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The Dao of World Politics: A Review

L. H. M. Ling's *The Dao of World Politics* perfectly blends storytelling with policy analysis to present, and perhaps exemplify, an alternate approach to the Western-dominated discipline of international relations: worldism. As IR is founded on a Western account of knowledge—one that is logical, analytical, hypothesis-based, progresses linearly, and prizes self interests above all—that falsely presents itself as 'international' and 'universal,' Ling is a prominent voice among a growing number of scholars calling to decolonise IR, or to have Western values and systems of thinking be not the only one but one of many. Thus, worldism is not a call for unification or diversification, but rather, reconciliation. Drawing from Daoist and Buddhist principles of balance and fluidity, it aims to reconcile Westphalia, Western nations and schools of thought, with Multiple Worlds, those that don't fit into the description—the majority of the world.

The book is organized into three parts; Ling explains wordlist dialogics, applies it to US-China, China-Taiwan, China-India relations as example, and concludes with a play that offers an unconventional reading experience of the previous content. Combining fables, pop culture references, and aspects of daily life, she illustrates what she calls 'the three elements of the worldist zone of engagement' (20): how to contextualise the social relations between nation-states (*relationality*: who is saying what to whom and why?), how to investigate the production of the knowledge that we consume (*resonance*: where are alternative discourses coming from and what do these mean?), and how to effectively communicate with one another (*interbeing*: how can I act ethnically and with compassion?). Her organization is what successfully conveys a thorough, straightforward thought process: first and foremost, she poses the problem, calling out Western hegemony by coining her own terms to discuss it. She then dissects the problem by deconstructing the Western epistemic framework and its inherent biases. Finally, she demonstrates a solution, proving firsthand that a pluralist approach is indeed possible by incorporating multiple writing genres and referencing multiple academic fields.

Posing the Problem

Although Western hegemony in IR is widely recognised, the terminology to commonly identify, express, and discuss it is not. Decoloniality is still ill-defined, and those writing about it stumble between West/Rest, Global North/Global South, and core/periphery vocabulary, all words that come with inevitable connotations of hierarchy. We don't have the right words to speak about it, so Ling has gone ahead and adopted her own terms for us to use. It is in this process of naming that space is created to construct a narrative uninfluenced by the West. As words only appear out of necessity and are maintained through the consensus of a community of speakers, her coinage of 'Westphalia,' 'Multiple Worlds,' and 'worldism' makes clear the urgent need for decolonisation across disciplines and provides the language for scholars to properly talk about it.

Dissecting the Problem

Western epistemology not only creates, but maintains an imbalance of power: Ling breaks down how Hegelian-Marxist dialectics and individualism, two fundamental pillars of Westphalian thinking, not only necessitates a hierarchy among powers, but also justifies the violence required to achieve it. The former, Hegelian-Marxist dialectics, refers to a discourse between two opposing forces, one eventually overthrowing the other. This process requires thinking in terms of binaries and polarising two parties past any recognisable commonalities. Cooperation is out of the question because conflict is deemed as the key to progress. As Ling explains, it "offers strategies for revolution or overthrow only, not negotiation…It institutionalises violence (15)." Not to mention, "since synthesis…progresses linearly toward an ideal or utopia, never intended to reach attainment or culmination (41)," it is simply not applicable to reality. Yet it is engrained in us to see this method as 'academic' and 'rational.' For this reason, Ling introduces the Daoist symbol, the yin yang, to counter this monolithic thinking and to show an interconnected world in which two seemingly incompatible forces 'mutually contradict and complement' (15) each other. Even in conflict, the two forces are in dialogue, coexisting not only with each other but within—the yin carries a sliver of the yang, and vice versa. The yin yang emphasises the need to think beyond singularity, beyond synthesis, as one force cannot be defined without the other. Their relationship is constantly subject to change and thus, strives for balance, rather than progress.

Moreover, individualist methodology depends on the erasure of social relations between Westphalia and Multiple Worlds, especially in Westphalian history. Although Westphalia has and continues to rely on Multiple Worlds to be where it is at today, Westphalia upholds an 'ex-nihilo' narrative that attributes their success only to its individual effort and enlightened thinking: "Wiped out are any references to the occupations, massacres, expropriations, and enslavements that made this rendition of history possible (17)." By eliminating its colonial history, Westphalia is able to perpetuate a "convention of treating 'civilisations' as self-enclosed (essentialist), self-generating (limited to current interactions only), and self-absorbed (monological) (12)" that holds other nations to an impossible standard, hereby ensuring Westphalian hegemony. Failure to meet this standard is used as grounds to discount any knowledge production coming from Multiple Worlds; thus, if a nation has failed to become developed, it is the nation's fault for being backwards in thinking or not trying hard enough, not because the nation has been subject to Westphalian exploitation for centuries. If a nation is to prosper, it must do so in the Westphalian tradition in order to be considered legitimate. This Westphalia/good/civilised, Multiple Worlds/bad/barbaric binary, however, also limits Westphalian potential, as it discourages contributing with Multiple Worlds. Ling concludes, "Worldism does not seek only to show how marginalised or erased actors affect world politics…[but] to highlight their actual ontological parity with, and thereby potential to balance, Westphalia World (2)." Worldism aims for international relations to reflect the interconnectedness of the world, revealing the possibility to think beyond constructed binaries and hierarchies to everyone's benefit.

Demonstrating a Solution

Ling's writing, in structure and content, is an exemplar of pluralism. She challenges the traditional notion of a book by combining two drastically different writing styles: academic literature and fiction. The two main sections of her text are bookended with plays, in which historical philosophers, poets, theorists, and spirits come together to contemplate the best approach to world politics. Thus, she is able to achieve a humorous, informal tone alongside her didactic, scholarly writing. She carries this tone throughout her book, notably with a personal anecdote of the time she attended an international conference in post-Mao China and with dim sum as a representative example of fluidity, for it 'has no beginning, no middle, no end' (46).

These quotidian examples from food, folklore, medicine, and popular culture, along with references to various academic discipline demonstrate how ubiquitous the idea of interconnectedness is. Her second chapter includes analysis of three different movements in academia—social constructivism, post-colonial feminism, and dialectical international relations—to show common threads in all and the potential for intersectional solidarity across disciplines. In fact, her last chapter is a collaboration with Carolina M. Pinheiro, a scholar of Andean cosmovision, in which the two draw parallels between Daoist and Andean dialogics.

Troubleshooting Potential Problems

Though Ling pushes past the confines of conventional IR, her 'gender-as-analytic' argument is framed through traditional gender roles yet fails to draw a parallel between tradition views of gender and race and her proposal of Daoist dialectics in lieu of Hegelian-Marxist ones inevitably gravitates towards the creation of a West vs. East binary. Her third chapter is dedicated to 'gender-as-analytic,' which takes gender as a metaphor for two contrasting yet complementary forces engaged in a mutualistic relationship. Specifically, she draws from the traditional association of yin with the feminine and yang with the masculine. Yet, counterintuitively, it relies on looking at the female identity through old-fashioned stereotypes of 'soft' and 'weak' and as wholly separate from the realm of masculinity: "Never underestimate en element, the dao instructs, simply because it appears soft and weak (54)." The masculine and feminine must, first and foremost, be two separate entities so that they can, then, co-exist in harmony.

This method would have been more effective and a representative case of intersectionality if she had given more context to demonstrate how the masculine/feminine divide goes hand-in-hand with that of Westphalia/Multiple Worlds. She cites Edward Said's *Orientalism* multiple times, but fails to make a proper analogy of how the 'oriental' became synonymous with 'female' through a centuries of oppression and othering. She does touch upon the differing levels of discrimination and privilege that depends on a person's gender identity and racial identity, linking 'gender-as-analytic' and feminist IR: "White feminists tend to presume they can teach emancipation to their sisters of color, as if the latter have no sense of personhood or freedom. This stance echoes the patriarchal colonial order where (white) men presume they can teach (all) women how to be enlightened… (54)" However, she does not expand on the shared history between gender oppression and racial oppression. Race and gender both constitute social relations, and further historical context (such as

Orientalist art commonly depicting prostitutes because 'the Orient' was seen as primitive, subordinate, and vulgar but somehow attractive) would allow gender association to be seen as an extension of the hierarchical power relations between the 'masculine' Westphalia and the 'feminine' Multiple Worlds. Thus, Ling's argument on 'gender-as-analytic' remains a metaphor when it could have been an analogy.

She shrewdly remarks, **"**The question remains: how do we integrate Westphalia World with 'the Rest' without reproducing the same old binaries that lock us into the same old traps? (38)**"** However, Ling is also guilty of using binaries to simplify her argument; even though she makes her approach to be one of West vs. Rest, the examples she uses inevitably reveals a West vs. East sentiment. Ling's Westphalia is the United States, while her Multiple Worlds is China—two major players in current politics. She speaks of Multiple Worlds as marginalised, often using the term 'subaltern' and repeatedly referring to Spivak's text, yet China is hardly subaltern. Not to mention, Westphalia comes from a history of European colonisation, and although the United States is the most dominant power today, to understand it, we must look at back to British and French imperialism and its continuing effects on society today.

Her proposal for worldism falls short, as it is heavily centred around Chinese traditions to the point that it feels more like a compare-and-contrast between Western and ancient Chinese philosophy more than a call for pluralism. She creates a binary by directly opposing Daoist dialogics with methodological individualism and failing to mention any other systems of thinking in her text. While Buddhist and Daoist approaches have a long history across many cultures, it is not representative of all the systems of thinking in the world. She acknowledges this fact, yet the fact that she theorizes worldism exclusively on Daoist principles and that the entire second portion of her book is dedicated to China's relations with three nation-states, her acknowledgment comes off half-hearted. At times, her book was reminiscent of Richard E. Nesbett's *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerns Think Differently,* a cross-cultural psychological study into how one's culture affects the way he/she perceives the world and produces patterns of not only thinking but also behavior. Ling mentions several times throughout the book Takeuchi Yoshimi's 'Asia as a method,' as a source of inspiration and point of departure, which would have perhaps served as a better title for her piece.

Contesting Western approaches with an East-Asian alternative is still a form of hegemony and raises concern for a potential extension of the model minority myth. This myth is founded on the fact that many East Asian immigrants in the United States have achieved socio-economic mobility through hard work and resilience. It is predominantly used to excuse microaggressions, under the reasoning that the stereotypes play off seemingly positive attributes, and to contest the existence of systemic racism in America. Though looking into China's relations with the United States, Taiwan, and India give hope to the incorporation of Multiple Worlds in the Westphalian World, it isn't clear if this is merely an example or a new standard. Each nation and culture has its own unique social, political, economic, and cultural histories, and using East Asia as an example to

follow could be detrimental, as it becomes easy to generalise these complexities and pit marginalised cultures against each other.

My mother always likes to tell me, “No fish live in clear waters.” Fish rely on a number of nutrients, many from other organisms in their ecosystem, to survive. They cannot live alone. They cannot live if the water is too pure; my mother is trying to tell me that I cannot impose my ideals on others nor on the world. Wouldn’t we all love to live in a global community clean of inequity? Ling’s book brings tremendous insight into the possibility for a better, balanced future for IR, but her worldism remains largely conceptual and central to two mainstream powers, the United States and China. She is but one fish; more scholars from Multiple Worlds must join the conversation and nourish it with their expertise.

Bibliography

Ling, L. H. M. *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations.* London and New York: Routledge, 2014.