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Chapter 2

**ADAPTIVE CONFUCIAN RELATIONSHIPS:
MODELS FOR CONTEMPORARY
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

R. James Ferguson

Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies,
Bond University, Gold Coast, Australia

ABSTRACT

Chinese thought has a sophisticated concept of human relations, in the Confucian tradition based on core ideas of benevolence (*ren*), social customs (*li*), harmony (*he*) and reciprocity (*shu*). Five relationships have been identified as the basis of a stable society: between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older to younger brothers, and among friends. Likewise, in China's historical international relations, diverse relational models have been propounded including the 'tribute system' (asymmetrical relations supporting China's primacy), *Tianxia* as an inclusive empire embracing 'all-under heaven', and the idea of Chinese culture as an attractor and stabilizer. These relations imply a degree of prescriptive hierarchy that is at odds with equal respect for sovereign nations (the legal basis of the current interstate system), modern liberalism and socialist egalitarianism. In contrast, contemporary Chinese foreign

policy mobilizes principles that emphasize harmony and cooperation: the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, notions of co-governance (*guojia gongzhi* and *quanqiu gongzhi*), and building communities of ‘common destiny’. These general formulations do not provide detailed guidelines for positive and nuanced interactions. However, when combined with an active understanding of *zhong* (contextualized as ‘equilibrium’ or the ‘mean’), creative and positive relations among nations can be postulated as a Confucian political norm. This line of thought provides insights for beneficial and benevolent relations among states, institutions and diverse actors, even when they have unequal power levels and different cultures, e.g., the PRC’s relations with smaller states in Central Asia.

Keywords: China, Confucianism, five relationships, international relations, tribute system

NUANCED RELATIONSHIPS AS THE BASIS OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

International relations theory has often been viewed through the dominant axes of Western political thought, deriving much of its terminology from the idealist, realist, liberal and Marxist traditions that evolved through the 16th-20th centuries. However, it is also possible to analyse international politics as a matrix of power *relations*, with a focus on how those relationships are shaped, formed and interpreted, paralleling modern constructivism with its focus on identity and socially-constituted relations (Qin, 2000, 2010, 2011). Within the wider framework of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism has developed sophisticated concepts of human relations based on the values of benevolence (*ren*) and harmony (*he*), regulated by social customs (*li*) and reciprocity (*shu*). Traditionally, the five cardinal relationships (*wulun*) were seen as the basis of society: those between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older to younger brothers, and among friends. In more generalized forms, they can be taken as the relationships of ruler to subject, parent to child, older to younger sibling, older to younger friend (Dallmayr, 2003; Chan, Chu, and Young, 2012). In the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhongyong), a fundamental Confucian education text influential from the

Han period on (206 BCE-220 CE), the five cardinal relations are viewed as universal paths, but with varying degrees of understanding and practice:

There are five things that extend throughout the world and three means of practicing them: ruler and minister; father and son; husband and wife; elder and younger brother; friend meeting friend. These five form a universal Dao for the world. Wisdom, humanity, valor: these three form the universal virtues for the world. There is but a single means of putting them into practice.

Some are born understanding it, some study to understand it, some come to understand it only in circumstances of duress. But once they understand it, they are all one. Some practice it through natural ease, some practice it to benefit thereby, some practice it by forcing themselves. But once they succeed by means of it, they are all one (Eno, 2016: 374).

Confucian relationships are often interpreted as hierarchical and asymmetrical, and politically as implicitly paternalistic and communitarian or authoritarian (Spina, Shin, and Cha, 2011; Lo, 2016). In the five relationships, one person tends to have a higher level of power in each relationship: the ruler, the father, the husband, and the older brother. These relationships can be seen as ‘three bonds’ (*san gang*) with “the dependency of the son on the father, of the wife on her husband, and of the minister on the ruler” (Dallmayr, 2003). However, the asymmetry of authority is supposed to be moderated by the overall context of benevolence (*ren*), by concern and reciprocity, and by the ‘rectification of names’ which ensured that persons should fulfil their social roles, e.g., rulers as caring leaders rather than tyrants (Zhang, 2005; Dallmayr, 2003). Put another way, these relationships are hierarchical, but not ‘necessarily authoritarian’ (Elstein, 2012).

Confucian ethics do not divide up the private and public spheres, mixing political and non-political issues within a wider perception of human nature (Dallmayr, 2003). Taken as a political philosophy, *ren* when combined with proper social ritual (*li*) would allow a harmonization of family and state interests, reinforcing a hierarchical political system focused on evolving roles and duties. In the *Doctrine of the Mean* (Chan 1963), this was not seen

as de-humanizing: indeed, the humane family was seen as the basis of the state and of humanity itself. For Confucius, the family was the training ground for political relationships, with filial piety (*xiao*) and respect (*jing*) for elders or superiors the basis for political obedience and humane conduct (Confucius, 1979, 1993; Connolly, 2012).

The relationship among friends was not always asymmetrical. It could be a dialogue among peers, but elsewhere was focused on learning among elders and juniors (Confucius, 1979; Chan, 1963). Friendship is ideally based on mutuality and trust, paralleling the Confucian idea of the relationship between teachers and students. Mutual learning and self-cultivation rather than emotional bonds were the main justifications for friendship in early Confucian thought (Confucius, 1979; Kutchner, 2000). As noted by Confucius, worthy and learned friends improve a person, though he also welcomed those who were straightforward and sincere (Confucius, 1979). Friendship is unique in that it lies outside of state and family, is voluntary, and could be based on equality, therefore leading to it being viewed suspiciously if it interfered with other relationships (Kutchner, 2000; Huang, 2007). Indeed, some sections of Confucius' *Analects* can be taken to suggest that friendship should be based on a certain type of equality, at least an equality based on shared loyalty and trust (Confucius, 1979; Connolly, 2012).

Powerful friendships abound in the historical and poetic records, many of them involving self-sacrifice e.g., Guan-Bao friendships based on the interwoven careers of Guan Zhong and Bao Shuya, which was at once a professional and deeply personal and emotive relationship (Nylan, 2001). However, official and family duties were held to override personal affiliations, though conflicts could occur among different familial and state duties, e.g., a son would not normally be expected to testify against his father (Confucius, 1979, 1993; Kutchner, 2000). There was an effort to lift the status of friendship among some intellectuals in China from the 16th century onwards, especially among philosophical circles that linked travel, debate and peer networks into a new social force (Huang, 2007). Reformers such as Tan Sitong (late 19th century) sought to position friendship within the context of egalitarianism, equality (*pingdeng*) and moral autonomy,

rejecting patriarchal and authoritarian relationships (Gao, 2010; Li, 2017). Modern modes of friendship in China are now more diverse, with special links to work comrades, room-mates, graduation groups, hometown associations, and business circles.

As we shall see below, ‘friendships’ and ‘friendly relations’ are concepts that have been re-invoked in international relations, in spite of the dominance of state interests in realist political analysis, itself being challenged by constructivist and relational theories (Koschut and Oelsner, 2014; Digeser, 2016). The historical ‘lessons’ we can take are that such ‘friendships’ involve mutual learning processes, can evolve and change, may exist among equals or unequals so long as there is a shared positive intent, and may be over-ridden by other governance or relational needs. At the least, however, friendship involves reciprocity and expectation of future exchange and engagement.

From the viewpoint of Confucianism, a particular kind of reciprocity (*shu*) is involved in all these relationships. *Shu* is a complex, nuanced concept, in some contexts embracing the idea of kindness and forgiveness. *Shu* contains the notion of reciprocity based on the universal golden rule. As stated in the *Analects* 15.24:

Tzu-kung asked, ‘Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one’s life?’ The Master said, ‘It is perhaps the word “*shu*”. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.’ (Confucius, 1979).

This is placed into a wider context in the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

Therefore the superior man governs men as men, in accordance with human nature, and as soon as they change [what is wrong], he stops. Conscientiousness (*chung*) and altruism (*shu*) are not far from the Way. What you do not wish others to do to you, do not do to them (Chan, 1963).

Even *shu* (reciprocity) may still seem limited by the frame of traditional relationships, e.g., the benevolence of rulers is reciprocated by loyalty of their ministers, with the father being compassionate to a filial son (Chang,

2005). However, we should not take this as a purely negative or limiting reciprocity. *Shu* in wider contexts emerges as an inner quality of “doing one’s best” when extending help to others. There is an active component of mutually-developing relations that is powerfully outlined in the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

Only those of utmost creativity (*zhicheng*) in the world are able to make the most of their natural tendencies (*xing*). Only if one is able to make the most of one’s own natural tendencies is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others; only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of others is one able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events (*wu*); only if one is able to make the most of the natural tendencies of processes and events can one assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth; and only if one can assist in the transforming and nourishing activities of heaven and earth can human beings take their place as members of this triad (Ames and Hall, 2000; Chan, 1963).

It is here that we find the link between human relationships and the wider development of the world affairs. In the history of Chinese thought, these are both ethical and cosmological interactions. Since human relations are mutually transforming and developmental, we can see that this engages much more than rote behaviour, formal ritual or functional outcomes. This is why wisdom (*zhi*), benevolence (*ren*) and courage (*yong*) are needed to actively fulfil these complex social roles, working within the context of sincerity (*cheng*) (An, 2004).

THE ‘MEAN’ IN A GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

An active understanding of *zhong* (equilibrium or the ‘mean’) might point us toward creative and positive relations that can be developed among nations. A few caveats are needed when mobilising the thought of the *Doctrine of the Mean*. The word *zhong* in different contexts can suggest ‘focus’, ‘focussing’, ‘equilibrium’, ‘centre’, ‘impartiality’, ‘average’ or

‘mean’ (Xu, 2012). Philosophically, the ‘mean’ (*zhong*) referred to is certainly a dynamic balancing or ‘ceaseless rebalancing.’ The word usually translated as doctrine (*yong*) is not so much a rigid formulation as a regular usage, hinting at the idea of putting the mean ‘into practice in modes of behavior that trace from the lowest to the highest’ across the range of human capacities (Plaks, 2014). The *Doctrine of the Mean* uses this approach to explore filial piety and benevolent rulership, leading onto the notion of an ideal, informed ‘sagehood.’ However, realisation of the self can only be achieved when actualized ‘in the sphere of human action’ (Plaks, 2014). Within the context of political philosophy, it suggests a cultural or political awareness that involves inclusive, applicable judgements that take into account the history and culture of a given person or country, allowing unique relationships to be formed (Xu, 2012).

Zhong as a cluster of meanings and practical understandings is found in a number of early Chinese texts and is associated with approaches identified as *zhongdao*, the Way of the *zhong*, *zhonghe* (embracing the mean and harmony), or *shizhong* (being timely and correct or appropriate) (Xu, 2012). In the *Doctrine of the Mean* this becomes a creative vision of humans as co-makers of the world in which they live:

This means that the individual thing or person is only understood and acting in the context of a field and web of forces; in this context one is still capable of making a creative impact, and a contribution to, the formation and transformation of the world (Cheng, 2009: 92).

The *Doctrine of the Mean* states that the ‘superior man’ (the *junzi*, what we might call ‘the cultivated person,’ someone fit for office) exemplifies the Mean and ‘can maintain it at any time’ (Chan, 1963). This has political implications. Exemplary figures such as the Emperors Ku, Yao and Shun in the *Book of Documents* were said to hold fast and rule by *zhong*, as did the Emperor Tang, the founder of the Shang Dynasty (Xu, 2012). Likewise, new bamboo slip sources, the *Baoxun* (probably to be dated no later than the Warring States period) often refer to *zhong* as a means of governance and

way to moderating relationships with tribes such as the Youyi in the Yellow River Valley (Xu, 2012). Governance is based on wisdom and knowledge:

Knowing how to cultivate his personal life, he knows how to govern other men. And knowing how to govern other men, he knows how to govern the empire, its states, and the families (Chan, 1963).

The connection to political justice is spelt out by Xu Keqian, where he explains that the Way of *zhong*:

... takes a dialectical relative, and non-antagonistic attitude in handling contradictions and conflicts in society, trying to find and keep a *zhong* between the self and others, right and left, majority and minority, rich and poor, central government and local autonomy, and so on, while advocating the value of equilibrium, harmony, peace, and coexistence. This does not mean that *zhong dao* intends to neglect the contradictions and conflicts or that it tries to eliminate all differences and diversity. It only means that *zhongdao* considers harmony and peaceful coexistence as having a higher priority in society (Xu, 2012, 434).

Therefore using ‘the mean’ does not rely on strict equality, but suggests a kind of ‘differentiated equality’ with persons as objects of concern. ‘Equality’ is a dangerous concept, even in Western political analysis. Equality cannot be guaranteed in all areas, even in the most democratic or communist of societies. Equality of opportunity and political rights have been formulated by different thinkers such as Aristotle (a just *polis* is composed of peers who take turns in holding office), Immanuel Kant (via notions of individual autonomy), J.S. Mill (via a self-regulating liberty that does not impinge on the liberty of others) and John Rawls (seeking to create improved judgements of fairness that help the least well-off) (Dallmyer, 2003). The obvious point is that a numerical notion of equality cannot cover all aspects of an individual’s needs and rights. Both a child and an adult have a need for food, but one needs more than another to survive. We often expect those with more power or knowledge to act with greater responsibility and care for those around them. This shows that even ‘equality of treatment’ is

embedded in a set of relational and situational judgements, with needs and context taken into account (this is not the same as mere relativism).

In early Chinese thought there was a strong recognition that social roles and functions were differentiated and that harmony did not rely on equality of knowledge, power or status. Even Mengzi (Mencius), among the most democratic of ancient writers, noted that ‘it is the nature of things to be unequal’ and accepted the necessary division of labour and governance, though all persons share characteristics that make them human and worthy of esteem (Mencius, 1988). Likewise, Taoist thinkers such as *Zhuangzi* noted that the effort to enforce equality or uniformity destroys natural relationships and undermines proper judgement (Chuang, 1891, 1968). For classical Chinese thinkers, harmony itself relied on numerous roles and differentiation in judgements: harmony among different persons was the basis of a functioning society with all its diverse needs and skills.

HUMAN RELATIONS AS THE MODEL FOR STATE RELATIONS

It can be seen that there is an overlap across family and governmental relations in the Confucian thinking. This has led to the postulation that the state was modelled in part on familial relations, with China being literally a ‘family state’ (*guojia*) (Kutchner, 2000). This interpretation should not be exaggerated, but is partly true for the imperial period where patterns of loyalty were attached to ruling dynasties: hence the denomination of the Chinese ethnically as the Han, historically linked the formative Han dynasties. There was some tendency to take ethical principles and read them across into political relationships, e.g., the idea found in the *Analects* that a loyal official learns proper behaviour from his role as a devoted son (Confucius, 1979). Likewise, simply being a good son and brother was seen as ‘taking part’ and ‘exerting an influence’ on government (Confucius, 1979; Kutchner, 2000).

Certain relationships may be taken as ready metaphors for inter-state relations. Thus Father-Son relations can be seen as a model for superior-to-lesser relations implied in the inter-state ‘tribute system’ that China developed from the Han period onward (better conceived of a pattern of asymmetric international relations, with more formalized forms being developed in Ming period) (Womack, 2009; 2012; Zhang, 2009, 2010). China was seen as the imperial centre of a family of tributary states whose relations were carefully regulated through court ritual. Even within these tribute relations, there was scope for patterns of trade, accommodation and inter-marriage, allowing for the *heqin* policy of “peaceful and friendly” relations across China’s imperial borders (Waldron, 1992). Likewise, the uncle-nephew or patron-priest roles have been used to describe early Tibet-China relations, implying differential roles and levels of authority (VanSchaik, 2012; Snellgrove, 1986; Perelomon and Martynov, 1983). In the modern period, however, such metaphors imply a primacy rejected by modern notions of equal sovereignty and non-interference. Brotherly relations or friendship patterns are the only other two relational metaphors left, since the idea of a ‘marriage’ would parallel exceptional or problematic cases, e.g., a confederation of separate states as found historically in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, or the often problematic use of dynastic marriages among kingdoms to create patterns of transnational kinship. Likewise, notions of brotherhood and fraternity have at times been invoked in actions of modern socialist solidarity, e.g., support for Cuba and Venezuela by the PRC, but are less commonly mobilized than notions of ‘friendship’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘strategic partnerships’ in the 21st century. Beyond these general categories there are still numerous variations in the way that particular relationships are conducted. It is the *nature* of the relationship, both intrinsically and in its beneficial outcomes, that needs careful analysis. Here the ‘mean’ becomes a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ recognizing the individuals involved and the particular nature of the relationship as it evolves (Plaks, 2014).

In China’s historical international relations, diverse relational models have been propounded including the ‘tribute system’ (asymmetrical relations supporting China’s primacy), *Tianxia* as an inclusive empire

embracing ‘all-under heaven’ that has cosmopolitan implications for a humane world order today, and the idea of Chinese culture as an attractor and stabilizer (Carlson, 2011; Zhao, 2006; Barabantseva, 2009; Zhang, 1998). There is also another layer of the ‘near and far’ in Chinese philosophical accounts of international relations, with core areas contrasted to tribal peripheries and the wild domain beyond Chinese influence. The *Doctrine of the Mean* also provides some practical advice on how to deal with ‘far’ or weaker countries:

... this is the way to show tenderness to strangers from far countries. To restore lines of broken succession, to revive states that have been extinguished, to bring order to chaotic states, to support those states that are in danger, to have fixed times for their attendance at court, and to present them with generous gifts while expecting little when they come – this is the way to extend kindly and awesome influence on the feudal lords (Chan, 1963: 106).

Even if couched with the context of Chinese primacy, this short section implies notions of political intervention and a responsibility to sustain the state system, thereby maintaining Chinese influence without direct imperial control or acquisition of territory. This approach has some parallels with modern ideas of humanitarian invention and soft power influence, though focused on states and ruling houses rather than populations and human rights.

For international relations scholars, the implications of Confucian relational thinking are profound. No rigid balance of power can be achieved because inter-state relations are dynamic, changing and evolving. Furthermore, under conditions of regionalization, globalization and complex interdependence, states can only develop themselves through extensive interaction with other states, societies and cultures. However, due to the diversity of these states, their peoples, and interactions with other groups, one set of rigid norms cannot embrace a full and developing relationship. This line of thought provides insights for beneficial and benevolent relations among states, institutions and diverse actors, even when they have unequal

power levels and different cultures, e.g., the PRC's relations with smaller states in Central Asia.

RELATIONS IN MODERN CHINESE FOREIGN POLICY

From the early 1950's China's foreign policy moved along two tracks. The first supported communist and revolutionary movements in Asia and elsewhere, the second focused on sovereign control of its territory and interstate cooperation, especially with developing countries. From the 1980s, as China engaged open-door policies and domestic reform, there was a gradual shift towards multilateralism, multipolarity, and mutual benefit in an evolving international system. Contemporary Chinese foreign policy mobilizes principles that emphasize harmony and cooperation: the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, notions of co-governance (*guojia gongzhi* and *quanqiu gongzhi*), and building communities of 'common destiny', treating countries as equals in the context of cooperative security and mutual learning among civilizations (Kuik, 2005; Chan, Lee, and Chan, 2008; Dellios and Ferguson, 2013). These ideas have had both a philosophical and practical evolution over the last sixty-seven years.

The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence have been a cornerstone of PRC's international relations since 1954, with their well-known concepts of "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence." Formulated in the context of India-China relations, they were part of wider efforts by China to reach out to developing countries in the 'third world'. Furthermore, the Five Principles expressed in the Pancha Sila channelled the hope that India and China might become comprehensive partners rather than peer competitors, a factor already at play as China moved to reclaim complete control of Tibet through 1950-1959. In spite of the short, sharp and bitter war of 1962, plus ongoing nuclear and border tensions, this hope for cooperation has never been completely lost in the long-term relationship. This idea is found reflected in aspects of the April 2005 'Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace

and Prosperity’ between the two countries, though this has been hard to sustain in recent years (Kaura, 2015; Wolpert, 2004). Likewise, the recent leadership and cultural diplomacy between PM Modi and President Xi Jinping has sought to emphasise common ground between the two rising powers. Part of the tensions between these two countries, however, lies in different perceptions of the relationship: India tends to benchmark itself against Chinese capacities across the board, whether in nuclear weapons, military capabilities, economic growth, or soft power. In turn, China sees India as only one part of a much wider fabric of relations that it needs to manage, with the US and Russia being of more immediate concern. However, any view of India as a second-tier power or young-brother to a rising China would be totally rejected by India’s strategic culture and by its emerging narrative as a modernising cyber-power. It is in this context that India has been critical of China’s limited support for its bid to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council and recent objections to its membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group (Kaura, 2015).

This is where notions of co-governance (*guojia gongzhi* and *quanqiu gongzhi*) could be brought into play, seeing both countries as rising powers that have special but overlapping spheres of interest (Ferguson and Dellios, 2017). Thus, while India might be seen as the natural shaper of Indian Ocean affairs, China’s need to trade through this oceanic expanse is well known. In turn, China’s strong energy, trade and security engagement with wider Central Asia is well known, but does not preclude India improving its relations with Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is partly on this set of mutual relations that India was welcomed as a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while the PRC has become a dialogue partner to IORA (Indian Ocean Rim Association) and an observer to IONS (Indian Ocean Naval Symposium). Though usually cast in a negative light (due to border disputes, tensions over Pakistan, and ongoing strategic competition), in the long run these two states will need to cooperate more closely if shared problems are to be resolved. This may require, however, a revised conception of balance between these rising powers.

The notion of ‘friendship’ (between states and peoples) as a meaningful concept in international relations has been resurrected by a number of

writers, suggesting an enduring relationship that goes beyond short-term, shared interests (Koschut and Oelsner, 2014; Digeser, 2016). Even past adversaries and enemies sometimes cement treaties of friendship to mark a reversal in relations, e.g., the 1976 Basic Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Australia and Japan. This was soon followed by the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and the People's Republic of China (*Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo he Ribenguo heping youhao tiaoyue*), finalized in 1978, an important stage of China's opening and normalization of international relations. The embedding of the term 'friendship' in such cases is as much an expectation of an improved future relationship as a statement of current fact. Modern China has invoked the terminology of 'Friendship' or friendly cooperation in at least 17 of its treaties, e.g., The Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation (2001) and the China-Pakistan Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Good-Neighbourly Relations (2005). The PRC has such agreements with North Korea, Mongolia, Yemen, Nepal, Afghanistan, the Republic of Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, though such terminology is usually reserved for countries in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe rather than with the West (Devere, 2009; Leallsa, 2009). More generally, Chinese foreign policy has come to focus on qualitative relationships as a mean to promote win-win diplomacy. Increasingly over the last two decades the flexible terminology of 'partnerships' (*Cihai*) has been used, with China having over 50 of these special relationships (Feng and Huang, 2014).

Unfortunately, these formulations do not provide detailed guidelines for positive and nuanced interactions. Modern neo-realist thinkers tend to dismiss this terminology as merely part of the ritual of diplomacy without serious import. This may be unwise given China's distinctive evolution of its strategic and political cultures (Ferguson and Dellios, 2017). We can test this by looking at an 'unequal relationship' between a rising power (China) and a small, rather troubled state - Tajikistan. As we shall see, there are very good reasons for both states to go beyond narrow formulations of gain and benefit in their relations.

DIFFERENTIAL RELATIONS: RESPECT BETWEEN THE BIG AND THE SMALL

As we have seen, relationships in Confucian thinking focus on diversity rather than equality: indeed, difference, rather than uniformity is the basis of harmony in this kind of thinking (Cheng, 2006). Friendship can occur between equals, but also between older and young, someone with lesser or more knowledge, so long as there are shared (good) intentions and a certain level of reciprocity.

This issue is quite acute in the case of China's relations with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, two small, relatively fragile states in Central Asia. Though both states have strong economic and security ties with Russia, the PRC has become an increasingly important partner over the last two decades (Ferguson, 2018). Both abut Chinese borders, have growing trade relations with PRC, are likely to gain from major Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI), and are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. These states are links in China's wider economic and strategic embrace of Greater Central Asia, crucial for China's access to diversified energy sources, new markets, and a 'belt' of potential stabilization (or de-stabilization) across its western borders. This raises the importance of even small states for a China that is seeking a wider footprint of economic interests and geopolitical influence across Eurasia, thus escaping over-reliance on easily interdicted maritime routes through Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean for trade and energy access (the Malacca Straits dilemma).

We can explore some of these nuances by looking at the relationship with Tajikistan in a little more detail. Tajikistan is a small country with a population of approximately 8.8 million, long borders (including problematic frontiers with Afghanistan), and a procedural democracy dominated by the family and party of President Emomali Rhamon. Although it has some natural resources, including hydro-power, gold, silver, lead, and tungsten, its economic growth operates from a low base line, circa 6.9% GDP growth in 2016 but with GDP per capita of only \$2,980 (PPP) per capita (BTI, 2017; Farcky, 2016; BTI, 2016). Still suffering from the after-

effects of a civil war in the 1990s and Islamic militancy in recent decades, and it has relied strongly on security support from Russia via the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and the presence of several thousand Russian troops to bolster its stability.

However, in recent years the relationship with China has become increasingly important. China engaged in early diplomatic relations with Tajikistan in 1992, soon after it emerged as an independent state after the breakup of the Soviet Union. A Complementary Agreement on China-Tajikistan Boundary was signed in 2002, followed by the Good-Neighbourly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between China and Tajikistan in 2007, covering the 'One China' policy and security cooperation (Leallsa, 2009). China's trade with the country increased eight-fold through 2007-2010, reaching \$685 million and 17.8% of Tajikistan's trade volume – the PRC is now its' largest trade partner and biggest lender via China's EximBank (Muzalevsky, 2007; BTI, 2014). China will provide credit of \$140 million to improve the capacity of the Zarafshon gold mining company and build an oil refinery in the south of Tajikistan, while China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has been involved in oil and gas development within the country from 2012, as well as building new road networks (BTI, 2016; Fazullina, 2017).

This has evolved to the point where China and Tajikistan have signed more than 105 agreements, with this relationship seen as an integral part of the Silk Road Economic Belt. The heightened importance of relations has led to it being described as a Strategic Partnership from 2013 onward. At that time 'President Rahmon and Chairman Xi Jinping signed energy, banking, agriculture, tourism, and other cooperation agreements, and China pledged \$300 million for development projects in Tajikistan' (Nichol, 2013; Jones, 2012). This Strategic Partnership is a fascinating case of a very powerful state engaging a weak one in a relationship covering many areas of cooperation and high levels of leadership dialogue.

Part of the reason for this strategic partnership, however, may be due to real issues and tensions between the countries that need a deepened 'friendship' to solve. Tensions have emerged about the level of Chinese influence in the business sector (impacting on small and medium

companies), with over the 82,000 Chinese skilled workers involved in projects during 2014, including 1,500 Chinese farmers growing rice in Khatlon province on 2000 hectares of land bought as part of PRC's food security agenda (Reeves 2015; Eurasianet, 2011). Resolution of a past border dispute with PRC led to return of 1,142 square km of mountainous land to China, ending a long term irritant between the two countries, but sparking debate on Chinese influence regionally (Eurasianet, 2011). China has also viewed Tajikistan, with its poorly controlled borders with Afghanistan, as one transnational route for illicit goods into Xinjiang, including militant ideologies, arms and drugs networks. On this basis the PRC has been active in developing a 'Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism' with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan to help contain regional militancy, with high level military meetings in August 2016 (Eurasianet, 2016; Nasar and Hand, 2016).

The China-Tajikistan relationship is also located within regional processes. Tajikistan's engagement in the Shanghai Five Forum emerged out of early confidence building measures and efforts to delineate inner Asian borders from 1997 onwards. Its evolution into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization placed Tajikistan and China's relationship in the midst of a multilateral understanding to improve transnational security. At first focused on the 'three evils' of terrorism, fundamentalism and separatism, the SCO has moved onto a wider dialogue to ensure positive inter-state relations across wider Central Asia and much of Eurasia. Although a soft-balancing mechanism against external powers such as the US, the SCO has also helped small states to balance their relations with stronger powers, especially Tajikistan in relation to Russia, China and Uzbekistan (Rambler News Service, 2012). Tajikistan is an active member of the SCO and has joined in SCO's regional counter-terrorism exercises and Peace Missions in 2003, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, including bilateral drills with a focus on border security and high level meetings in 2016. A major Peace Mission was held in Tajikistan in 2012, with Tajikistan perhaps hoping this would allow the SCO to balance its negative relations with nearby Uzbekistan (*Tajikistan Monitor*, 2012).

The SCO, however, is much more than a security dialogue. The Shanghai Five was based on the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: “mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and pursuit of common development,” itself largely structured from China’s Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (Ferguson, 2018). It seeks to transcend ‘the idea of Clash of Civilizations and advocates respect for diversity of civilizations’, following elements of China’s ‘Harmonious World Order’ Concept and Russia’s ‘Sovereign democracy’ and civilizational dialogue concepts. It aims ‘to promote peace, cooperation, development and win-win progress in the context of independence’, as expressed by Zhang Deguang, first Secretary-General of the SCO (Zhang, 2011).

In this content the relationship is part of China’s wider effort to ensure Eurasian stability through cooperation with pan-Asian mechanisms such as the Istanbul process (Heart of Asia dialogues), the CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia) initiative, and the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). The main point is that China’s long-term strategic interests in Central Asia go beyond energy and resources:

China’s push into the region is not purely economic. It is an integrated geopolitical approach, combining “*zhoubian zhengce*” (periphery policy), “*mulin zhengce*” (good neighbouring policy), and “*wending zhoubian*” (stabilising the periphery).’ China considers the wider region as part of its ‘direct sphere of influence or “*dingwei*” (Nopens, 2014).

However, we need to be careful with the meaning of ‘sphere of influence’, since the idea *dingwei* in China’s foreign policy includes “the search for a place, the seeking of a proper role, or the undertaking of a process of negotiation to firm up one’s position, thereby enabling one to avoid potential conflicts in the future” (Chan, 2001). Likewise, projects such as BRI have now been framed beyond economics to include civilizational exchanges, recognition of cultural diversity with a focus on inclusiveness, protection of heritage sites and creation of friendly people-to-people exchanges (NDRC, 2015). Although seemingly an ‘add-on’, it is precisely these bonds that will support long-term mutual benefits in the relationship.

The Tajikistan example shows that the relationship is not only embedded in a wider network of relations, but relies on a deeper pattern of cooperation than immediate economic or security benefits. Here, however, China will need to tread carefully: its influence, whether in environmental or societal terms will, have a huge impact on this small nation in the heart of Eurasia. The 'balance' here is precisely to help and engage this small state without opening up new patterns of fragility in its ecological or political system.

METAPHORS FOR ADAPTIVE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

We have to be careful in using the Five Relationships or equilibrium-theory as a strict models for contemporary international relations. Human relations, even when postulated as having universal foundations, do not have the multi-layered, multi-actor aspect of the modern state, with its diverse agencies and multi-track diplomacy across many foreign policy conduits and subnational actors (Kischel, 20000). Taking these parallels too far would expose us to false similarities and category mistakes made by linking across different levels of analysis. Nonetheless, politics is about relationships between actors, agents and identities all the way down to the individual human level. Metaphors can help us probe similarities and differences, explore complex organic and mechanistic relationships, and expose us to the nuances of critical irony in the human condition (Ryle, 2009; White, 1973). Linking the rich relational thought of Chinese philosophy to modern inter-state relations is useful for exploring nuanced relationships that may have been missed in current foreign policy analysis. Friendship-like relations among peoples, collectively, is possible, and core notions of benevolence and humaneness should take their place in international relations analysis, alongside the discussion of norms, institutions and power.

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