concept and practices of coexistence merely as coterminous with co-presence—that is, the parallel existence (co-dwelling) of two or more entities/things. For Odysseos, such framing is symptomatic of the “ontological totalitarianism” of mainstream IR (p. 50), which subscribes to an understanding of the modern subject as a “‘being without relations’ . . . perfectly detached, distinct, and closed . . . it is unencumbered; it is solitary; it is unaffected” (p. xxviii). Thus, coexistence is usually presented as a function of residing “side by side: It does not require that we live together in any meaningful way; it merely records that we live in the same limited space.” In this setting, the “international” represents “a violence-steeped state of nature” (p. 23). Survival therefore becomes “the predominant relational schema of IR—it offers ‘a particular kind of relationality whose focus is the protection of the self and the
surviving of the other” (p. 21). The world stage is then nothing but a domain populated by “nonrelational and self-sufficient subjects” (p. 178). To remedy this condition, Odysseos posits “critical belonging” as a form of relational groundedness that permits the reconstruction of communities and the liberation of “groups and others that were silenced by the tradition [of nonrelational, belligerent subjects, lacking capacity to live with others] and making their voices heard” (pp. 175–184).

Although such gendered accounts make a valuable and much needed contribution to the relationalizing of IR, the point here is that the initial wave of relational analyses neglected most of them altogether and instead pivoted on the study by Jackson and Nexon (1999)—either as fellow travelers or critical interlocutors. Jackson and Nexon contend that the bulk of IR is underpinned by the “entity-seeking” of substantialism. This means that the study of world affairs takes “entities,” “things,” and “substances” as the ontological priors of global life. In particular, the belief that actors precede and are formed outside of the dynamics of interaction appears to be the common denominator “cut[ting] across conventional divisions in the field, including theories in all the major ‘paradigms’ of IR” (Jackson & Nexon, 1999, p. 293). Consequently, and regardless of their theoretical commitment, IR scholars purvey visions of “the world out there” as a closed system populated by sovereign states, whose interactions are motivated by power maximization and the pursuit of their own self-interest. The framework of instrumental-rational action has thus become the standard against which alternative claims are judged. The “atomistic ontology” of substantialism asserts that all social phenomena are quantifiable and predictable (Kavalski, 2012, p. 138; Kurki, 2008, p. 17). Given the linear causality backstopping the substantialist metanarrative, what comes to pass in world affairs is presented as subject to anticipation premised on the properties (interests, identities, and power) of international actors. Apart from relying on overgeneralizations, such substantialism tends to purvey profoundly essentializing claims about the actors, factors, and processes animating international politics.

As a correction to the dominance of substantialism, Jackson and Nexon (1999, p. 292) proffer a “processual relationalism.” This is a transactional approach that takes sociality as prior—both logically and in practice—to the actors who are engaging in interactions. From this perspective, it is increasingly difficult to imagine global life as “billiard balls slamming into another series of billiard balls”; instead, it “look[s] much more like reverberations along a web of interdependencies” (p. 299). To assist the operationalization of processual relationalism, Jackson and Nexon elaborate four elements: processes, configurations, projects, and yoking (p. 301). The emphasis on processes seeks to disrupt the ways in which change is construed in IR. In contrast to substantialist claims that change is nearly invariably associated with agential intentionality, processual relationalism proposes that change does not have to always be associated with a specific actor. Instead, many things happen in world affairs independent of the actors involved and they are “un-owned” and elicit “doings” that are not attributable to a particular “doer” (p. 302). In this setting, configurations have to be understood as “aggregations of processes” providing contingent interactive contexts of “relational differences which give rise to meaningful action” (p. 304). Configurations thus offer insights into the circumstances and contingencies that go into the relational production of the processes of international interactions. It is, therefore,
projects that denote “a configuration with agent properties, a social entity with the ability to make choices and exercise causal power” (p. 307). Rather than a distinct property of individual international actors, the key qualities of projects are a function of circumstances and contingent on the particular spatial and temporal specificity of interactions.

Finally, in order to frame the ways in which certain “configurations are reified into entities, and how these entities in turn come to manifest agentic properties,” Jackson and Nexon (1999, p. 312) turn to the concept of yoking. Jackson and Nexon acknowledge that relational analyses find it difficult to conceptualize “things”—that is, entities are mere accidents, “a kind of a standing wave,” or something else altogether (p. 313). The notion of yoking assists this endeavor by revealing that actorness represents the formalization of “various connections so that the resulting entity has the ability to endure as a persistent thing, in the various ecologies in which it is located” (p. 314). In the setting, the processual relationalism proposed by Jackson and Nexon not only constitutes a powerful challenge to the substantialist metanarrative of IR but also makes available much-needed vocabularies and optics for engaging phenomena, practices, and dynamics that cut across the turbulent pluriverse of global life. In this way, processual relationalism has made possible the advancement of valuable alternative pictures (simultaneously in analytical, ontological, and normative terms) of the fundamental characteristics and purposes of world politics.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the main uptake of the framework proposed by Jackson and Nexon (1999) has been among scholars seeking to decenter the study of IR. The encounter with the radical relationality of global life has become a key site for the contestation with the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism of the IR mainstream. Relationality has, thus, become integral to all kinds of projects for producing “worlds and knowledges otherwise” (Escobar, 2007). Overlapping ecological, economic, political, and social crises suggest not only that the existing analytical frameworks, institutions, and types of international behavior have become “dysfunctional and can no longer deal with the situation in the old ways” but also that they have actively contributed to the real and epistemic violence against seeing the world otherwise than through the substantialist lens of the mainstream (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015). The section on “Relationality in Other Tongues and Many Worlds” detail these decentering relational endeavors.

**Relationality in Other Tongues and Many Worlds**

It can be argued that the attentiveness to relationality might be one of the central defining features of the diversity of perspectives and voices propagating the decentering, worlding, and democratization of the international relations (IR) mainstream. Of course, many such endeavors are profoundly entangled with the decolonization of disciplinary inquiry. For instance, Robbie Shilliam (2015) has written powerfully about the “relationality that exists underneath the wounds of coloniality” and can be drawn on as a source to “repair colonial wounds, binding back together peoples, lands, pasts, ancestors, and spirits” (p. 13). For others, this form of “entwinement” is the foundation of a “relational materialism”—a vision and approach for acknowledging the numerous and numinous ways in which “social relations make worlds” (Agathangelou & Ling, 2009, p. 6).
These perspectives on relationality intend a meaningful contribution to the pluralization of the study of world affairs. The aim is to recuperate, re-memory, and reinstate a more capacious understanding of global life than the one associated with the parochial emplotment of “Westphalian IR,” which prescribes preordained responses to a static set of fixed questions posed by a pantheon of nearly always-and-only Euro-American thinkers in order to sustain the dominance of “hypermasculine Eurocentric Whiteness” (Ling, 2017, p. 477). Relationality in this setting reflects a complex and mercurial plurality of visions, whose radical endeavor disrupts mainstream attempts to press-gang the messy, multiple, and interpenetrating histories, identities, experiences, and knowledges into the service of Self/Us–Them/Other binaries that hold sway over IR’s purview (Brigg et al., 2022; Chen & Shimizu, 2019; Ling, 2014a; Querejazu, 2022; Shimizu, 2015; Tickner & Querejazu, 2021; Tucker, 2018).

According to proponents of relationality, the mechanistic (and nearly clockwork) features of this substantialist imaginary disclose a normalization of oppression evidenced by the control, domination, and exploitation of various others—be they human (Indigenous, non-Western, gender, and other vulnerable communities) or nonhuman (nature, species, and objects; Kavalski, 2020b). By drawing attention to ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure, and order, among the diversity of agency, form, and matter implicated in, enacting, and enabling global life, relational approaches intend openings that make it possible to flee the substantialist partitioning of the world. The central pillars of this partitioning are the Eurocentric makeup and anthropocentric commitments of the IR mainstream. From this perspective, Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism have coevolved in parallel with the forces of racial superiority, economic hegemony, settler colonialism, primitive accumulation, and violent power politics producing the crises of the current times.

Relational approaches thereby seek to contribute meaningfully to the decentering of IR by outlining feasible post-Western and non-anthropocentric modes of inquiry. In this respect, relationality has proven particularly potent for the “contrapuntal reading” of established knowledge (Bilgin, 2016). As a number of scholars have noted, relational perspectives yield meaningful tools for the encounter with and the interplay between coloniality and indigeneity (Onar et al., 2013). At the same time, the relationalizing move recognizes that the current ecological crises are profoundly shaped by the histories of colonialism, the practices of imperial plunder, and racialized exploitation. Thus, by moving away from the substantialist universe of IR, relational approaches amplify the call for emancipatory ethics and politics claiming “a more just coexistence of worlds” (Rojas, 2016). Although the meaning of such “just coexistence” is contested and will very much depend on the specific proponents of the relationalizing move, it seems to imply accountability; emancipation; democracy; reciprocity; respect; and recognition of suffering, dispossession, oppression, and redressing inequalities, traumas, and silencing. For some, such normative commitment suggests that in a world of irreducible interdependence, relationality is not just an observable condition of existence but also a norm and a qualitative modality of appreciation for the possibility and achievement of sustainable shared flourishing (Nordin et al., 2019; Shimizu, 2019; Trownsell et al., 2021). For others, the notion of relational justice acts as a call and a basis for the acknowledgment of the “unraveling of being” in the context of the mutual but unequal vulnerability in the Anthropocene’s era of annihilation (Kavalski, 2020a; Querejazu, 2022; Tickner & Querejazu, 2021). For others still, such normative
commitment opens avenues for relational transformation that can begin to redress different forms of violence and injustice through committed, open-ended, and creative encounters and engagements that can “show us a way . . . towards other imaginable alternative political systems” (Trownsell et al., 2021, p. 31; see also Ling, 2014b; Querejazu, 2016; Rojas, 2016). In all these instances, the relational turn in IR discloses formidable ethically informed bonds and connections that demand a normative stance to reframing and repairing political, economic, and social patterns of interactions. The critical point, backstopping such emancipatory normative commitment, is that instead of “objectivity” in the narrow Eurocentric and modernist sense, relationality simultaneously facilitates and encourages epistemological pluralism that engages “the complexity of reality and its oppressive dimensions” (Kincheloe, 2011, p. 80). The post-Eurocentric and post-anthropocentric traits of the current relationalization of IR are sketched out in the sections on “Post-Eurocentric Relationalities” and “Post-Anthropocentric Relationalities.”

**Post-Eurocentric Relationalities**

The disclosure of multiple relational ontologies has helped uncover the complex, eclectic, and non-objective blend of cultural universals and culturally specific patterns of social interaction underpinning the dynamics of global life. As such, the acknowledgment that humanity has been (and continues to be) distinguished by the coexistence of and interaction between a diversity and range of worldviews is a distinguishing feature of the current relationalization of IR. These endeavors resonate with the emancipatory mutuality of many different ways of knowing and being in global life. In this setting, the relationality lens outlines the contested terrain of post-Western IR as a space for dialogical learning, which encourages engagement with the possibilities afforded by the interactions of multiple worlds and privileges the experiences and narratives of neither of them.

It needs to be acknowledged that although the post-Eurocentric relational endeavor has gained followership throughout the world (Brigg et al., 2022; Querejazu, 2022; Rojas, 2016; Shilliam, 2015; Tickner & Querejazu, 2021; Trownsell et al., 2021), Asian—and, in particular, Sinophone—contributions have gained specific prominence (Kavalski, 2018b; Ling, 2014b; Qin, 2018; Shih, 2016; Shih et al., 2019; Shimizu, 2019). This might be an effect of the exposure, opportunities, and attention provided by the so-called global shift to the East in world affairs (Cho & Kavalski, 2019; Pan & Kavalski, 2022; Walton & Kavalski, 2017). Others have asserted that although the commitment to relationality is new for most contemporary IR theories, Sinophone intellectual traditions have long been defined by a normative commitment to relationalism, which makes them uniquely positioned to provide a significant contribution to the global field of IR (Zhang, 2016, p. 180). At the same time, the perceived difficulty of the disciplinary mainstream to articulate a relational IR has drawn substantive criticism from a number of Asian IR scholars (Ling, 2017; Liu et al., 2022; Long, 2021; Qin, 2016; Shimizu, 2022).

The broad commitment of these perspectives is about not just the lack of relationality in the Anglophone mainstream but also that the forms of relationality and interaction that are allowed to be fostered are “limited to those (inter)actions that can be understood to be in line with the
reproduction or circulation of—a particular rendering of—political life and political order(ing)” (Ansems de Vries, 2015, p. 72). At the same time, others assert that “Chinese relationality is about anxiety instead of passion” (Shih, 2016, p. 2). A central feature that a number of the proponents of relationality in Sinophone IR share is that they tend to draw on ancient Chinese thought and ideas for their explanation and understanding (Chen, 2011; Horesh & Kavalski, 2014; Ling, 2014b; Ling et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2022; Shih, 2016; Zhao, 2021).

The key characteristic of approaches to relationality is the engagement with distinct Sinophone concepts and ideas. Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳), for instance, draws on the notion and practices of Tianxia (天下; usually translated as “all-under-heaven”). For Zhao (2009), Tianxia presents a relational ordering principle prioritizing the most beneficial mutual interactions (the minimization of mutual harm) rather than the most beneficial unilateral strategy (the maximization of individual interest). Thus, in contrast to the conflictual interactions between the self and its others, the all-under-heaven system “proposes politics of harmony for a world in which relations prevail far and near among nations, as opposed to hostile differentiation between self and others. In a world with no enemies, harmony becomes possible” (Zhao, 2009, p. 14). Zhao’s relational model pivots on universalism that does not expect nor argue for uniformity. Instead, it proposes a “multiverse of compatibility” through interactions (Zhao, 2015, p. 62). Hence, in contrast to Western modalities of cosmopolitanism redolent of imposing universalizing normativity that should “apply to all individuals,” Tianxia offers a set of principles that would “apply to all relations” (Zhao, 2015, p. 62). Zhao’s (2021) point is that because of the elision of relationality from its Eurocentric mainstream, IR seems unable to come to terms with both global life and the full complexity of its interactions.

Probably the most prominent Sinophone account of relationality in IR is associated with the work of Qin Yaqing (秦亚青). In fact, his effort and insights have given impetus to much of the ongoing rethinking of the theories and practices of relationality across the various locales of global IR. It has to be stated at the outset that while making a distinct and important contribution, Qin frames his engagement with relationality as a response to and, significantly, a critique of the work by Jackson and Nexon. In short, Qin finds problems with both the metanarrative and the analytical framework of their processual relationalism. Although he concurs with Jackson and Nexon (and their followers) that the mainstream theories of IR ignore the significance of social interactions, Qin (2009) faults processual relationalism for its underlying commitment to “Western rationalism” (p. 14). According to Qin, the inability to problematize the Eurocentric roots of IR’s substantialism invariably hems in the endeavors of Jackson and Nexon. This leads them to propound an equally Eurocentric, isolated (and isolationist) “relations-for-relations sake” approach as that of the substantialism they seek to expose (Qin, 2018). The broader critique is that processual relationalism fails to decenter the monological knowledge production of IR. Thus, the exclusion (and expulsion) of “non-Western” perspectives and experiences perpetuated from this account of relationality fails to trouble the underlying “individualistic rationality” of substantialist IR—which Qin (2016) defines as the underlying “metaphysical component of the theoretical hard core” of Eurocentric IR (p. 34).
In contrast to these engagements, Qin (2018) takes the relational complexity of international society as the point of departure for his investigations. Drawing on Chinese intellectual traditions—especially Confucianism—he sets off to articulate a distinctly Chinese relational theory of world politics. His point of departure is the assertion that relationality is the defining characteristic of Chinese thought and practice. The social embeddedness in interactions has “always been given the first priority in the Chinese mindset” and is thereby the natural pivot and the basic unit of social analysis (Qin, 2009, p. 9). In this respect, it is the processes of ongoing relations that produce “social meaning” through the practice of interactions—namely it is relations that “shape an actor’s identity and influence her behaviour” (Qin, 2009, p. 9). In this framing, processes represent “an open becoming with unlimited possibilities”; at the same time, the forces animating these interactions gain their “own life through the unfolding and dynamic relations among actors” (Qin, 2016, p. 37).

On this premise, Qin (2009) goes on to envisage global life as a “complex network of flowing relations” in which “each line or knot of relational network moves, generating dynamics for the process. However, the dynamics itself cannot be reduced to any single line or knot of the network” (pp. 11–12). The assertion that the whole is more than the sum of its parts then informs the constitutive assumptions of Qin’s relational theory of IR. The suggestion is that “the IR world is a universe of interrelatedness” (Qin, 2016, p. 35). Abandoning substantialist commitments to individualism has a direct bearing on the framing of “the social context composed by relations” (Qin, 2009, p. 16). In particular, such perspective urges rearticulating the international society as “a relational web” whose dynamics are embedded in and emerge from the contingent figurations of interaction. Such position informs a context-oriented international society that represents the world as a “complexly related whole” whose social vitality is “defined by the fundamental relatedness of all to all” (Qin, 2016, p. 36).

The second assumption of Qin’s relational theory of world politics is that “relations define identity” (Qin, 2009, p. 15). The point here is that “actors are and can only be ‘actors-in-relations’” and social relations have a shaping power over their identity formation (Qin, 2016, p. 38). The assertion that social actors do not exist outside of the context of social relations proffers a dynamic understanding of identity as a relationally circumstantial construct. Drawing on Chinese intellectual traditions, Qin posits that in contrast to the Eurocentric rootedness of identity in the dictum of “cogito ergo sum,” Chinese takes on identity reflect an understanding that “there is no me in isolation to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others” (Qin, 2016, p. 36). Such contingent framing suggests that identity is “by nature, multifold, interactive, and changeable along with practice” (Qin, 2009, p. 16). Qin’s claim then is that “individuals per se have no identities”; instead, “identity and relational webs co-exist, co-define, and co-transform” (Qin, 2009, pp. 15–16).

The third assumption of Qin’s relational theory of world politics is that power is relational—it is not a property of any one actor but is relationally engendered by, in, and through the dynamics of social interactions. Qin’s reckoning with the relational nature of power emphasizes that “it is nurtured and defined in the relational web” (Qin, 2009, p. 17). This means that rather than a material possession or an equation of capabilities, power becomes a contingent reflection of intersubjective and circumstantial relational practices. It is in the iterations of such practices that
actors “constantly manipulate and manage [their] relational circles. An actor is more powerful because she has larger relational circles, more intimate and important others in these circles, and more social prestige because of these circles” (Qin, 2016, p. 42). In this setting, both “relations are power” and “relations always influence [enlarge or constrain or both] the exercise of power” (Qin, 2009, p. 18). The inference here is that what actors are after is not influence (in the sense of power over others, which tends to be associated with the logic of control underpinning the concept and practices of both hard and soft power [and their many variants]) but, rather, ensuring the longevity of relations by reinforcing the strength of ties through ongoing commitment to and active participation in interactions. The crucial inflection is that the currency of relational power is “social capital such as face/reputation” (Qin, 2016, p. 42).

In this setting, Qin outlines the “logic of relationship” animating his relational theory of world politics. The intention is to emphasize the framing effects of sociality on actors’ relational capacities. The point of departure for such logic of relationality is the observation that “an actor tends to make decisions according to the degrees of intimacy and/or importance of her relationships to specific others, with the totality of her relational circles as the background” (Qin, 2016, p. 37). Thus, in contrast to mainstream accounts which assume that actors are distinct and separate from one another, the logic of relationality insists that “things or variables change along with the change of their relations; individuals in the web are subject to changes in the relational web as a whole; and, similarly, the interaction among individuals can have an impact on the web” (Qin, 2009, p. 15). Consequently, and methodologically speaking, a relational logic of inquiry would not try to control variables and demand substantive isolation of temporal and causal factors; instead, it would seek to offer a comprehensive engagement with the overall context of interactions by embracing its complexity and taking into account as many variables as possible into the investigation. The messiness and unpredictability of interactions suggest that the relational totality constitutes a social context, which shapes and is shaped by, enables and is enabled by, and constrains and is constrained by actors (Qin, 2018).

According to Qin, the logic of relationality works in two distinct directions. First, “relations select”—meaning that “it is relational circles in which an actor is embedded that enable and constrain her behaviour” (Qin, 2016, p. 38). The implication is that in a complex world, the logic of relationships takes precedence over the logic of consequences and the logic of appropriateness informing mainstream approaches to IR. It is the very totality of social relations that not only defines what is rational and appropriate but also “precludes abstract individual rationality and self-sustained agency, which assumes the ability of discrete individuals to make decisions on the basis of self-interest” (Qin, 2016, p. 38). The key inflection here is the centrality of the social context—it is the very circumstances of interaction that act as the “[invisible] hand that orients an actor toward a certain action” (Qin, 2016, p. 38).

Second, the logic of relationality works in the direction of relational circles and insists that these are utilized for instrumental purposes. This element comes to indicate that relational action can be and, more often than not, is self-interested. In this sense, social actors utilize their “relational circles to facilitate the achievement of instrumental objectives” (Qin, 2016, p. 38). What might appear as the instrumental direction of the logic of relationality can be employed for the achievement of “immediate payoffs” or “longer term returns” or “even merely for social capital.
as reputation and prestige” (p. 38). At the same time, such instrumentality can be deployed “for achieving and maintaining social order” (p. 38). By virtue both of their location in a dynamic social context and of perceiving the world as a complex non-additive composition of ongoing relations, relational actors do not seek to merge into a homogeneous international society but, rather, aspire for the dialogical management of their differences through interaction so that these do not lead “to conflict and disorder, but on the contrary, can add up to stability” (p. 39).

Qin’s work has spurred multiple responses in the growing scholarship on post-Western IR (Nordin et al., 2019; Shih et al., 2019). In particular, his logic of relationality has informed different challenges to the “rules-based” international order. The ontological premise of such narratives is that the world stage is populated by disconnected international actors. This proposition calls for regulation of the behavior of such detached and egotistical entities. Rules thereby provide the convenient rational model for the management of such self-regarding actors by providing instrumental and normative prescriptions (as well as proscriptions) for their behavior (Kavalski, 2013). It is the formalization of rules both through international institutions and as ethical standards that ensures the predictability of international interactions. It is also the guidance of such rule-based frameworks that makes it possible to speak of international society in world politics. As Qin (2016) states succinctly, “Because actors are egoists and, therefore, are not trustworthy, they make and trust rules instead of trusting one another” (p. 43). In contrast, the relational framing of global order “focuses on the governing of relations among actors rather than of actors per se” (Qin, 2016, p. 43).

Relationality in such post-Eurocentric approaches advocates negotiated sociopolitical arrangements that manage complex relationships in a community to produce order so that members behave in a reciprocal and cooperative manner with mutual trust evolved over a shared understanding of social norms and morality (Chen, 2012; Shih, 2016). By eliciting such registers of worlding mutuality, post-Eurocentric relational approaches advocate the ethical and political promise of transcending the expected by engaging creatively with the contradictions, challenges, and opportunities of an entangled and unpredictable global life. The kind of IR that they engender is one that thrives on the conscious exploration and encounter with the interstitial and relational.

**Post-Anthropocentric Relationalities**

Drawing on such willingness to engage other ontologies as a way of learning different ways to observe and encounter the world, ourselves, and the problems that embroil us, relational perspectives have situated such alternatives into a nuanced comparative conversation with more familiar critical political lexicons and procedures inherited from academic scholarship. In these settings, relationality discloses the world as a multiversal space in which alternative realities can and do coexist and have done so for quite some time (Kavalski, 2022; Trownsell et al., 2021). As such, the relational knowledge production underpinning the worlding of the study of global life mandates tolerance of at least as much diversity and contradictions as evident in the social relations being narrated. It is in this setting in which the post-Eurocentric endeavor melds into the more-than-human accounts of IR (Cudworth et al., 2018; Youatt, 2020).
In particular, a number of contributors to the scholarship on relational cosmologies have contested the anthropocentrism of IR. They have sought to indicate the ways in which “other beings and collectives also actively participate in worlding” (Trownsell et al., 2021, p. 29). It is the “unpredictable awareness of matter” that draws attention to the diversity of ontological entanglements in the world (Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015, p. 3). The substantialist reductionism of IR’s ontological purview has been underpinned by the perception that human/sociopolitical systems (civil society, states, international organizations, etc.) are both detached from (not only conceptually but also in practice) and in control of the “nonhuman” systems (be they biophysical, technological, or other; Kavalski, 2015). Not surprisingly, therefore, IR’s concern only with “the human subject” (and its anthropomorphized effects such as states) has been part and parcel of the “disciplinary imperialism” characterizing the mainstream of Western social science (Inglis & Bone, 2016). In this setting, references to ecological interconnections extend a normative gesture aimed both at breaking “the spell of the human” and at disclosing IR’s “disembodied understanding of knowledge” that depends on the ongoing practices of abstraction and decontextualization (Cudworth et al., 2018, p. 288).

Relational cosmologies bring back the vast array of implications for how IR scholarship understands unfolding relations with humans, other species, objects, land, and various kinds of matter (Trownsell et al., 2021). Global life is not constituted by, through, and in humans alone. In fact, the relational endeavor actively seeks to rethink the meaning and practices of being human in the context of the Anthropocene by reconnecting, re-relating, and re-worlding sociopolitical systems to the very complex environments that they inhabit and depend on. Relationality inaugurates pluriversal politics proposing a more just coexistence that exceeds the substantivist imaginaries of the possible prescribed by the mainstream of IR (Drichel, 2021; Luke, 2003; Steiner & Helminski, 1998). The irruptive translation of such coexistence brings in dialogue the form and the content of the languages and experiences of the diverse and infinitely complex worlds cohabiting in global life. Such relationality becomes coextensive of and stands together with the interpolating spontaneity of surrounding events and things.

The nascent relational universe presaged by such analytical verso reveals the “thoroughgoing” way of relational thinking, where “relations shoot through and flow through ‘things’” (Kurki, 2020, p. 120). Global life—just like life in general—is profoundly relational, interstitial, and has a tendency to pass, flow, and connect (meaning that it can move, relate, transform, and become) beyond boundaries and across limits (Cudworth et al., 2018; Kavalski, 2020b; Pan, 2021). The emphasis is on “the reciprocal, nurturing relationship that binds human beings and other parts of the natural world and cosmos” (Tucker, 2018, p. 218). As such, “humans” (and the systems that they engender) are never isolated nor homogeneous individuals/actors; they lack specific boundaries; they are profoundly defined and symbiotically embedded in genetic (and not only) interactions with multiple others (e.g., bacteria, viruses, and fungi); and they are co-dependent on relations with various animals and plants they consume—in short, “‘the human,’ which has never been as singular . . . is porous and made of multiple relationalities” (Kurki, 2020, p. 122).

The point of relational cosmology is that the capillarity of such connections, relations, and ties is not merely illegible to the substantialist metanarrative of IR but also is purposefully and actively occluded, marginalized, dismissed, and erased from the disciplinary record (Ling et al., 2016). In
other words, thinking beyond the anthropocentric frames of IR urges “us to connect the questions of political possibility with the dynamics and the intransigence of vast domains that are themselves recalcitrant to the purchase of politics” and, at the same time, acts as a provocation “to imagine worlds both before and after us” (Clark, 2011, pp. 27–28). The resultant ethos of relational interdependence nourishes responsiveness toward other (radically different) kinds of beings (Litfin, 1997). The point is that the disclosure of the primacy of interaction unlocks new possibilities for coexistence in a relational universe, which are intrinsic to the phenomenon of interaction itself (Corry, 2020).

At the same time, such approaches seek to empower and give voice to non-Western and marginalized subjects as well as planetary lives that cannot speak for themselves (Querejazu, 2016; Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015; Trownsell et al., 2021). This requires axiological skills for living (if not thriving) in a social environment beyond the control of any of the participating actors. The distributed change provoked by the interactions of multiple actors in entangled complex settings demands an ethic of “responsibility-in-time”: “an extraordinary kind of strategic and moral responsibility [that is] temporally and structurally intertwined . . . both for the past and for the future generations of humans, animals, plants, forests, and fish” (Burke, 2016, p. 15; see also Kavalski, 2009). Such framing of the ethical underpinnings of the “complexification” of IR suggests that political action does not occur in a vacuum but, rather, in idiosyncratic and dynamic spatiotemporal contexts. What is normatively important emerges not as a result of individual decisions but, rather, relationally in the process of interactions with a wide variety of “others” (Kavalski, 2020a). Thereby, it becomes meaningful in the context of doing things together with them.

Instead of engaging in such relational intellectual traveling, the claim is that the IR theory mainstream still refuses to recognize “other” forms of theory-building that fall not just outside its Eurocentric bedrock but also beyond its anthropocentric frame (Cho & Kavalski, 2015; Drichel, 2021; Kavalski, 2020b; Kurki, 2020; Pan, 2020). Due to the underdetermined nature of such relations, what passes for world order not only is constantly changing but also demands ongoing commitment to participating and maintaining social exchanges. This understanding backstops an ethic of “living otherwise–relationally” (Rojas, 2016, p. 370)—namely the fostering of relational practices and nuanced adaptations sensitive to the emergent, historically contingent, and self-organizing character of global life. The point of such non-anthropocentric relational cosmologies is that global life is a messy and mercurial complex social figuration, always emergent, embedded in contingent spatiotemporal contexts, and shaped by interrelations with others (Connolly, 1991; Cudworth & Hobden, 2018; Zolkos & Kavalski, 2016). Of course, this ethic of entanglement at the planetary scale mandates a willingness to respond, reimagine, and receptively approach global life with “care in all its complexity. Humans must take responsibility for wrongs to multiple Others, even if we may not be able to communicate with them in a shared world or know precisely what these claims might be” (Biermann & Lövbrand, 2019, p. 23).

By accounting for the complex interactions between sociopolitical systems and the ecologies that they inhabit, the relationalization of IR suggests that the entanglement of world politics within larger systems of global interactions demands “asking questions about moments of imperial encounter and global governmentality that simultaneously involve multiple cultures and multiple
forms of life” (Youatt, 2020, p. 123). Such considerations call on IR theory to go back to the road less traveled of encountering the multiverse of relations animating global life. This move demands not only the rejection of the privileging of stability over change in IR’s knowledge production but also dispensing with the assertion (regardless of whether it is explicit or implicit) that such stability is normatively preferable. The relational verso is about the cultivation of attentiveness to the emergent, self-organizing, and contingent reality of global life. This inference seems to have prompted the development of diverse trajectories in the relational turn in IR. For some, especially those drawing on Indigenous cosmological traditions and political movements, the pluriversal analytical architecture furnishes frameworks through which other-than-human beings and forces participate in the co-production and co-creation of worlding. Relational ontologies then proffer opportunities “to fold an inter-human ‘international’ into a continuum of relations that include human–nonhuman ones” (Querejazu, 2022; see also Reddekop, 2022, p. 857; Tickner & Querejazu, 2021). Taking a similar point of departure, other scholars emphasize the responsibility to place in the relational geographies of the Anthropocene. Such embeddedness calls on and for stewardship practices predicated on caring for and maintaining ecologically specific sets of interrelationships, even if it means experiencing loss and pain (Brigg et al., 2022; Reddekop, 2022; Rojas, 2016).

The point is that rather than static physical configurations of matter, places represent “lived generative temporalities” refracting poignant confluences between past, present, and future that draw profoundly on the “ineluctably inescapable” embodied experience of space (Price, 2004, p. 11). Thus, irrespective of the pervasive contingency of global life that makes particular time-scenes never fully predictable, “the multiple intersections of the times of culture and the socio-physical environment” (Kavalski, 2007, p. 445) can nonetheless be anticipated insofar as they become relationally bounded to and by the experiential knowledge of emplaced historical, spiritual, social–political, economic, etc. entanglements (Beier, 2005; Brigg et al., 2022; Lightfoot & MacDonald, 2017). Thus, in keeping with a recognition of places as “a particular mix of social relations,” relational ontologies “reaffirm the necessity of reconstructing life from below in its very connectedness with nature” (Dirlik, 1999, p. 167). Political action, in this setting, becomes a co-creative process in which people, events, and their “environing circumstances” are in responsive resonance with one another as well as simultaneously shaped by and shape the spatiotemporal contexts of their interaction (Kavalski, 2020a; Reddekop, 2022; Rojas, 2016). This move implies that things in global life are not merely interconnected but that they gain meaning and significance within complex webs of entanglements and encounters with others—be they human or nonhuman (Querejazu, 2022; Tickner & Querejazu, 2021; Zolkos & Kavalski, 2016). The focus here is not only on acknowledging but also on working creatively with and through the “circles of reciprocal implication” engendered by such relationality (Coles, 2016, p. 49).

Conclusion

Rooted in the conviction that global life outlines a complex mesh of contingent interactions, the contributions to the relational turn in international relations (IR) draw attention to the ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure, and order among the diversity of agency, form, and
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matter implicated in, enacting, and enabling global life. Inhabiting a relational universe reveals not only the interdependence between international actors but also their mutual implication in each other’s interactions and roles as well as the overwhelming embeddedness of these relations in the world. According to its proponents, relationality offers meaningful and productive ways to negotiate the critical junctures between imperialism, greed, environmental degradation, and hope. Such an endeavor is not intended to brandish relationality—both in general and in IR in particular—as either a panacea for the crises plaguing the global condition or the flaws of the disciplinary purview of IR (Cudworth et al., 2018; Kavalski, 2015). Instead, the claim is that relational perspectives offer a range of alternative stories that need to be heard.

Both the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism of IR’s atomistic outlook are shown to be unresponsive to the flexibilities, contingencies, and transformative possibilities engendered by the encounter with other lifeworlds and knowledges. Striving to overcome “the ontologies of separation and metaphysical individualism” that dominate the substantialist commitments of IR, the interlocutors of relationality suggest that the “‘realities’ informing both the materiality of the world and by extension the realms of IR are intrinsically relational, permeable, shifting, open-ended, and always historically and geographically situated properties” (Cudworth et al., 2018, p. 280). The many outlines of relational IRs have thereby sought to confront the Eurocentric and anthropocentric certainties dominating the purview of the discipline by encouraging interest in and recognition of the embeddedness of world affairs in broader networks of relations. The point of departure is that the IR mainstream has remained peculiarly and poignantly resistant to the insertion of either post-Western or posthuman imaginary on the agenda of the international (Nordin et al., 2019; Trownsell et al., 2021).

In this respect, relationalization seeks to uncover modes for understanding, explanation, and encounter not only attuned to but also able to sustain complexity, foster dynamism, encourage the cross-pollination of disparate ideas, and engage the plastic and heterogeneous processes that periodically overwhelm, intensify, and infect (while all the time animating) the mercurial trajectories of global life. The interlocutors of relationality in IR insist that rather than being fearful of analytical crossroads and the unexpected (and unintended) encounters that they presage, IR should embrace the uncertainty attendant in the journey beyond the substantivist ontology of the world. In contrast to the dualistic bifurcations that dominate IR imaginaries, the encounter and engagement with relationality both illuminate and remind the study of world affairs that the complex patterns of global life resonate with the fragility, fluidity, and mutuality of global interactions rather than the static and spatial arrangements implicit in the fetishized currency of self–other/center–periphery/hegemon–challenger models underpinning the binary metanarratives of IR (Kavalski, 2018b; Ling, 2014a).

Rather than looking at dyadic sets of relations as well as the identities and capacity of individual actors, relational perspectives inhere an IR pivoted on webs of figurations intertwined by a conscious and strategic search for relations with others. Such a move has a palpable relational flavor associated with the convivial yet dissonant cross-pollination of values, narratives, and practices in the study of global life. International actors are not just isolated entities moving about in the vacuum of world affairs; instead, they are entangled in and produced by multitudes of relations among and across many different spatiotemporal contexts. In this respect, actors
(and their agency) have effects only to the extent that they are in relations with others. At the same time, the notion of relationality suggests that the interactions of global life are not just self-organizing and co-constitutive but that they can hardly be regulated. In other words, relational IRs are just as incoherent and socially mediated as the everyday patterns and practices of the global life they intend to explain and understand.

Given the multiple aims, questions, applications, perspectives, and tasks endeavored by the proponents of the relational agenda in IR, it seems that the next steps in its development will depend on the ways in which it tackles some of the following questions:

- **Is it possible to have a relational theory/ies of IR?** It seems that one of the key tasks for the relational agenda is to determine whether there is a sufficient common ground between the different relational approaches to develop a relational theory (or a set of theories) in IR, which neither falls into the trap of “disembodied abstract discourse” (Escobar, 2007, p. 192) nor “homogenizes and romanticizes subalternized knowledges (while) obfuscating the concrete practices and process that contribute to their marginalization” (Tucker, 2018, p. 216). It is certainly the case that some of the Sinophone proponents of relationality in IR have made a conscious move in that direction; however, their journey is still far from reaching its intended destination. For the time being, the relational agenda in IR is still mostly engaged in a double move of unraveling the established perspectives, approaches, and divisions dominating the disciplinary purview while expanding existing methodologies, epistemologies, ontologies, and axiologies of IR.

- **Will the moves coalesce into a movement?** Equally significant, it seems that a number of relational turns are taking place across the IR domain simultaneously; however, there is still little interaction among them (Nordin et al., 2019). In this respect, it will be a mammoth task for the proponents of relationality to connect the disparate relational moves into a meaningful movement without imposing coherence on its polyphony. Such a development would require a capacity to sustain a plurality of voices within a singular movement.

- **Will ontology provide the glue that binds the relational turns together?** It appears that the privileging of interconnections is a shared ontological point of departure for most relational approaches. The question is whether such profoundly and comprehensively relational conceptualization of the world can furnish a sufficient foundational bedrock for building commonalities between diverse and heterogeneous relational strands.

- **Can emancipatory ethics keep the relational revolution going?** All relational approaches share a strong and palpable normative commitment to undo diverse forms of injustice, violence, and inequality that have been occluded, silenced, and marginalized by the IR mainstream. The relational agenda challenges the “either–or” and “us–them” dichotomies of IR emphasizing detached and homogenizing global representations unable to tolerate the underlying multiplicity of global life. In this respect, the emancipatory desire to acknowledge and redress the traumas and erasures prompted by the IR mainstream has provided the support backstopping the relational agenda in IR. The point is whether such normative commitment can sustain the further development of relationality in IR.
These are some of the posers facing the relational research agenda in IR. It has to be acknowledged that the attentiveness to the promise and possibilities of uncertainty emphasized by the proponents of relationality makes the realms of IR doubtlessly messy. Yet, relationality suggests that IR theorizing is not merely about the provision of knowledge (in the sense of a positivistic measuring exercise): It is about forming rather than purely informing; it is about the art of living rather than decontextual and detached abstract thought. Messiness is, thereby, needed if IR is to recover a disposition for encounter and engagement with currents, trends, voices, worlds, and possibilities foreclosed by the atomistic substantialism of the mainstream. The disclosure of the intrinsic relationality both of global life and the realms of IR suggests the inextricable and invariable intertwinement between understanding, explanation, practices, and encounters in the study of world affairs.

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Further Reading


References


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