

4 CHINA

Introduction

Like India, China, and indeed all agrarian civilizations, fluctuated from empire to fragmentation and back again. But compared with India, China developed a much more hierarchical political and interstate system. Even though India had its exponent of universal empire in Kautilya, it never developed anything like China's theoretical and practical obsession with hierarchy and unity. China's principle of social order, though rooted in family, was, in contrast to Hinduism's mainly social order, both social and political. In China, there was always a presumption that when an existing dynasty became too weak to maintain unity, a new one would arise to claim the Mandate of Heaven and pull the country back together again after a period of division.

Until the nineteenth century, China was relatively lightly connected to the other sedentary civilizations of Eurasia, and during its long history was consequently able to develop, and maintain for millennia, a distinctive theory and practice of world order. Both China and Europe were at the ends of the Eurasian system, which made them relatively detached from the other major centres of civilization. Ancient Greece and Rome were in close touch with other civilizations in the Middle East, which were in turn in direct touch with South Asia. Medieval Europe was a civilizational backwater, though it was deeply influenced by having been part of the Roman Empire for several centuries. On the basis of its Roman-Christian legacy, Europe began a long and defining military encounter with Islamic civilization from the eighth century AD. China, however, had only arms-length relay trading and cultural contact with other Eurasian civilizations through the Silk Roads. China was

effectively penetrated by the diffusion of Buddhism over many centuries. But in terms of trade and commerce, apart from the early fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He, few Chinese ships ventured beyond the South China Sea. Trade was mostly carried by foreign ships, and by the ninth century AD there is evidence from tax records that more than 100,000 Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Persians were living in the commercial settlements of Canton (Chaudhuri, 1985: 51; Jacq-Hergoualc'h, 2002: 265). The Silk Roads were mainly relay trade, where goods moved through many local trading points. China's local military challenge came mainly from the pastoralist, nomadic steppe barbarians to the north, who the Chinese saw as culturally inferior no matter that they could often defeat China militarily.

Before its unification in 221 BC, China was not in much contact with outsiders and evolved mainly as a self-contained world order which fluctuated between various degrees of unity and fragmentation. Much of classical Chinese thinking about world order, including Legalism and Confucianism, was formed during this time when China itself was fragmented into multiple, and often warring, states. After 221 BC, unity was the dominant theme within China, though periodically interrupted by invasions from the peoples of the steppe and sometimes long transitional periods of fragmentation when one dynasty was falling and another rising or several dynasties existed simultaneously. As elsewhere in Eurasia, China was not infrequently ruled by steppe dynasties; these were mainly Manchu and Mongol, whereas Turkic dynasties tended to dominate in South and West Asia.

After unification, China also became engaged in varying degrees with the wider world around it, with the Silk Roads under the Han dynasty becoming a transmission belt for ideas, goods, and diseases across Eurasia. Post-unification, China was therefore both engaged as a player in a world order that extended beyond itself and, sometimes, temporarily reverted to being a fragmented system in its own right (most recently between 1911 and 1949 with the warlord period and the civil war). If we compare China's history and political theory about

world order with Europe's in this respect, they come out as near opposites. In China, the principle of unity was normatively dominant from an early point, though in practice the system suffered periodic breakdowns and fragmentations. In Europe, the principle of unity, though always present, was relatively weak normatively, despite having the compelling, and much admired, image of Rome behind it. Individual polities and dynasties might aspire to bring the continent under their rule, but in practice and in theory the desire for independence and self-government remained strong enough to prevent that outcome. The balance of power idea triumphed, and no attempt to form a durable European empire succeeded.¹

This duality of China as both an international system and civilization in itself and a player in a wider international system has to be kept in mind when trying to understand the Chinese/Confucian view of world order. Edward Luttwak (2012: 260) takes this duality very seriously in strategic terms, seeing in China:

a deeply rooted strategic culture that is both intellectually seductive and truly dysfunctional. Its harmful consequences have marked the historical experiences of the Han nation, supremely accomplished in generating wealth and culture from earth and water by hard work and wonderful skill, but exceptionally autistic in relating to the non-Han, and therefore unsuccessful in contending with them whether by diplomacy or by force. Nor is this culture at all appropriate for the fluid conduct of inter-state relations among formal equals, as opposed to the management of a China-centred tributary system.

¹ The operation of the balance of power against hegemony in Europe was mainly what Richard Little (2006, 2007) calls *adversarial*, driven by the responses of states and empires to what they perceived as threats to their independence. Not until the nineteenth century did *associational* balancing emerge, where the balance of power becomes a generally accepted principle and an institution of international society.

This unique insulation from direct military and political encounters with other settled agrarian civilizations perhaps goes some way to explaining the particular and distinctive form and character of Chinese thinking and practice about world order and international relations. Whereas Western thinking and practice were eventually drawn towards sovereignty, territoriality, international anarchy, war, and international society, Chinese theory and practice were drawn towards hierarchy, *Tianxia* (all under heaven), and the Mandate of Heaven, which combined to form the tribute system of relations. In the Chinese system, war, diplomacy, and trade all embodied quite different practices and understandings from those either in India or in the West. What is now called soft power played a much larger and more political role in the Chinese system than it did for India, where the diffusion of Indian culture and religion was largely separate from the state. It is common to note that China's relations with its civilized neighbours to the east (Korea and Japan) and south (Vietnam) were relatively peaceful and that its culture spread much more by acceptance than by imposition (Kang, 2010; Katzenstein, 2010: 34–5). That said, China's relations with its nomadic neighbours to the north were much more warlike (Kang, 2010: 112), and its internal politics periodically descended into extensive violence and power politics during dynastic transitions. Victoria Tin-bor Hui (2005), for example, tells a graphic story of ruthless power politics in the unification of China under the Qin dynasty, and China's history contains many turbulent and violent transitions between dynasties. Yasuaki Onuma (2000: 11–18) argues that China's insistent claim to superior status over all others, even if that claim could not always be enforced, prevented the emergence of thinking about international law within the Chinese sphere. China's claim to be the 'Middle Kingdom' was an assertion of cultural as much as material superiority, and Chinese practice and thinking often do not fit all that comfortably with Western concepts such as great powers, empire, and suzerainty.

Thinking

Yuri Pines (2012: 1–43, 162–70) argues that China's history generated a different view of politics and world order from that which unfolded in the modern West. He focuses particularly on the extremely violent experience of the Warring States period (453–221 BC) that led up to the unification of China, interpreting this as being so traumatic that it instilled in Chinese culture a permanent fear of the dispersal or separation of power. The Warring States period and the turbulent Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC) that preceded it were the golden age of Chinese philosophy and political theory, and the trauma of these times drove many of these thinkers, Confucius most notably, to search for arrangements and practices that would prevent any repetition of it. Thus, whereas the West eventually learned the lesson that political pluralism both at home (democracy, separation of powers) and abroad (an anarchical international society based on separated sovereignty and territoriality and an international society of states) was to be desired, China came to the opposite conclusion. The lesson of the Warring States period, and of many other periods of disunity in Chinese history, was that political pluralism was a recipe for a ruthless round of fighting and disorder that would last until someone could once again reunify the country and accept the Mandate of Heaven to reign over all. Hierarchy in all relations and unity at home were thus China's default political preference, and anarchic separation of powers its nightmare. Hierarchy was a system of symbolic order. At times it came close to empire, especially within China, and sometimes in its relations with Vietnam and the steppe nomads. But in many of its external relations, it allowed too much local sovereignty to fit comfortably into the concept of empire as normally understood.

Pines' interpretation is, of course, a heroic simplification of a much more complicated reality. Chinese philosophy and political theory does not begin and end with Confucius but is a very deep, rich, and varied resource, influenced among other

things by Buddhism and Daoism. It notably includes Legalism, an equally long tradition of Chinese thinking, running alongside Confucianism and interacting with it, which has some similarities to Western Realism/power politics. Legalism advocates the construction of both a strong state and a strong power (Pines, 2018). First formulated by Shang Yang and later by Hanfeizi, both philosopher-politicians, Legalism focuses on domestic rule but also has clear implications for interstate relations and world order. It holds that in order to conquer or defeat enemies and to regulate the 'all under heaven', a ruler must control its own people first. To quote the most important Legalist text, *The Book of Lord Shang*, 'In the past, those who were able to regulate All-under-Heaven first had to regulate their own people; those who were able to overcome the enemy had first to overcome their own people'. And the way to achieve this was through strict laws backed by harsh punishment. 'When the people are weak, the state is strong; hence the state that possesses the Way devotes itself to weakening the people' (cited in Pines, 2018).

Hui (2005) observes the extreme ruthlessness of state-strengthening to overthrow the balance of power system during the Warring States period and its influence on the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) that first unified China. The Qin dynasty was short-lived, and Confucian and Daoist thinking was revived during the next major Chinese dynasty, the Han, who also introduced Buddhism into China, creating a plurality of political and social thought. Nonetheless, the political and administrative legacies of the Qin, especially the creation of a centralized professional bureaucracy, created a durable impetus in China's political system for strong and authoritarian rule. Indeed, an echo of Legalism can be found in current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who is widely seen as creating the most authoritarian Chinese regime since Mao and who has cited Hanfeizi to justify the need for a country to have strong leaders upholding the law (rule *by* law, rather than rule *of* law). Thus, Xi quotes the following words of Hanfeizi: 'No country is permanently strong, nor is any country permanently weak. If

those who impose The Law are strong, the country will be strong; if they are weak, the country will be weak' (Buckley, 2014; Zha, 2020).

In the case of Chinese thinking about world order, there is again the difficulty in disentangling the domestic from the international. Territoriality, and with it the distinction between inside and outside, is much blurrier than it is in the European tradition. China was, in the centuries before the Qin unification, both an international system and civilization in its own right, while later becoming a unified player in a wider international system with non-Chinese polities. But in China's case it also concerns the universalist aspects of Chinese thinking about world order. The Chinese/Confucian view of world order had three distinctive and intertwined components: a strong sense of *hierarchy* as the preferred social order; a universal sense of space/territory (*Tianxia* – all under heaven); and the idea of the Mandate of Heaven linking rulers and people. There are two additional ideas rooted in traditional Chinese culture that played into how the tribute system worked: *relationalism* and *face*. We are fortunate in having contemporary Chinese IR scholars who have made sustained attempts both to recover classical Chinese thinking about IR and to relate it to both contemporary (Western) IR theory and current Chinese foreign policy (e.g., Zhao, T., 2006, 2009, 2015; Qin, 2011, 2016, 2018; Yan, 2011, 2019). These five ideas combined to create the practice of the so-called tribute system, which defined how the Middle Kingdom related to those outside the Chinese cultural sphere.

Hierarchy

A good case can be made that thinking of social relations in hierarchical terms is a particularly strong and intrinsic feature of Confucian cultures, rooted deeply in an embedded philosophical tradition (Braudel, 1994 [1987]: 178–9). The basic Confucian model is rooted in a hierarchical family structure similar to that in many traditional agrarian civilizations in

which fathers, brothers, sons, wives, etc., stand in status relations of dominant/inferior to each other, and these relationships are mediated by the degree of intimacy/distance (Shih, 1990: 39–46; Hwang, 2011: 109–10, 199). This kind of hierarchy is of course not unique. Most pre-modern agrarian societies, including in Europe, also had strong class ranking, patriarchy, and dynastic political legitimation.

Some literature supports the view that this way of thinking still applies in modern foreign policy terms, with Confucian cultures being more inclined to hierarchy and bandwagoning than to sovereign equality and balance of power (Fairbank, 1968; Huntington, 1996; Kang, 2003, 2003–4, 2005; Kissinger, 2011: 1–3; Harris, 2014: locs. 362–74. For a critique, see Acharya, 2003–4). Traditionally in East Asia, Confucianism operated mainly on the basis of a hierarchy rooted in the existence of a central culture, or more accurately, civilization: the Middle Kingdom as the apex of a cultural, political, and economic order. Material power was of course relevant to establishing and maintaining hierarchical relations but was not its main foundation (Zhang, Y., 2001; Suzuki, 2009: 34–55; Zhang, F., 2009, 2014; Zhang and Buzan, 2012). Both Western and Chinese scholars emphasize the ongoing importance of hierarchy in China's worldview. Stuart Harris (2014: locs. 362–74, 1289) notes that 'China sees the world in a different way than countries in the West, for various reasons, but mostly because of the Confucian belief in hierarchy'. Chih-yu Shih (1990:118–22), echoing Luttwak, argues that China remains in the grip of Confucian hierarchical relationalism and has failed to develop separate norms for dealing with interstate relations. This interpretation certainly fits both with China's keenness to deny equal status to Japan (Shi, 2007: 217–18; Odgaard, 2012: 169–77; Goh, 2013: 221; King, 2014; Dreyer, 2016: 360) and with its undiplomatic assertions in Southeast Asia about big versus small countries. In Confucian thinking, social harmony rests on the precondition of stable hierarchy. As Shih (1990: 40) puts it, 'The system is harmonious as long as everyone in his role behaves as the role requires'.

Jack Gray (2002: 18–19) nicely captures the traditional Confucian approach to maintaining social order:

The object of that culture was the maintenance of peace and stability in an agrarian society, in which change was neither sought nor anticipated. The highest value recognized in China was social harmony. The method by which the Chinese sought to realize this value was the control of conflict by the imposition of hierarchically organized authority.

In this formulation, the link between hierarchy and harmony is almost absolute. As William Callahan (2009) rightly notes, the inseparability of harmony and hierarchy in Confucian thought imparts a worryingly imperial implication to China's current discourse about harmony. China's official foreign policy rhetoric has a lot to say about harmonious relations and 'win-win' but is generally silent or evasive about the hierarchical assumption that lies behind it. China seems to feel surprisingly comfortable sustaining the contradiction between its manifest interest in regaining primacy in Asia on the one hand and enthusiastically embracing the Westphalian principles of sovereignty and non-intervention on the other (more on China's ability to sustain contradictions in Chapter 6).

The linkage of hierarchy and empire, and the fears associated with it, have, however, to be mediated by differences in Western and Chinese conceptions of hierarchy. The Western conception tends to be associated with relations of dominance and extraction that were typical of Western empires. The Chinese conception, with its roots in Confucian family relations, is more reciprocal. The dominant side has the right to expect fealty and loyalty from the subordinate one but in return has clear obligations. Thus, as many have observed, the tribute system often did not work as a mechanism of extraction but rather benefitted the subordinate side materially. The balance of rights and duties in Confucian hierarchies gives the concept a distinctly different form, both morally and practically, from Western conceptions and destabilizes any too-easy

conflation of hierarchy and empire. The tribute system was certainly paternalistic but perhaps fell somewhere between empire and hegemony and took a different form from empires elsewhere in Eurasia. By comparison, only quite late in Western imperialism did the paternalistic idea of the ‘civilizing mission’ obtain much traction: for those in the vanguard of both modernity and imperialism to bring the colonized peoples up to the ‘standard of civilization’.

Tianxia

Tianxia (all under heaven) is a concept that goes back to the Zhou dynasty of China (beginning in eleventh century BC). It literally means the earth or all lands under the sky. The *Tianxia* system was designed by the Zhou, who had seized power from the Shang but soon found themselves surrounded by other, rising powers who were both numerically and materially superior, including the Shang whom the Zhou had displaced. Hence the Zhou approach represented an ‘unusual and systematic innovation’ that depended not on ‘rule by force’ but on legitimizing principles such as the Mandate of Heaven (to be discussed shortly) and ‘a net-like world system that would create interdependence among all nations and guarantee the shared goods and benefits that were attractive to every nation in the network, therefore discouraging them from refusing or betraying the world system of *tianxia*’ (Zhao, T., 2014: 128–9).

Tianxia has been applied by Chinese scholars (especially Zhao, T., 2006, 2009, 2015) to understand contemporary world order. In this view, *Tianxia* rejects the Westphalian model and blames it for problems of conflict and state failure. Instead, it sees the highest unit as the ‘world’, not the ‘state’. *Tianxia* effectively sees the world as a single political space, a vision antithetical to the territoriality, borders, and inside/outside preoccupations of Western IR. As Tingyang Zhao puts it, ‘The concept of *tianxia* means a world system that takes the world as a political actor or an order of coexistence that takes the world... as a political unit.’ (Zhao, T., 2015: 2). When combined

with hierarchy, *Tianxia* makes the traditional Chinese view of world order effectively a universal one by downgrading the significance of boundaries. Kissinger (2011: 357) notes that in the Chinese tradition of thinking about the world, the emperor notionally ruled all under heaven, a perspective that did not allow a strong distinction between home and abroad, or, in IR parlance, inside/outside.

Moreover, Zhao insists on the universal contemporary appeal of *Tianxia*: 'tianxia is not a special concept about China, but a concept about the world' (Zhao, T., 2015: 2). By taking as the highest unit of international relations the 'world' and not the nation-state, *Tianxia* expands the concept of international politics 'by introducing the dimension of global politics' (Zhao, T., 2015: 31). While the 'tianxia system of the Zhou Dynasty disappeared a long time ago ... today the concept of tianxia becomes the imagination about the future world.' (Zhao, T., 2015: 2). And he sees *Tianxia* as a prescription against modern anarchy disorder: 'Tianxia should be so established to be a world system based upon the ontology of coexistence by means of relational rationality, which gives the priority to the *minimization of mutual hostility over the maximization of exclusive interest*, in contrast to the individual rationality which gives the priority to the maximization of self-interest ... the impartial will of the heaven is above the partial preferences of human minds.' (Zhao, T., 2014: 1-2; emphasis original). This formulation is too open and ambiguous to be an obvious fit with Western IR concepts. The references to 'the ontology of coexistence' seem to rule out both world government and universal empire. It might fit more closely with the English School idea of a solidarist international society (i.e., one built on a logic of cooperation, not just coexistence), but there is a top-down element in it - 'the will of heaven' - that has no place in English School thinking.

For China, becoming a modern sovereign state legally equal to others was a major loss of status compared to its Middle Kingdom position in the *Tianxia* system. *Tianxia* is a tricky concept for China to deploy in the contemporary world. It can be useful as an idealist framing for thinking about the problems of

humankind and the planet as a whole. It might, for example, be a way of framing global shared threats such as climate change, pandemics, and terrorism. But to the extent that it is linked with hierarchy, it threatens fundamentally the now widely and deeply accepted territorially bounded sovereign equality of the Westphalian international system/society. As such, it has been criticized for being politically motivated, as a theoretical justification for China's ruling elite (Zhao, S., 2017). It might, however, open a new perspective on how to think about the international system/society and the principles of world order.

The Mandate of Heaven

The Mandate of Heaven is also a concept from the Zhou dynasty (1026–256 BC). The ruler, the Son of Heaven, receives the right to rule from heaven (from Tian, who was the main god of the Zhou). If the ruler was not wise and just and ignored the welfare of the people, heaven would send warnings in the form of a natural disaster, an eclipse, or a peasant rebellion. If the ruler did not change his way, heaven would withdraw its mandate and his right to rule. The Mandate of Heaven can therefore be understood as a kind of performance legitimacy and in that sense is still very visible in Chinese politics today. The Mandate of Heaven was used by the Zhou dynasty founder, Wu, to justify the overthrow of the Shang dynasty's last ruler, Di Xin. The Mandate of Heaven was a double-edged sword. Rulers could use it to suppress any rebellion as an act against the will of the heaven. But it could also be used to justify rebellion against the ruler on the pretext that he was cruel and unjust. If the rebellion succeeded, it could be presented as evidence that the ruler had lost the mandate. Whichever side succeeded could claim the mandate. As Pines (2012: 134–40) perceptively observes, the Mandate of Heaven allowed *rebellions* but not *revolutions*. The point of rebellions was to replace leaders who had lost the mandate, not to replace the system itself. The role of the leader was crucial to the whole two-way formula of harmony-in-hierarchy. In return for the respect and obedience of the

followers, leaders had to show *ren* (concern, kindness, forgiveness, love, wisdom, moral purity, and leadership) and be ‘an unambiguous symbol of high moral spirit’. Although the hierarchical order forbids revolution, it sanctions the overthrow of leaderships that no longer display *ren*, seeing that overthrow as a return to normality (Shih, 1990: 40–1, 57).

One can perhaps understand the work of Yan Xuetong (2011, 2019), one of China’s leading realist theorists of IR, in the light of the Mandate of Heaven. Particularly in his 2019 book, Yan puts a lot of emphasis on the quality of leadership as a crucial factor for great powers, both established and rising, though especially for the latter. Yan recovers from classical Chinese political theory and practice the ideas of ‘the kingly way’ and ‘humane authority’. These ideas resonate with Shih’s (1990) discussion noted above about the importance of *ren* to the viability of the whole ‘harmony-in-hierarchy’ formula. With echoes of Plato’s philosopher-kings, wise and humane leaders become the key to squaring the circle of hierarchy, *Tianxia*, and the Mandate of Heaven, possibly even for modern times.

Epistemology–Relationality

China’s classical political ideas are perhaps more secular than India’s, although the latter, as we have seen, has powerful secular traditions, including Kautilya and Samkhya. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of classical Chinese epistemology is *zhongyong* dialectics, which has been introduced to IR theory by Qin Yaqing (2018). Unlike the Hegelian concepts of thesis and antithesis ending in synthesis, the two ends in Chinese dialectics are contradictory but non-conflictual and mutually inclusive to start with. This scheme is based on the well-known yin/yang symbol in Chinese philosophy: the *yin* and the *yang* of a complementary and co-evolutionary process, where each always contains an element of the other and the balance between them shifts according to circumstance (see Figure 4.1).

The point of Hegelian dialectics is to resolve contradictions and start again from a new place. The point of

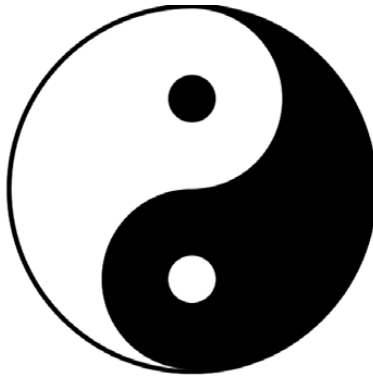


Figure 4.1 Yin and yang in Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics

zhongyong dialectics is to manage contradictions that are seen as permanent. Achieving harmony in the presence of contradiction is the essence of Chinese dialectics. Drawing on the epistemology of Chinese *zhongyong* dialectics, Qin argues that instead of rational calculations of self-interest and need, states and non-state actors alike often base their actions on relationships. It is relationships that make the world go around. Such a theoretical framework presents an alternative way of conceptualizing IR or allows us to see the world from a different perspective, including rethinking the relationship between power and governance, and allows for a more fruitful comparative study of international systems.

In contrast to Hegelian thinking, Chinese *zhongyong* (*yin* and *yang*) dialectics stresses a ‘both-and’ rather than an ‘either-or’ way of thinking and rejects the dichotomous Hegelian ‘thesis’ and ‘anti-thesis’ in favour of ‘co-theses’ (Qin, 2018: xvii). Whereas the Hegelian approach stresses individual rationality, the Chinese notion represents relational rationality. As he puts it, ‘while the Hegelian tradition tries to diagnose the key contradiction, which is key to crumpling the old and creating a new synthesis’, the ‘*zhongyong* dialectics always tries to find the appropriate middle where the common ground lies’ (Qin, 2018: xvii).

Conflict exists but does not have any ontological status (Qin, 2018: xvii).

In sum, *zhongyong* dialectics agrees with Hegelian dialectics in that both understand things as consisting of polarities and their developments through the interaction of such polarities. But it differs from Hegelian dialectics in that *zhongyong* dialectics interprets the basic state of the relationship between the two polarities as capable of being harmonized if the right middle ground can be found, while Hegelian dialectics sees conflict as the essential nature of the polarization. The difference is fundamental (Qin, 2018: xvii). In contrast with the West, China (and Japan) lean more towards collectivism than individualism in their social practices (Qin, 2011: 127; Harris, 2014: loc.1379), which links to the disposition towards hierarchical relations. But Qin dismisses the commonly held view that Confucianism or traditional Chinese culture generally 'values collectivity at the expense of individuality'. Instead, it values both. Still, Qin (2011, 2018) argues that there are profound differences between Western rationalism and Eastern relationalism as approaches to social relations and that these differences significantly affect how diplomacy is conducted and international society managed. Rationalism risks reducing all relationships to mere individualist calculation, devoid of morality, trust, or the dynamics of personal relations. Relationalism is much more about trust in the process of interpersonal relations within a collectivist social framing. Seen from the prism of Confucianism, relationality 'holds that self-existence, self-identity, and self-interest are all related to other-existence, other-identity, and other interest' (Qin, 2018: xii). It is noteworthy that, among IR theories familiar in the West, Constructivism makes somewhat similar arguments, albeit mostly without either the normative content or the specific cultural rooting.

Qin does not say that Eastern relationality is superior to Western rationality. His point rather is that rationality – so often privileged in Western IR – without relationality fails to capture and explain a good deal of international relations.

Qin's theory appears to make a tight distinction between the West and China, sometimes openly, sometimes implicitly. Yet, the West also has middle-ground concepts, such as international society, that might resonate with Chinese ideas of harmony and the positive notion of power and inclusiveness. In highlighting the distinction between positive and negative dimensions of power, Qin (2018: xviii) implies that the West pays more attention to the negative dimension (power against), China more to the positive dimension (power with). But the West also has positive notions of power. Hence Qin's contribution is to shift the emphasis onto the positive notion of power, not to reject the negative notion. This also suggests Qin is trying to broaden our understanding of the relationship between power and IR. Moreover, Qin argues that the salience of relationality is universal, rather than being a unique attribute of Chinese or Asian societies. Western IR theories have not paid sufficient attention to relationality, which, like Constructivism, emphasizes process.

Qin makes a good case for the fact that, as in the *yin/yang* framing of Chinese dialectics, both rationalism and relationalism are present in Eastern as well as Western IR and practice. He argues that they overlap enough to be combined and that this needs to be done if diplomacy in a more multicultural, less West-centric international society is going to work. The key difference is that in the East relationalism comes first, while in the West, rationalism is the dominant logic. This offers useful ground for a meeting of minds if each side can recognize and acknowledge aspects of itself that are found more strongly in the other. One implication of Qin's argument is that China, Japan, and Korea should have more in common with each other in this respect than any of them has with Western countries. Their relations should be less subject to misunderstanding but perhaps more vulnerable to the narcissism of small differences (see Buzan and Goh, 2020: ch. 1), especially in relation to 'face', which is closely tied to both hierarchy and relationalism.

Face

'Face' is a cultural feature common to Confucian societies and shapes social interactions in ways quite different from those within Western culture (Tudor, 2012: 42–52; Moore, 2014). Face is a complex concept, relating partly to material accomplishments and positional status and partly to one's moral standing in one's community (Hu, 1944; Hwang, 2011: 266–81). David Yau-fai Ho (1976: 883) defines face as:

the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in his social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptably in his general conduct; the face extended to a person by others is a function of the degree of congruence between judgments of his total condition in life, including his actions as well as those of people closely associated with him, and the social expectations that others have placed upon him. In terms of two interacting parties, face is the reciprocated compliance, respect and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party.

Ho (1976: 883, 867, 873) also notes a 'Chinese orientation, which places the accent on the reciprocity of obligations, dependence and esteem protection'. In this sense, face is a more complex sociological formulation than mere esteem/image/externalities, entailing roles, responsibilities, and mutualities. In this collectivist context, 'losing face is a serious matter which will, in varying degrees, affect one's ability to function effectively in society'. In the sense that life is meaningless without a legitimate social existence, not just social standing or position, 'face can be more important than life itself'. Shih (1990: 16–37) sets up a two-level model of face: the individual level refers to people searching 'for self-identities to satisfy their desire to confirm the meaning of life' (36), while 'national face' is about 'the continued meaningful existence of the whole to which the individual self belongs' (29).

Some Western authors take face seriously as a core feature of Northeast Asia's international relations, both historical and contemporary. For instance, S. C. M. Paine (2003: 257, 306, 349–51; see also Dreyer, 2016: 50) sees face as explaining a lot about the conduct of the Sino-Japanese war of 1894–5 and its ongoing importance in Sino-Japanese relations. For Peter Hays Gries (2004: loc. 223–55) face is both individual and collective, always social, and promotes self-justifying behaviour and self-serving interpretations of history. He gives extensive documentation of how China has sought to construct itself as superior to both the United States and Japan, gaining face for itself and taking it away from the other two. He shows how this interplay of nationalist rhetoric between China on the one hand and the United States and Japan on the other serves to construct China's nationalism and identity. David Shambaugh (2013: 55–9) agrees, arguing that China displays a huge amount of 'face diplomacy' to bolster the country's image in general and that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its leader in particular. Gregory Moore (2014) shows how face plays differently and often in contradictory ways in how governments in Northeast Asia relate to their domestic constituencies on the one hand and their neighbours on the other.

These themes resonate very strongly with Qin's (2011) analysis, which also emphasizes trust, reciprocity, and collectivist, hierarchical societies. Face and Asian relationalism seem to be closely linked, either as different ways of talking about the same thing or with face as a particular feature of relationalism in Confucian societies. Face is unquestionably an important and very longstanding feature of Northeast Asian cultures and is therefore almost certainly a key element in diplomatic relations both within the region and between the Northeast Asian states and the rest of the world. Shih (1990: 138–47, 189) argues that concern about face has a deep influence on Chinese diplomacy and that statesmen generally have a strong linkage to the 'national face'. This concept has not yet received either the amount or depth of attention it deserves in the IR literature. Both modern and classical international relations within the

zone of Confucian civilization cannot be understood without it, and neither can the diplomacy of a rising China towards the rest of the world.

Practice

At some risk of oversimplification, classical China's practice of international relations can be divided into two parts: when it was a unified polity interacting with neighbours and when it was fragmented, and therefore a kind of international system in itself. When China was unified, especially from the Han dynasty (202 BC) onwards, its international relations largely took the form of the so-called tribute system, which Yongjin Zhang (2001: 56–8) among others depicts as the key institution of China's world order. When China was fragmented, it often looked like an extreme form of power politics, in which the contesting polities struggled ruthlessly among themselves to rebuild a centralized order. Neighbouring polities easily got involved in this process, further blurring the inside/outside distinction, sometimes, as in the case of the Yuan (Mongol) and Qing (Jin/Manchu) dynasties, taking over as the rulers of a reunified China. From 1931–45, the Japanese tried, but failed, to emulate this trick of foreign rule. Like the Mongols and Manchus, Japan had clear military superiority over China. But unlike them, the Japanese refused to accept or adapt to the superiority of Chinese culture, instead seeking to reverse positions by making themselves the civilized Middle Kingdom and seeing China as backward and barbaric.

Warring States

By far the best-known period of warring states is the one that carries that label (453–221 BC) and that eventually led to the (re) unification of China under the Qin dynasty. As noted, that period is notorious for the ruthlessness and efficiency with which the states within the Chinese system pursued their rivalries with each other. Hui (2005: 156–9) even goes so far as to say

that because of the intense focus on self-strengthening, there was no international society within the Chinese states-system at that time. Indeed, this period is often exploited by realists to provide empirical support for their claims about the timelessness and placelessness of their power-political, inevitable conflict view of IR. Yet as Yongjin Zhang (2001: 43–52) notes, during the Warring States period China's practices bore many resemblances to a Westphalian-style international system with an adversarial balance of power and an institution of diplomacy, and with analogies to sovereignty (more implicit than doctrinal) and international law (more in the form of moral ritual than law). But even then, there remained a vestigial central dynasty, the long-lasting Zhou, which kept alive the idea and the symbolism of a unified Chinese polity. Adversarial balancing eventually failed (Hui, 2005), with the Qin victory reunifying the country. The persistence of the idea of a unified China even during periods of deep fragmentation is a key distinctive factor in Chinese practice of international relations.

But subsequent to this defining first period of warring states in China, there were many other, lesser-known such periods. Indeed, it might not be going too far to say that it has been a characteristic of the Chinese system that it alternates between long periods of relative peace, unity, and stability, as under the Han, Tang, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, and periods of turbulence and conflict when an established dynasty loses the Mandate of Heaven and a multipolar struggle ensues among the successor states and dynasties to replace it. Part of the rationale behind the CCP's claim to stay in power indefinitely is that it hopes to place itself in the company of long-lived dynasties. Sometimes the periods of turbulence are centuries long, as after the fall of the Han dynasty and before the rise of the Tang. Sometimes they are quite short, as between the Ming and the Qing and between the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the victory of the CCP in China's long civil and international war in 1949. In all cases, however, the icon of Chinese political unity established by the Qin and the Han dynasties remains an enduring political framing.

In this sense, the broad pattern of China's practice in international relations fits with the *zhongyong* dialectics discussed above. During periods of disunity and division, the idea of unity and harmony is always present and politically active. Likewise, during periods of unity and harmony, the idea of division and disunity is present and politically active. This understanding is reflected in popular culture. As the famous first sentence of the Ming dynasty novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* puts it, 'the basic logic of the world/the general trend under heaven is that it is bound to divide after a long period of unification, and it will unify after a long period of division'.²

The Tribute System

Three of the ideational elements discussed above – hierarchy, *Tianxia*, and the Mandate of Heaven – combined to inform and underpin the main practices of the tribute system, with the other two – relationalism and face – playing a more subtle role. While these component concepts were clear in Chinese thinking and practice, the idea of the tribute system itself was not. Zhang Feng argues that the Chinese did not see the tribute system in abstract theoretical terms at the time they practised it. This construction and labelling of it was supplied later by Western observers (Fairbank, 1968; Zhang, F., 2009: 574) and has now become more or less accepted as the way of framing classical China's international relations.

The tribute system started from the Han dynasty (202 BC–AD 220) and ended with the Qing dynasty (AD 1644–1911). It was a hierarchical system with China at the centre, and the scope of application was potentially (but not actually) as wide as *Tianxia*. Under the system, tributary states acknowledged China's superiority thus both recognizing and reinforcing the

² We are grateful to Wang Jiangli for pointing out this reference and for providing a translation (语逆天下大势，分久必合，合久必分). An alternative translation (from the 2018 English edition, trans. Martin Palmer, Penguin) is 'Empires arise from chaos and empires collapse back into chaos. This we have known since time began.'

emperor's Mandate of Heaven. In return, local rulers received both recognition of their legitimacy and the right to trade with China in the form of tribute. Those sending tribute received from the Chinese emperor gifts of higher value than they presented to him, and the system also allowed a significant degree of private trading alongside the tribute missions. Some rulers in Asia also used the system to their advantage, to gain recognition as the legitimate ruler in domestic succession disputes and occasionally to secure protection from predatory neighbours. For example, the tributary state of Malacca sought Chinese protection against Siam in the fifteenth century AD, and China made a huge effort to protect Korea from Japanese invasions at the end of the sixteenth century (Swope, 2009). During the Ming dynasty there was a neo-Confucian form of foreign policy theory which combined the Mandate of Heaven, reflecting a benevolent and morally superior emperor, with *Tianxia*, as the domain within which the emperor exercised authority. The emperor expected loyal subordination from others and reserved the right to punish them if they disturbed China's peace or good order. This theory extended the hierarchical relations of the Confucian family structure all the way up to the global level and somewhat discounted territoriality as a major political factor (Zhang, F., 2015a: 202–5).

The working of the tribute system, especially its claim to be a relatively benign or non-coercive order, has been subject of controversy. For the most part, it allowed states to submit without being subjugated. China did not undertake large-scale overseas colonization of foreign lands like the Europeans did after the fifteenth century AD. There are of course exceptions to this: the colonization of Vietnam in the first millennium AD and the conquest of kingdoms and peoples to the southwest (Nanzhao, Dali) and Tibet and Xinjiang. Chinese merchants also established substantial Chinese settlements along the trade routes of Southeast Asia, many of which are still there as minority populations. As clearly shown by the famous fifteenth-century voyages of Zheng He, which were about expanding the scale of the tribute system, China used both persuasion

and coercion when it suited its purpose. Zheng He's fleets went heavily armed and did not refrain from using force to promote what would now be called regime change in other countries (Chong, 2014: 952–4; Zhang, F., 2015a: 200–2). Geoff Wade (2004: 18–19) goes as far as to liken these voyages to 'gunboat diplomacy', or even 'proto maritime colonialism'.

But the classical tribute system of China was not a coercion-heavy empire in the same sense as either classical Rome or the modern European empires from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries. As noted above, whether it should be called an 'empire' at all remains a matter of debate (Spruyt, 2020: 156–64). It does not fit comfortably into the categories of Western thinking about hierarchy, though it might possibly be located within Adam Watson's (1992; see also Buzan and Little, 2000: 176–82) spectrum of anarchy–hegemony–suzerainty–dominion–empire. It was not even a rigid, suzerainty-like structure but rather a flexible and pragmatic set of mutual relationships perhaps best viewed as a hegemonic form of international society which, more so for its outer than its inner circles, had other institutions such as adversarial balancing and war (Zhang, F., 2009; Zhang and Buzan, 2012). As Yongjin Zhang (2001: 51–5) and Spruyt (2020: 93, 101–10) both observe, the tribute system in practice was flexible and accommodating to the realities of power and the diversities of culture. It embraced many religions and philosophies and was able to absorb ethnic and cultural diversity, as when non-Han dynasties became the rulers of the Middle Kingdom.

China generally allowed those within its orbit to keep their independence so long as they showed suitable deference according to the rituals. While China's relations with Korea epitomized the tributary relationship, its relationship with nearby Japan was much more difficult, with Japan almost never accepting much, if any, subordination (Buzan and Goh, 2020). China's relations with more distant powers such as Russia and the steppe barbarians were in practice (though not in ritual) not far removed from sovereign equality. China was pragmatic enough to allow considerable degrees of variance in

the extent to which foreigners observed, or didn't, its cultural norms and practices. China placed the outside world into three circles: those to be assimilated, coercively if necessary; those to be allowed 'loose rein' and political independence; and those to be excluded (Zhang, F., 2015a: 200–2, 210–12; 2015b). Even then, as Yongjin Zhang (2001: 51–5) notes, there was enough pretence at observing the tribute system's rituals to allow a parallel with Stephen Krasner's (1999) 'organized hypocrisy' view of sovereignty. While there was a certain uniformity of ritual across China's foreign relations, with everything having to appear to acknowledge China's central and superior position, the underlying practice ranged widely and could embody relations more like those of sovereign equality. Form was more homogenous than substance.

Yongjin Zhang (2001: 58–63), Barry Buzan and Evelyn Goh (2020), and Spruyt (2020: 133–64) all chart the downfall of the tribute system during China's traumatic encounter with both modernity and the power of the Western states and Japan. Japan's takeover of Korea from the late nineteenth century pulled away China's last tributary. It reduced China from holding the central and superior role of Middle Kingdom to being no more than a sovereign state legally equal to all others, and with the additional humiliation of being a backward developing country well down in the ranks of international power and status.

Conclusions

If we take this discussion of thinking and practice as the baseline for answering our question of 'What would IR look like if it had been invented in China', the answer would have to be along the lines of 'pretty different'. There is some similarity between Legalism and the practices of warring state periods on the one hand, with Realism/power politics on the other. But Legalism and power politics played most strongly in the context of China's internal wars, less so in its relations with non-Chinese cultures. That said, however, one faces the sustained indeterminacy about

what the term 'China' encompasses. How does one differentiate inside and outside when the borders between them are in constant flux? Sometimes the northern 'barbarians' were outsiders, and sometimes they were within the Chinese empire, whether as subjects or rulers.

The most striking differences are around hierarchy/sovereign equality and *Tianxia*. As Spruyt (2020: 127–31) emphasizes, the Chinese had a very different concept of inside/outside from that of the West. To risk some oversimplification, it might be said that traditional Chinese thinking about world order privileges the concept of hierarchy but allows some exceptions for equality. This was perhaps not unlike the practice of other 'universal' agrarian empires, such as Rome and Byzantium, and even of pre-modern Europe's aristocratic hierarchies of princes, kings, emperors, and suchlike. By contrast, modern Western thinking about IR theory privileges sovereign equality/international anarchy while making some allowances for hierarchy. When the Chinese faced strong barbarian powers, or remote ones such as Russia, they conceded towards equality. While Europeans from 1648 onwards took sovereign equality as the baseline and the balance of power as a principle against hegemonism, they also recognized privileges for great powers and the reality of differences in power and authority (Simpson, 2004).

Tianxia and the practices of the tribute system represent a radically different conceptualization of territoriality from the quite strict inside/outside view which elevated sovereignty, non-intervention, and territoriality to being core principles of the Western world order. A Chinese IR theory based on it might recognize concentric circles of civilization around a core but not the hard territorial packages that are the foundation of modern Western IR. Indeed, contemporary Chinese practice displays this contradiction, with China being a leading defender of sovereign equality and non-intervention on the one hand, while seeking primacy and a 'return to normality' in its region on the other. This seeming incoherence perhaps makes better sense when viewed through the lens of *zhongyong*

dialectics, where opposites are to be managed rather than resolved.

Although *zhongyong* dialectics has not been discussed in relation to the English School, it is noteworthy that both take middle-way positions as their preferred approach to dealing with contradictions. It might well be possible to read international society as a *zhongyong*-style approach to the choice between sovereign equality and international anarchy on the one hand and centralizing imperial order on the other. International society is the middle way, finding a balance between the excesses of national independence and imperial authoritarianism. This might be a fruitful research project for suitably qualified scholars.

Another take on *zhongyong* dialectics points towards an interesting speculation as to whether the rather ‘sticks and carrots’ style of contemporary Chinese diplomacy, showing both faces at the same time, is a reflection of China’s long tradition of having mainly to deal with the militarily threatening, but socially and politically unsophisticated steppe nomad ‘barbarians’. Such peoples were, for over two millennia, the main threat to China and the main target of its diplomacy. Most other Eurasian civilizations also faced threats from steppe nomads, but they had sedentary, civilized neighbours to deal with as well. China had no such neighbours and therefore no diplomatic tradition of dealing with cultural and military peers. This behaviour could also, in addition, be a reflection of a rather extreme Sino-centric perspective, in which China defined civilization. From that perspective, all others, not just steppe nomads, were in varying degrees ‘barbarian’ in relation to it. As S. C. M. Paine (2003: 336) astutely, if somewhat sharply, puts it, ‘Only in the late nineteenth century did the Chinese learn that civilization had a plural’.

The Mandate of Heaven also differs from Western thinking, though with some points of contact. It differs from Western dynasticism in giving the people a right to rebel if a dynasty is performing badly. No such right existed under the European divine right of kings. There is perhaps some analogue to the

relationship between emperors and subject foreign peoples in the Western tradition and a much more limited one with popular sovereignty's right of the people to choose their government. The enduring importance of the moral order represented by the Mandate of Heaven in China explains the CCP's existential concern about corruption in its ranks and any signs of 'peasant rebellion'. Although the term is not used, the Mandate of Heaven is still a core principle in Chinese politics in the form of performance legitimacy: the idea that the legitimacy of governments derives mainly from whether they do a good job or not. Pines (2012) comes close to arguing that the CCP, despite its self-understanding as a revolutionary party, looks increasingly like a successful rebellion that has founded a new dynasty with an emperor (Xi Jinping), a meritocratic mandariate (the CCP itself - Braudel, 1994 [1987]: 215-16), and the Mandate of Heaven (the right to suppress rebellions and rule eternally, so long as it does a good job of government). So far, this new Mandate of Heaven has confined itself to China, not reaching for *Tianxia*, but it is perhaps beginning to pursue hierarchy in its region and the wider world.

Relationalism sets up an alternative logic of IR that both challenges the Western emphasis on rationalism and is potentially complementary to it. Face is definitely different in importance for Confucian societies than for Western ones, and as a feature of collectivist societies it may also be different in substance. It can perhaps best be understood in the IR context as an additional and important ideational factor in the rational calculation of gains and losses in any transaction, though for those within Confucian cultures it is much deeper than that.

Nationalism was not a feature of traditional Chinese thinking about the rest of the world. The main approach of Confucianism was more centred on cultural than ethnic differentiation, with anyone in principle able to acquire (or lose) 'civilized' status according to their mastery (or not) of the appropriate language, customs, and rituals. But in practice, there was politically significant differentiation between Han

and Manchu during the Qing dynasty, with Han nationalism, albeit already then influenced by Western ideas, becoming an important factor in the weakening of the Qing imperium. Although nationalism was not part of Confucian thinking, it might well have become part of an IR theory invented in China once China expanded its range of regular contact beyond its immediate neighbourhood.