


RESEARCH ARTICLE

On being Chinese and being complexified: Chinese IR as a transcultural project

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Abstract

While proponents of Chinese IR pursue a national school based on the identification of Chineseness with the Chinese national culture, its critics find a limited value in the ‘Chinese’ school as a mere temporary site for non-Western agencies. In contrast, I argue a distinctive and enduring Chinese IR is possible if it adopts a non-national and non-essentialised transcultural conception of Chineseness. This transcultural Chinese IR is based first on the contested and transcultural conception of Chineseness and second on the ontology of Chineseness as immanent humanity. Chineseness has been a fiction of a privileged descent from antiquity, which various contestants claimed by redefining the meaning of Chineseness. The *shi* elites, in particular, developed Chineseness as an aspirational ethos that propelled it to transcend its cultural boundary by incorporating foreign influences and thereby rendered Chineseness transcultural. Also, drawing on the ontological turn and Roy Wagner’s work in anthropology, I show how Chineseness as immanent humanity transcends the category of culture, transforming the division of innate nature and constructed culture. The transcultural Chinese IR, with its own complexity and universal aspiration, uses its history and ontology to complexify both its tradition internally and other IR traditions externally, promoting the pluralisation of IR.

Keywords: Chinese IR; Chineseness; Culture; Ontology; Complexification

Introduction

Chinese culture occupies a crucial place in the debates around Chinese IR theory. On the one hand, many Chinese theorists consider their national culture a necessary resource for Chinese IR theory, which aspires to be both uniquely Chinese and universal. Many leading figures in the debates, most notably Qin Yaqing, have emphasised the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation as the site of innovations that are both uniquely Chinese and universal.¹ On the other hand, many critics of Chinese IR question its conception of Chinese culture. They charge Chinese IR theorists’ notion of culture with essentialism and exceptionalism.² A few sympathetic critics, such as Yih-Jye Hwang, suggest a mid-way defence of Chinese IR as strategic use of essentialised culture against the hegemonic Western IR. Yet even they remain sceptical about the

¹Yaqing Qin, ‘A multiverse of knowledge: Cultures and IR theories’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 11:4 (2018), pp. 415–34.

²Amitav Acharya, ‘From Heaven to Earth: “Cultural idealism” and “moral realism” as Chinese contributions to global International Relations’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 12:4 (2019), pp. 467–94; HunJoon Kim, ‘Will IR theory with Chinese characteristics be a powerful alternative?’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9:1 (2016), pp. 59–79; Yih-Jye Hwang, ‘Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations: A postcolonial perspective’, *Review of International Studies*, 47:3 (2021), pp. 311–30.

prospect of the distinctive *and* enduring Chinese IR based on its culture. The pursuit of the Chinese School of IR remains ‘not an end, but a means’ for the more inclusive post-Western IR.³

In contrast to both, I argue it is possible to develop a *transcultural* Chinese IR as an end in itself through a non-sceptical elicitation of the difference-generating potential of transcultural Chineseness as an alternative to the nationalised Chinese culture. Unlike the national conception of Chinese IR and its culture, the transcultural Chinese IR would base its project on the transcultural Chineseness as a non-national and non-essentialist reconfiguration of Chinese culture. It is a set of non-national heritages, shared by multiple societies, with its accompanying aspirational ethos. The adjective ‘transcultural’ means Chineseness transcends any static boundary of culture as its aspirational ethos compels its participants to explore and encounter foreign traditions. Transcultural Chineseness has preserved its coherence and continuity by reinventing and adapting its genealogical descent through the same foreign encounters. The Chinese IR based on this transcultural Chineseness will not be bound to a single nation or fixed cultural boundary.

Also, unlike the critics’ scepticism over developing a unique and enduring school of Chinese IR and their preference to integrate it into the encompassing pluralised IR, the transcultural Chinese IR rejects the very conception of a local Chinese IR school *vis-à-vis* an encompassing IR discipline. Its primary goal is not to pluralise IR discipline as a whole but to establish a new centre of IR project with its own universality, which non-sceptically embraces the difference *in and of* Chineseness as a permanent resource for mutual transformation of the Chinese and other IR projects. On the one hand, it will embrace the differences *in* Chineseness by tapping into its complex and open-ended tradition. On the other hand, it non-sceptically elicits the difference *of* transcultural Chineseness as a way to transform ontological premises of other IR traditions.

With its transcultural boundary and difference, the transcultural Chinese IR functions as a double project of internal and external complexification, which I define as the self-transformation through selective incorporation of foreign otherness. Internally, rather than functioning as a mid-way stop towards a more global and pluralised discipline, the transcultural Chinese IR would be an intellectual project with its own universal aspiration and complexity. Developing Chinese IR is not just about talking back to the Western IR but also about talking *inward* with the vast lineage of Chineseness. The latter has complexified itself through encountering other foreign traditions, and the transcultural Chinese IR continues that complexification. Externally, it will be a catalyst for complexifying the ontological premises of other IR traditions. By ontology, I mean, above all, the reality-generating power of the conceptual apparatuses of different peoples and traditions. The Chinese tradition possesses conceptual schemes that generate distinctive cultural *and* natural realities. This ontological difference can be used to transform ontologies of other traditions, such as the modern IR.

I develop the prospect of transcultural Chinese IR by examining the history and ontology of Chineseness. The meaning of Chineseness has been crucial for intellectual and political projects such as the current Chinese IR theory that have defined their significance in terms of their Chineseness.⁴ However, the issue of defining Chineseness has often been overlooked by both the proponents and critics of Chinese IR. Too often, Chineseness has been equated with the Chinese national culture. Proponents used it as a condition of possibility for the national school of Chinese IR, while critics viewed it as a source for its problematic essentialist tendencies. Consequently, the possibility of the non-national and non-essential Chineseness has rarely been examined.

I first conduct a conceptual history of Chineseness to reveal how its manifestation as a genealogical fiction and aspirational ethos led to its transcultural form. Indigenous words for Chineseness, such as *zhonghua*, *zhongguo*, and *zhongtu* functioned as a fictional marker of

³Hwang, ‘Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations’, pp. 328–9.

⁴Youngmin Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 218–31.

privileged descent from Chinese antiquity. Various historical actors have defined Chineseness in terms of culture, ethnic group, or other criteria to justify their claim of being Chinese. This contested history of Chineseness inhibited its easy identification with a nation or an essentialised culture. I investigate the complex history of contestation over Chineseness to recover its transcultural form. Second, I examine the ontological premises of Chineseness in contrast to the concept of culture to reconceptualise Chineseness as *immanent humanity*. The reconceptualisation shows that it cannot be grasped by the ontological matrix of the dichotomous conception of nature and culture. By drawing on the ontological turn in anthropology and Roy Wagner's reinvention of 'culture', I highlight the difference between the ontological premises of Chineseness and the Western conception of culture and how the ontology of Chineseness can transform the latter.

My argument and analysis have two significances for the debate on Chinese IR and the discussions on how to pluralise the IR discipline. First, the historical and ontological investigation of Chineseness would expand the theoretical and historical basis for the debate regarding the future of Chinese IR. Second, the transcultural Chinese IR as a double complexifications project would function as an ally to the diverse and sometimes conflicting proposals, such as the global, relational, post-Western, and pluriversal IR, which seek to pluralise IR.⁵ It is an ally because it supports many of their agendas while retaining a few disagreements. In particular, unlike their emphasis on exploring the multiplicity of worlds, ontologies, or knowledges, the transcultural Chinese IR focuses on continuing its finite yet complexifying lineage without prioritising exploring other multiple ontological traditions. Furthermore, it rejects the view of Chinese IR as a particular school *vis-à-vis* a universal field of IR as a whole. Rather, it regards the universality or particularity of an intellectual project as simply a result of different perspectival positions.

This article first reviews how the proponents and critics of Chinese IR have conceptualised Chineseness. Second, I examine the complex and contested history of Chineseness to broaden possible meanings of Chineseness. Third, I use Roy Wagner's concept of immanent humanity to show how the ontological difference of Chineseness transforms the concept of culture. Finally, I will show how transcultural Chineseness reconstructs Chinese IR as a project of double complexifications and clarify how it relates to the proposals for pluralising IR.

The problem of Chineseness in Chinese IR

Though there is no explicit debate on Chineseness, the main proponents of Chinese IR bases their intellectual distinctiveness on what they deem to be Chinese cultural heritages. While not all prominent Chinese IR theories utilise Chinese cultural resources, the latter has firmly become one of the foundational grounds for launching distinctive Chinese IR theories.⁶ In his summary of Chinese IR theory, Qin Yaqing suggested the Confucian concept of *Tianxia* as one major resource for Chinese IR theories.⁷ Yan Xuetong's moral realism also has drawn extensively from the pre-Qin texts whose Chineseness he does not question.⁸ Zhao Tingyang's *Tianxia* system also self-consciously draws the distinction between the Western world order and the *Tianxia*

⁵Acharya, 'From Heaven to Earth'; Astrid H. M. Nordin et al., 'Towards global relational theorizing: A dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relationalism', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 570–81; Pinar Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR?', *International Theory*, 8:3 (2016), pp. 492–501; David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR', *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 293–311.

⁶The notable exceptions are: Shipping Tang, *The Social Evolution of International Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Chun Zhang et al., 'Hainabaichuan baorong gongshengde "shanghai xuepai" [Inclusive and symbiotic "Shanghai school"]', *Global Review*, 6 (2014), pp. 1–17; Wei Song, *Weizhi Xianshizhuyi [Positional Realism]* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2021).

⁷Yaqing Qin, 'Why is there no Chinese International Relations theory?', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 7:3 (2007), pp. 313–40.

⁸Xuetong Yan, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Xuetong Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought: Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

system, which is a modern reconstruction of the ancient Zhou order.⁹ Chinese IR theorists are leveraging their culture as the mark of Chineseness to ‘maximize their distinctiveness internationally’.¹⁰

Qin Yaqing’s relational theory is most explicit in its reliance on culture as the basis of the distinctive Chinese IR theory. He argues that the cultural inheritance of all theorists, not just Chinese theorists, binds their epistemic horizons. A cultural tradition is embodied by a bounded cultural community of practices where ‘shared background knowledge embeds people and orients their thinking and doing’.¹¹ Qin is not explicit about the exact boundary of the Chinese cultural community. However, the latter is implicitly coterminous with the boundary of the Chinese nation. The Chinese nation simultaneously becomes the cultural community that owns Chinese culture. In sum, He equates Chineseness of Chinese IR with the culture of the Chinese nation.

Chineseness in Chinese IR theories has often manifested in some essential attributes of its national culture. Qin’s relational theory, Zhao’s *Tianxia*, and Yan’s moral realism all mobilise what they take as unique features of the Chinese national culture. Qin’s relational theory is most articulate in expressing Chineseness in the essentialist mode. For example, while they qualify the essentialising tendency of their argument, Qin and his co-author, Astrid H. M. Nordin, still contrast, in a recent article, the priority of relationality in Chinese or Confucian communities with that of individualist rationality in Western communities.¹² While other works in the Chinese language publications use different concepts, such as oneness, propensity, and ritual, from those in the aforementioned works, many of them, too, adopt essentialist expressions of Chineseness such as ‘traditional culture’ (*chuantongwenhua*).¹³

Many critics have questioned this essentialist and national rendering of Chineseness though they did not consciously problematise the concept of Chineseness *per se*, which should be distinguished from the Chinese nation or culture.¹⁴ Their criticism is summed up by the problems of internal variation and external overlap. As critics of cultural essentialism noted, the problems of internal variation and external overlap make it unsustainable to conceive of a culture as exclusive attributes of a given community. Due to internal variation, there will always be a member of the community that deviates from the standard cultural norms, while external overlap implies the existence of an outsider that possesses the supposed cultural attributes of the bounded community. These problems disrupt any neat identification between the cultural attributes and the boundary of a community, such as the Chinese nation.¹⁵

Consequently, critics of Chinese IR theories pointed out countless examples of external overlap and internal variation. For internal variation, Amitav Acharya points out the need to reduce the reliance on the pre-Qin political thoughts so that diverse elements, such as Buddhist thinking,

⁹Tingyang Zhao, ‘Rethinking empire from a Chinese concept “All-under-Heaven” (Tian-xia)’, *Social Identities*, 12:1 (2006), pp. 29–41.

¹⁰Peter M. Kristensen and Ras T. Nielsen, ‘Constructing a Chinese International Relations theory: A sociological approach to intellectual innovation’, *International Political Sociology*, 7:1 (2013), p. 27.

¹¹Qin, ‘A multiverse of knowledge’.

¹²Yaqing Qin and Astrid H. M. Nordin, ‘Relationality and rationality in Confucian and Western traditions of thought’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 601–14.

¹³For example, see Kangling Chen and Zhongqi Pan, ‘Zhonghua jingdian guojiguanxi gainian yanjiu [A Research on classical Chinese concepts of International Relations]’, *World Economics and Politics*, 8 (2019), pp. 20–38; Ye Tian, ‘Lizhi yuguo-jiajianshe [Rule of rituals and state building]’, *World Economics and Politics*, 9 (2020), pp. 45–71.

¹⁴Kim, ‘Will IR theory with Chinese characteristics be a powerful alternative?’; Feng Zhang, ‘The Tsinghua approach and the inception of Chinese theories of international relations’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 5:1 (2012), pp. 73–102; Astrid H. M. Nordin and Graham M. Smith, ‘Relating self and other in Chinese and Western thought’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 636–53; Hwang, ‘Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations’; Duowen Cheng, ‘Quanguojuoguanxixue shiyezhongdi “Zhongguoxuepai” goujian [The implication of global international relations for building Chinese School of International Relations theory]’, *International Review*, 2 (2021), pp. 1–30.

¹⁵Alan Patten, ‘Rethinking culture: The social lineage account’, *The American Political Science Review*, 105:4 (2011), p. 736.

can be included.¹⁶ Even the extension of Chineseness to include non-Confucian traditions such as Buddhism and Daoism are insufficient to address further internal variations within the Chinese cultural community.¹⁷ For example, one critic pointed out the perspective of non-Han groups, like Tibetans, is absent in Chinese IR theories.¹⁸ Yih-Jye Hwang also traces the distinctive character of International Relations studies in Taiwan, which shared history, culture, and a sense of Chinese identity with those of the PRC.¹⁹ The accounts of external overlap are similarly extensive. Many non-Chinese thinkers have utilised the same ‘Chinese’ ideas to propose alternative international theories. One of the most prominent examples is the interwar Japanese pan-Asianist thought that employed the same Confucian distinction of kingly way (*wangdao*) and hegemony (*padao*) as that used by Yan Xuetong.²⁰ As Yih-Jye Hwang points out, many aspects of Qin’s relational theory also overlap with Western relational theories.²¹

These lists of internal variation and external overlap are endless. Consequently, though they welcome Chinese IR as a force for pluralising the IR discipline, the critics seemed to have found little value in establishing an enduring and distinct school of Chinese IR. Whatever Chinese IR theories are proposed, the name as the marker of their Chineseness seems bound to fail. There will be nothing uniquely Chinese about them, nor will there be stable cultural attributes that can encompass disparate elements associated with the name. Yih-Jye Hwang’s attempt to reconceive the Chinese School as a strategic use of essentialism for decolonising purposes is a rare exception that puts positive values on a distinctive Chinese school. However, even in Hwang’s reconstruction, there is not much room for Chineseness as a marker of a distinctive *and* enduring intellectual project. Chineseness mostly plays a role of a temporary site for decolonising agencies. It is a mere means and part of the larger pursuit of post-Western IR.²²

However, these critical appraisals gave limited value to the Chinese school without investigating the theoretical and historical meanings of the very identity marker, Chineseness. Criticism of essentialism made it difficult to reduce Chineseness to the shared cultural attributes of the Chinese nation, but that is not the same as questioning the connection between the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, and Chineseness. Even without essentialising Chineseness, it is possible to attach it to the Chinese nation. One can simply regard all cultural practices done by the Chinese nation as Chineseness. It is one thing to essentialise Chineseness. To construct Chineseness as a name or identity marker is quite another.

Problematising Chineseness in Chinese IR is crucial in reorienting the project because it opens a way to envision a non-national and non-essentialised Chinese IR that is still distinctively and coherently Chinese. If we can imagine a Chinese IR that can avoid nationalistic essentialism and still possess the agency to determine its path and positively affect other IR traditions, there is no need to turn it into a strategic mid-way stop in the process of developing post-Western IR. It can simply exist as Chinese IR and still pluralise the IR discipline with its distinctive Chineseness. By reorienting Chineseness, it is possible to non-sceptically embrace the differences produced by the non-national Chinese IR and pluralise the IR discipline. The history of Chineseness indeed shows that there have been various non-national ways to define Chineseness. Moreover, the meaning of Chineseness has been open to contestation by various participants.²³

¹⁶Acharya, ‘From Heaven to Earth’, pp. 484–5.

¹⁷Yiwei Wang and Xueqing Han, ‘Why is there no Chinese IR theory? A cultural perspective’, in Yongjin Zhang and Teng-Chi Chang (eds), *Constructing a Chinese School of International Relations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2016), pp. 53–67.

¹⁸Thøger Kersting Christensen, ‘Joining the club’, *Asia in Focus*, 7 (2019), available at: {<https://tidsskrift.dk/asiainfocus/article/view/114644>} accessed 12 March 2021.

¹⁹Yih-Jye Hwang, ‘The births of International Studies in China’, *Review of International Studies*, 47:5 (2021), pp. 580–600.

²⁰Shogo Suzuki, ‘Imagining “Asia”: Japan and “Asian” international society in modern history’, in Barry Buzan and and Yongjin Zhang (eds), *Contesting International Society in East Asia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 63–6.

²¹Hwang, ‘Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations’, p. 319.

²²Ibid., pp. 328–9.

²³Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, pp. 225–31.

In the next section, I investigate the contested conceptual history of Chineseness and recover, from this history, transcultural Chineseness as a new basis for reorienting Chinese IR. I first outline the historical contestation over the meaning of Chineseness and its resulting character as a genealogical fiction. I then provide a historical account of Chineseness as a transcultural ethos that possessed a special moral appeal.

Contested Chineseness and its transcultural ethos

Contested Chineseness and its genealogical fiction

In its history, Chineseness was expressed in various terms, such as *zhonghua*, *zhongguo*, and *zhongtu*, which functioned as a marker of centrality that distinguished the superior status of its members from the others. As a result, various groups claimed its name and contested its meaning. There have been three prominent approaches to defining Chineseness. First is the one closest to the approach taken by modern Chinese IR theorists. This approach ascribes Chineseness to the exclusive group defined by kinship or ethnic affinity. For example, a passage from *Zuo Commentary on Spring and Autumn* says, regarding a foreign power Chu, ‘Those not of the same kith and kin, their hearts and minds must be different.’²⁴ This Chu is not Chinese because it does not share kinship relations with the Chinese princes. The modern identification of Chineseness with the Chinese nation is another instance of defining Chineseness as an exclusive ethnic identity.

Second, Chineseness could also mean the centrality of China as a geographic place. The imaginary of China as the centre of the world is as old as the ethnic distinction of China. Already in the early Chinese classics, such as *Book of Documents (Shangshu)*, the Chinese state is portrayed as the geographic centre of the world.²⁵ In this geographical imagination, the centrality of the Chinese land naturally led to superior morality and political rule. For example, the founder of the Ming dynasty asserted its claim of universal legitimacy because he occupied China as a region.²⁶

Third, Chineseness could be conceived as a set of specific cultural attributes. The boundary of Chineseness is delimited by whether an entity adopts specific cultural traits. Chinese IR theorists partially follow this cultural approach, but they tend to think that Chinese cultural traits originally stem from the Chinese nation. The specific cultural attributes could be an adoption of Confucian teachings or a set of rites among others. The cultural demarcation could even overcome the entrenched ethnic definition of Chineseness. In the eighteenth century, a group of Korean literati began to see the Qing as a legitimate successor of Chineseness despite their barbaric ethnic origin because they adopted Chinese institutions and rites.²⁷

The varying definitions show the contested nature of Chineseness. As the attribution of Chineseness offered moral legitimacy, many political groups contested the meaning of Chineseness and devised various means to assert their respective Chineseness. While the three main criteria sometimes coincided, as in the Ming dynasty, they also often diverged. For example, the ethnic and geographical dimensions of Chineseness sharply diverged for one-third of its imperial history as the foreign conquest dynasties ruled the Chinese land.²⁸ When it diverged, the political nature of the demarcation of Chineseness became immediately salient.²⁹

²⁴Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, *Zuo Tradition* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2016), p. 747. The citation of the source without the translation indicates my translation.

²⁵James Legge’s translation is available at: {<https://ctext.org/shang-shu/tribute-of-yu>} accessed 9 November 2021.

²⁶Peter Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 14.

²⁷T’aeyong Hö, ‘17,18segi pukpöllönüi ch’uiwa puk’angnonüi taedu [Unfolding of “plan for northern subjugation” in 17–18th century, and emergence of “Bukhak” thoughts]’, *Journal of Eastern Studies*, 69 (2010), pp. 373–418.

²⁸Söngkyu I, ‘Chunghwasasangwa minjokchuüi [Sinocentrism and nationalism]’, *Philosophy*, 37 (1992), p. 33.

²⁹Lydia Liu, *The Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 81–96.

The contested Chineseness makes it difficult to ascribe it to exclusive referents.³⁰ Most of all, it cannot be easily reducible to the character of an ethnic group like the Chinese nation. The cultural definition of Chineseness is also unlikely to escape contestation. As the criticism of Chinese IR's essentialist tendency amply illustrated, the problems of internal variation and external overlap will challenge any definition of Chineseness as a set of cultural attributes. For this reason, though they do not always consciously problematise the conceptual history of Chineseness, the debates regarding essentialism in Chinese IR are already a part of this enduring contestation over what constitutes Chineseness.

The variable meaning of Chineseness implies its extensive historical presence was not the result of some fixed essence of Chineseness. The very contestability drew participants to contest its meaning and obtain the status of Chineseness. Its contested history has only increased its allure as a marker of superior identity. In other words, Chineseness persisted not as essences but as a valuable marker for which the contestants competed with each other using various shared means for claiming Chineseness. What united the various participants and elements under the rubric of Chineseness was the very process of contestation.

Youngmin Kim proposed a conception of Chineseness that reflects the constitution of Chineseness through its continuing contestability. Using Alan Patten's social lineage account of culture, he reformulates Chineseness as an identity marker for a culture defined not as a set of attributes but as a shared lineage consciously constructed through contestation. In contrast to the essentialist definition of Chineseness, Kim proposes that the cultural boundary of Chineseness is constituted not by its content but by the shared formative conditions that socialise people into the lineage of Chineseness. The shared process of and semiotic means for contesting Chineseness were these formative conditions.³¹ Contestants used various semiotic resources to signify their Chineseness, and this process of contestation socialised them into its lineage. The semiotic resources could be one of the three major elements of Chineseness. In particular, the mastery of the Chinese textual tradition was critical for claiming one's Chineseness.³²

This identity claim often took the form of fabricating a fiction of the descent from Chinese antiquity.³³ For example, Chosŏn Koreans generated elaborate compilations of envoy poetry exchange to prove their independent descent from Chinese antiquity.³⁴ Chineseness was a genealogical fiction that the contestants created to claim their identity as the descendants of Chineseness. This contestation over the genealogical fiction was the shared formative condition that gave a coherent and enduring boundary to the amalgam of diverse contestants and semiotic resources under the rubric of Chineseness. Chinese IR theorists, too, are participating in the long tradition of contestation over Chineseness, creating the fiction of the Chinese nation and its IR theorists as the legitimate successor of Chineseness.

Thus, the stake of Chinese IR is not just about launching a decolonial resistance against Western IR. It is also about determining the legitimate successor of Chineseness. If, as suggested by some Chinese IR theorists, Chineseness becomes identified with the Chinese national culture, it will make the fiction of the idealised genealogy serve the goal of elevating the status of the Chinese nation. The nationalised Chinese IR would mean a reduction of the field of the genealogical fiction into a national tradition. Still, it is a fiction that is and has been open to appropriation by multiple societies.

³⁰Ibid., p. 81.

³¹Patten, 'Rethinking culture'; Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, pp. 6–9.

³²Christopher Leigh Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).

³³Youngmin Kim, 'Chosŏnjunghwajuüüi chaegŏmt'o [Reconsidering Sinocentrism in late Chosŏn Korea]', *The Journal of Korean History*, 162 (2013), p. 224.

³⁴Sixiang Wang, 'Co-Constructing Empire in Early Chosŏn Korea: Knowledge Production and the Culture of Diplomacy, 1392–1592' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, New York, NY, 2015), pp. 284–341.

The shi and Chineseness as an aspirational ethos

Despite the strong tendency to nationalise the meaning of Chineseness, the history of the contested Chineseness illustrates its future in Chinese IR still remains open-ended. In fact, a particular manifestation of Chineseness constantly challenges any temporary identification of Chineseness with a fixed group. It is the characteristic of Chineseness as an aspirational *ethos*. As a fictional marker, Chineseness was actualised through various concrete manifestations. One of them was its manifestation as an aspirational ethos. The contestants of Chineseness often relied upon fashioning an ethos of aspiring to a higher moral ideal as a sign of their Chineseness. This way of actualising Chineseness imbued it with a peculiar anti-identity tendency.

Compared to the three familiar forms, Chineseness as an aspirational ethos has a distinctively contingent character because it is entirely dependent upon an individual's continuing efforts to cultivate a specific ethos. As it does not depend on any other stable external reference such as ethnicity or a particular set of rites, one's Chineseness ceases to be valid the moment one stops striving towards the aspirational ethos. Though this contingent and aspirational character renders one's Chinese identity unstable, it could also imbue it with a strong moral appeal. When the fiction of Chineseness must be actualised through one's perpetual struggle to become a better moral being, it is more likely to elicit the recognition of its moral character regardless of the particular contexts.

Chineseness as an aspirational ethos had evolved alongside the Chinese moral elite class, *shi*. The *shi* defined themselves in terms of their commitment to the aspirational moral ethos they imagined receiving from antiquity. For example, Mencius suggested that upholding the ideal ethos of antiquity is the product of the *shi* that needs to be circulated in society. He defined the *shi*'s social function as their aspirational efforts to maintain the idealised ethos.³⁵ He also said that the job of the *shi* is simply 'exalting their aspiration'.³⁶ These passages show the *shi* defined themselves to be the flagbearer of Chineseness as the aspirational ethos transmitted from antiquity. One of the most prominent examples of Chineseness as the *shi* aspirational ethos was the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty. The Song *shi* articulated a vision of Chineseness as the aspirational ethos cultivated through their learning programme, which was independent of the state's power. They even reinvented the genealogical fiction of Chineseness so that they could separate Chineseness as an aspirational ethos from the institutions of the state.³⁷

The separate moral authority of the *shi* aspirational ethos *vis-à-vis* state power made them a powerful contestant over the meaning of Chineseness. Its moral appeal also enabled them to regulate the process of contestation by shaping the formative texts such as Confucian classics that all contestants had to use. Consequently, Chineseness was further detached from any stable referent. The *shi* tendency to seek constantly better moral practice rendered the Chineseness of any referent, whether a person or a thing, easily contestable. Without a stable referent, Chineseness had to be constantly reinvented to suit the requirements of different historical contexts.

The transcultural Chineseness

One consequence of this aspirational character of Chineseness was that its boundary became particularly dynamic and responsive to foreign traditions. The aspirational ethos compels the *shi* and other contestants of Chineseness to seek a higher moral achievement constantly. Consequently, Chineseness cannot stay static and has to be reinvented by these aspirational contestants. In other words, it remains a perpetually incomplete ideal. One prominent way to reinvent

³⁵P. J. Ivanhoe and Irene Bloom, *Mencius* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 63–4.

³⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 151–2, translation by the author.

³⁷Thomas A. Wilson, *Genealogy of the Way* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 82–92, 104–11.

Chineseness has been the incorporation of foreign influences as the new formative conditions. The contestants reconstituted the formative conditions of Chineseness by bringing in heterodox foreign influences.

This method of reinventing has rendered Chineseness transcultural. By the word transcultural, I do not mean the absence of the cultural boundary but the strong tendency to shift its boundary. The boundary of Chineseness as a genealogical fiction is constituted by the formative conditions that control its contestation process. When actors bring in foreign influence, they transform the boundary of Chineseness because they incorporate the foreign influence into its formative conditions. For example, many early modern *shi* actively appropriated the Western geographical and astronomical knowledge and reinvented dominant cosmological conventions of Chineseness, which constituted basic formative conditions for the *shi*'s intellectual upbringing. As its formative conditions incorporated 'Western Learning' (*xixue*), the boundary of Chineseness now included newcomers such as the Jesuits astronomers and cartographers.³⁸ The periodic incorporation of foreign formative influence made the boundary of Chineseness dynamic and transcultural.

The past participants of the Chinese tradition have indeed often promoted these transcultural practices of Chineseness. In the Late Imperial period of Ming and Qing, examples of the transcultural practices abounded. The *shi*'s appropriation of Western geography and astronomy was one such example. Also, the Qing historians have pointed out the coexistence of various ethnic traditions, including that of the Manchu court.³⁹ One example of the coexistence is the Qianlong emperor's poem on the painting *One or Two*. The emperor asserts, 'Being Confucian and Mohist both possible/What do I worry or think.'⁴⁰ According to Youngmin Kim, Qianlong self-consciously adopted a provisional stance towards diverse cultural formative conditions represented by his reference to Confucian and Mohist traditions.⁴¹ There was no single set of formative conditions that defined the boundary of Chineseness. Qianlong's fiction of Chineseness included any cultural regimes that could help him impose imperial unity over his multiethnic subjects.

The modern habit of identifying Chineseness with the Chinese nation itself results from transcultural practice. As Lydia Liu illustrated, the English word 'China' as a name for the Chinese nation was invented by the Western colonial and the Chinese nationalist discourse, which transformed the formative conditions of Chineseness. The colonial discourse imposed the English word China upon the subjects of the Qing. The Chinese nationalist subsequently picked up this foreign word and reinvented the meaning of the indigenous word, *zhongguo*, as a nation and as the translation of the foreign word China.⁴² The invention of China/*zhongguo* as a nation also entailed incorporating Western institutions of nation building into the formative conditions of Chineseness.⁴³ This transition disrupted the meaning of Chineseness as the demarcation for the broader regional sociocultural elites while inventing a new Chinese nation that now includes non-elites.⁴⁴

The transcultural transformations of Chineseness, however, did not mean its participants could willfully change the boundary of Chineseness. They were always bound by the pre-existing formative conditions of Chineseness even when trying to reconstitute them. The message of transcultural Chineseness had to be conveyed in the existing conventions of Chineseness, in

³⁸Chong'tae Im, *17, 18segi Chungguk kwa Chosönüi Sögu Chirihak Ihae* [The Korean and Chinese Understanding of the Western Geography in the 17th and 18th Centuries] (P'aju: Ch'angbi, 2012).

³⁹Pamela Crossley, 'The rulerships of China', *American Historical Review*, 97:5 (1992), pp. 1468–83.

⁴⁰Translation by Kim, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, p. 205.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 201–10.

⁴²Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, pp. 75–81.

⁴³Hye-Gyung Yi, 'Konghwajuüüi shiminjök tögüi kwanjomesö pon yanggyech'ouüi 'kongdök [An examination of Liang Qichao's "public virtue" in relation to the civic virtue of Republicanism]', *Journal of Philosophical Ideas*, 46 (2012), pp. 95–128.

⁴⁴Qiang Li, 'Nationalism or republican patriotism? Rethinking nationalistic ideas of the late Qing reformers', in Chun-hyök Kwak and Köichirö Matsuda (eds), *Patriotism in East Asia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), pp. 49–64.

particular its textual tradition. Thus, the Manchu rulers mobilised the various classical resources to justify the inclusion of the Manchu tradition within the boundary of Chineseness.⁴⁵ The Qianlong poem, too, followed the style of classical Chinese poetry with various intertextual references.⁴⁶

The transcultural history of Chineseness shows double aspects of Chineseness as a fictional genealogy that might seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, we have a remarkably capacious ability of Chineseness to absorb foreign traditions within its coherent lineage. On the other hand, the same sinicisation process was simultaneously a counter-sinicisation process through which the received conventions were transformed and reinvented by their encounter with the foreign traditions. For example, the Manchu rulers have inserted a new genealogy of the virtuous foreign Manchu kings into the received genealogy of Confucian sage kings. The invention of Confucian Manchu kings conversely created Manchuness of Chineseness.⁴⁷

To borrow terms from Roy Wagner's dialectical framework, Chineseness was counterinvented through the incorporation of foreign formative influences.⁴⁸ Wagner explains cultural changes in terms of inventive deployment of existing conventions. Conventions are common social matrices such as the classical texts and metaphysical concepts that hold a human collectivity together. The foreign agents induce a flow of cultural invention by using the Chinese conventions in an unexpected manner, and this flow counterinvents the conventions of Chineseness themselves. This dialectical process was both the process of the assimilation of the foreign agents into the Chinese convention through their invention and the process of the transformation of Chineseness through counterinvention. In other words, sinicisation was simultaneously 'barbarisation' of Chineseness. As long as it was possible to incorporate the foreign formative influences in a way that does not contradict the fiction of the everlasting descent of Chinese antiquity, both the fiction of Chinese antiquity and the change in its actual lineage of conventions could be achieved.

The dialectical process of invention and counterinvention means the distinction between Chinese and foreign depends on the specific context of contestation. Each context of contestation begins with different accepted Chinese conventions. For example, the Neo-Confucian concepts of nature (*xing*) and principle (*li*) have been entrenched conventions of intellectual discourse since the Song period. However, they were a result of the past invention and counterinvention through which the Song literati deployed, with the help of the foreign Buddhist tradition, the received classical text to construct an unprecedented metaphysics based on nature and principle.⁴⁹ Before this invention, the pair *xing/li* was not a part of Chinese conventions. The invention through partial incorporation of the Buddhist tradition transformed the pre-existing Chinese conventions. Many current Chinese conventions are traces left from past inventions through foreign encounters.

This dialectic of counterinvention and invention must give some pause to the common practice of conceiving Chineseness as a distinctive 'culture' or a 'civilisation'. If every foreign culture can be assimilated into the Chinese tradition, then Chineseness is not really one culture among many. Nor is it a common practice of humankind as the Chinese were fully aware of the different customs of foreign peoples. Rather, it was akin to universal knowledge of the innate moral order

⁴⁵In-Ju Song, 'Ongjŏngjeui sasangt'ujaeng [The ideological struggle of the Yongzheng emperor]', *Humanities*, 77 (2020), pp. 123–59.

⁴⁶Kristina Kleutghen, 'One or two, repictured', *Archives of Asian Art*, 62 (2012), pp. 25–46.

⁴⁷Liu, *The Clash of Empires*, pp. 81–96.

⁴⁸Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 87–94. Unlike Qin's zhongyong and Ling's Daoist dialectics, Wagners's dialectical approach focuses on the interaction between convention and invention within a society not that between the self and other. L. H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 9–23; Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 152–94.

⁴⁹Stephen Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 46–9.

of the cosmos, which includes humanity, as modern physics is the study of the universal nature. Every moral agent, including the Chinese and foreigners, should and will eventually follow this innate moral order. Thus, Chineseness does not fit into the usual division of human artificial culture and the innate universal nature. In particular, it was not one of plural human cultural artifices constructed upon the singular innate nature. It was not a culture but the universal innate moral conventions that descended from antiquity and provided context for the inventive encounter with foreign influences. Thus, Chineseness transcends not only a fixed cultural boundary but also the category of culture itself. To elucidate this trans-‘cultural’ character of Chineseness, I draw on the ontological turn in anthropology and, in particular, Roy Wagner’s foray into the dialectic of conventions and inventions in human creativity.

Chineseness as immanent humanity: Transcending ‘culture’

For the last two decades, anthropology has experienced an intense debate on the ‘ontological turn’.⁵⁰ The proponents of the turn developed a way to harness ontological differences between the native and the anthropologist to generate conceptual innovations in anthropology.⁵¹ At the risk of simplification, one can say they have used ethnographic materials on indigenous peoples to transform the conceptual schemes of anthropology so that they can accommodate the different objective realities, not just subjective beliefs, generated by the indigenous conceptual apparatuses.⁵² Rather than referring to any universal theory of being, ontology simply refers to different conceptual schemes or perspectives, along with different realities generated by them, of indigenous people and anthropologists who occupy a specific relational position *vis-à-vis* each other.

The ontological differences of indigenous conceptual schemes *vis-à-vis* anthropologists can manifest in various ways: different cultures, cosmologies, and even just differing relational dispositions of the observer and observed. The non-sceptical ontological commitment of this approach to indigenous conceptual regimes is closely associated with the recent IR investigations of multiple ontologies and cosmologies, some of which are inspired by the ontological turn.⁵³ In particular, like cosmological investigations in Giorgio Shani and Navnita Chadha Behera’s works, the ontological turn aims to elucidate the indigenous realities not captured by Western conceptual schemes. One difference is that the ontological turn achieves this goal by transforming its own conceptual schemes rather than by faithfully recovering the indigenous world.⁵⁴

One pioneering example of such conceptual transformation through an ontological encounter was Roy Wagner’s reinvention of culture. I draw on his work to elucidate how Chineseness, too, can induce conceptual transformation in the existing IR. I rely on Wagner because his stark contrast between the Western concept of culture and what he calls ‘immanent humanity’ effectively disrupts the habitual identification of Chineseness and culture. As Shani points out, culture takes too much reality-generating power out of cosmologies or, more broadly, ontologies.⁵⁵ It would be better to give the concept of culture more expansive meaning, as in Wagner’s work explained below, or replace it with the notion of ontology with its reality-generating power.

Wagner suggests that the idea of culture must be reconceived as a particular manifestation of the dialectical process between conventions and inventions of human creativity. In other words,

⁵⁰Michael Carrithers et al., ‘Ontology is just another word for culture’, *Critique of Anthropology*, 30:2 (2010), pp. 152–200.

⁵¹Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*.

⁵²Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, ‘The politics of ontology: anthropological positions’, *Theorizing the Contemporary*, Fieldsight (13 January 2014), available at: {<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions>} accessed 25 June 2022.

⁵³Blaney and Tickner, ‘Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR’; Giorgio Shani and Navnita Chadha Behera, ‘Provincialising International Relations through a reading of Dharma’, *Review of International Studies*, first view (2021), pp. 1–20; Giorgio Shani, ‘IR as inter-cosmological relations?’, *International Politics Reviews*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 306–12.

⁵⁴Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, pp. 184–94.

⁵⁵Shani, ‘IR as inter-cosmological relations?’.

there is a more expansive Wagnerian reconstruction of ‘culture’, the dialectic between convention and invention, and the narrower and more familiar conception of culture as the human artifice imposed on nature. The former ‘culture’ has a more expansive power as it generates not only the cultural world but what the modern conceptual scheme conceives as the physical and natural realm. In this sense, one can say it also plays the role of cosmology, generating the basic divisions of the world.

This reinvention of ‘culture’ resulted from Wagner’s thoroughgoing engagement with various Melanesian ontologies, that is, ‘cultures’ in the extensive Wagnerian sense. He argues that the Western division of artificial culture and innate nature is a particular manifestation of the dialectic between convention and invention and does not sustain in many tribal societies that employ very different divisions of creativity than those supposed by the Western culture. According to Wagner, what much of the anthropological works of his day have done is to depict the various creativities of tribal societies as if they are human artifices like the Western culture that are imposed upon the innate nature that is common to all humanity. However, Wagner argues the ‘innate’ nature is just as much a result of the Western ontological practices as its culture. To assume its universality is to deny the creative power of the tribal peoples who invent their social *and* natural realities just as the Western ontology, too, creates its ‘innate’ nature.⁵⁶

Wagner avoids the pitfalls of the reductive imposition of the Western concept of culture by transforming the latter into a series of new concepts such as convention and invention that dodge the loaded division of culture/nature. In particular, his idea of ‘immanent humanity’ gives a succinct coherence to the creative world of tribal societies. The world of ‘immanent humanity’ is the world where every existent possesses a moral meaning. The ‘natural’ world of time, environment, and space, in this scheme, possesses moral meaning and humanity, hence the name of immanent humanity. Human consciousness and moral agency are a part of this larger universe of immanent humanity. The human soul in immanent humanity is not a locus of human moral agency that orders the world; on the contrary, it is a localised reflection of the morality of the entire immanent humanity.⁵⁷

Wagner distinguishes culture and immanent humanity in terms of their different deployment of the dialectic between convention and invention. According to him, all forms of human creativity sustain through the dialectical interdependence of collective conventions and differentiating inventions. The Western culture is one form of such dialectic. In this dialectic, conventions are akin to the formative conditions in the above discussion on the contested history of Chineseness. They provide common social matrices that hold a human collectivity together, whereas inventions differentiate particular and singular occurrences in the collectivity. For Wagner, conventions include language, social ideology, and cosmology, among others.⁵⁸ In Chineseness, the most prominent conventions would be the classical canons that have functioned as templates for endless variations throughout thousands of years of commentarial interpretations. The difference between culture and immanent humanity lies in the different distribution of deliberate action and innate properties of the world along the two poles of the dialectic. The world of culture places deliberate human control on the construction of conventional rules and orders while conceiving inventive human impulses and the particularistic non-human world to be innate and given. Consequently, they do not usually engage in deliberate inventive actions because that side of the dialectic belongs to the natural and non-rational realms of geniuses and contingencies.⁵⁹

In contrast, in tribal societies, the deliberate control is rather put on the differentiating inventions. Their default creative action is the inventive appropriations of the conventional context,

⁵⁶Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 35–70.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 86–102.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 50–9.

while the conventional contexts are innate templates for deliberate invention. While the people of culture live their lives by ordering and regulating, those of immanent humanity live theirs by their provocative inventions and improvisations.⁶⁰ Also, the division of artificial culture and innate nature that sustains the intelligibility of culture in Western societies is inverted in this context. There are, on the one hand, the ‘innate’ social conventions, which would have been named culture in the Western context, and, on the other, the ‘artificial’ inventions of natural capacities that come out of appropriating conventions and that are the main focus of conscious human control. As a result, their creative practice consists of the inventive flow of improvisations within the context of innate conventions and aims to cultivate natural capacities. In Wagner’s phrase, tribal peoples ‘do’ their nature while the social conventions for the inventive manipulation of nature are innate.⁶¹

As the ‘natural’ realms were the domain of conscious human control within this arrangement of conventions and inventions, what the Western ontology conceptualises as natural elements take on moral significance and agency. These differentiating and non-conventional natural powers are the very target of human moral actions. The moral significances are distributed everywhere and can be found just as well in the shapes of mountains as in human actions. Immanent humanity is the innate convention of the world that provides moral significance to the differentiating natural powers and thereby motivates humans to invent and improvise these powers.

In the world of immanent humanity, the flow of inventing natural powers is actualised by using magical symbols, which are distinct from the symbols of the world of culture. In the latter, a symbol usually refers to something other than itself. Human cultural symbols are means to represent and organise the contingencies of nature. In contrast, in the world of immanent humanity, a magical symbol does not stand for something other than itself. Magic is a symbol that stands for itself.⁶² Rather than being a stand-in for something else, it is there to cajole the natural powers of immanent humanity.⁶³ Through magic, the powers of ‘natural’ entities such as birds become the potential source for the extra-human empowerment of human moral agency.⁶⁴

Chineseness, or what has been called *zhonghua*, resembles immanent humanity more than culture. It has been widely recognised that the usual division of human culture and nature did not hold in the Chinese tradition of cosmology as the cosmos was just as moral and personal as the human.⁶⁵ Though the Chinese tradition, too, had its idea of the different realms of humans and non-humans, there was no ontological abyss that separated the two realms. For example, in its history, Chineseness (*hua*) was often defined against the barbarian (*yi*) in the binary formulation of *hua/yi*. The usual interpretation of the polarity follows the Western division of culture/nature and conceives *hua* and *yi* as antagonistic terms in the dichotomy of Chinese culture and barbaric nature. However, both *hua* and *yi* were often conceived in their history as products of natural forces. *Hua* was superior to *yi* not because of its culture but because of its more fortunate natural endowment.⁶⁶

Also, as immanent humanity, the conventions in China were the innate templates through which the participants of the tradition invented their moral cosmos.⁶⁷ Like in Wagner’s tribal societies, their conventions were never meant to be the rule or code for deliberate ordering but innate templates for invention and improvisation. For example, the crucial philosophical concept

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 59.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 66, 74, 86–9.

⁶²Ibid., p. 43.

⁶³Ibid., p. 63.

⁶⁴Ibid., pp. 89–90.

⁶⁵John B. Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1984).

⁶⁶Kyōngku I, *Chosŏn, Ch’ŏrhagūi wangguk* [*Chosŏn, the Philosophical Kingdom*] (Seoul: P’urūnyōksa, 2018), pp. 93–100.

⁶⁷Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, p. 88.

of *li* of the Sung Neo-Confucianism offered the conception of the innate convention that needs to be constantly improvised. Rather than being fixed principles, it meant innate coherences of the world that need to be discerned repeatedly according to particular situations.⁶⁸ It formed the background conventions of the moral cosmos whose particular manifestations must be constantly reinvented.

When the Chinese moral agents, such as the *shi*, engaged in the inventive appropriation of the received conventions, they, too, used symbolisation of the magical type. As discussed above, the *shi* elites developed Chineseness as an aspirational ethos, and the marker of their aspiration often had, though not explicitly, magical connotations. For example, the usual character for the *shi* cultural ideal, *wen*, had an implicit magical undertone. According to Shirakawa Shizuka, *wen* originally described a magical tattoo inscribed on the chest. He suggests this magical element is why the character obtained its sanctity in the moral thoughts of Confucius and the later *shi*.⁶⁹ To pursue *wen* was to activate the magical within the human agent to achieve higher moral qualities. As the original tattoo allowed humans to harness non-human powers, the *wen* of Confucius and the *shi* was a means to realise the extraordinary moral potential residing in human beings.⁷⁰

If Chineseness is the inventive unfolding of the innate conventions of immanent humanity rather than a culture, then the debate on Chineseness in Chinese IR will have to transcend even the category of culture. This is another meaning of the transcultural character of Chineseness. Not only does Chineseness continue to transcend its cultural boundary, but it also transcends the concept of culture itself. With the help of Wagner's reconstruction of culture, Chineseness can transform the concept of culture that is being used in the existing IR literature to categorise non-Western conceptions of politics like the Chinese one. In other words, along with other pluralising proposals for the IR, transcultural Chineseness facilitates the latter's ontological complexification.

Transcultural Chinese IR as double complexifications

The discussion of transcultural Chineseness depicts a different trajectory of Chinese IR that departs from both the national and essentialist vision of its proponents and from the critical reconstructions like Yih-Jye Hwang's. This section will illustrate how transcultural Chineseness reconfigures Chinese IR as a non-sceptical project of double complexifications different from both its nationalist proponents' vision and more critical reconstructions. Also, I will discuss its relationship with the proposals for pluralisation of IR, focusing on the problem of finitude and complexity.

The Chinese school of IR based on transcultural Chineseness is a double complexifications project as it promotes the complexification of both Chinese tradition internally and the other non-Chinese IR traditions externally. Above all, the contested history of Chineseness and its transcultural potential attest to the internal complexity of Chineseness from which Chinese IR can draw to propose new theories and redefine its Chinese identity. Contested meanings of Chineseness and continuing foreign encounters generated an extremely complex lineage of Chineseness. Reducing this vast field into a nationalist or essentialist conception of Chinese IR will be difficult. More and more non-Chinese nationals will contest its meaning as critics or proponents by appropriating more complex formative conditions of Chineseness that shape its socialisation.⁷¹

Transcultural Chineseness also implies there is no need to treat Chinese IR as a mid-way stop or a part for the more pluralised future of the overarching IR, as Yih-Jye Hwang's reconstruction

⁶⁸Angle, *Sagehood*, pp. 31–4.

⁶⁹Shizuka Shirakawa, *Kanji No Sekai 1* (Tōkyō: Heibonsha, 1976), pp. 29–31.

⁷⁰Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 97–101, 134–40.

⁷¹Duowen Cheng also opens up the boundary of Chinese IR to foreign participants. Cheng, 'Quanguoguojuiguanxixue shiyezhongdi "Zhongguoxuepai" goujian', p. 23.

or Acharya's global IR perspective seems to suggest.⁷² Given its longevity and transcultural dynamic, the internal complexity of Chinese tradition will be just as great as that of the modern IR. Also, the history of its transcultural tendency shows there is no need for Chinese IR to be demarcated by the received boundary of the Chinese tradition. As it has done in the past, the Chinese character of Chinese IR can continue to shift. Without losing its appeal as an identity marker, it can continue to transform its boundary by incorporating foreign formative influences. The theory of the state's moral character, like Yan Xuetong's humane authority, is already a symptom of such a shifting boundary. It is a new invention that incorporates the foreign discourse of sovereignty into the Chinese virtue ethical convention.⁷³ In other words, the current Chinese IR is further complexifying the lineage of Chineseness.

If the Chinese tradition contains unexplored complexity and possibilities for more complexification, making it a part or means for some universal vision of the generalised IR means truncating its untapped potential. Thus, the transcultural Chinese IR should, above all, be the process of internal complexification of its own tradition. It will revitalise the unexplored complexity of the past Chineseness and further complexify it through the transcultural incorporation of the outside formative influences. This is the potential difference *in* Chineseness mentioned in the introduction. It is the differences hidden in the existing lineage of Chineseness and the potential differences that can be created by bringing in foreign traditions.

Tapping into these differences in Chineseness is, of course, not an easy task. Above all, it requires an ability to access and inventively use obscure textual resources. However, textual mastery has been, after all, one of the main qualifications for proving one's Chineseness. Past contestants of Chineseness, too, had to compete regarding their competence in using its textual resources. Likewise, the participants in the transcultural Chinese IR will have to earn their membership in this intellectual project by proving their textual competence. Also, by anchoring it in the continuing textual tradition, the transcultural Chinese IR would obtain a coherent and enduring boundary while providing a sense of belonging and shared practice to its contestants without relying on any essential attributes.

Seen from the outside perspective, this difference *in* the transcultural Chinese IR yields its place to the difference *of* Chinese IR *vis-à-vis* other IR traditions. It is the difference intrinsic not to Chineseness, *per se*, but to its relation with other IR traditions. Various aspects of Chineseness can be invented as differences that might transform the conceptual matrices of other traditions. Due to the need to emphasise the contrast, this difference often takes essentialised form. What is often embraced or critiqued as the essential features of Chinese IR, such as relationality and *Tianxia*, are artifacts of this relational necessity.⁷⁴ They are differences of Chineseness that are 'invented' to make differences not in Chinese IR but in other IR traditions. Yih-Jye Hwang's strategic essentialism, too, is an attempt to clarify the contributions of these essentialised differences of Chinese IR in the context of their counterhegemonic relational position.

The process of producing differences *of* Chineseness is the other external half of the transcultural Chinese IR's double complexifications. They transform and complexify the theories and concepts of other IR traditions. The essentialised form they often take is the artifact of the relational necessity in producing external complexification. However, the danger of excess essentialism need not be resolved by turning it into a temporary and strategic measure. As long as the transcultural Chinese IR exists in parallel with other traditions, the differences of Chineseness will look like the essentialisation of a fluid tradition due to the sheer necessity of the external perspective of other traditions. The transcultural Chinese IR turns this essentialising tendency from a necessary evil to a permanent precipitating condition for theoretical innovations. However, what

⁷²Hwang, 'Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations'; Acharya, 'From Heaven to Earth'.

⁷³Yan, *Ancient Chinese Thought*, pp. 70–106.

⁷⁴Kristensen and Nielsen, 'Constructing a Chinese International Relations theory'.

is being essentialised is not Chineseness, per se, but the difference it makes in the other IR traditions. A better word might be objectification than essentialisation. Like the ontological turn in anthropology, it objectifies the differences of Chineseness to transform the conceptual scheme of other IR traditions. It will be non-sceptical elicitation of differences of Chineseness to complexify other IR traditions. The question is how effectively such elicitation of difference complexifies other traditions, not whether it represents the true character of Chineseness.

The efficacy of this external complexification is likely to correlate with how far one can go not in excavating some unique Chineseness but rather in doubting the entrenched categories of other traditions using the difference of Chineseness as a precipitating material.⁷⁵ This external complexification follows the ontological turn in that it passes through the material of Chineseness to complexify other IR traditions rather than attempts to represent Chineseness faithfully.⁷⁶ The reconceptualisation of Chineseness as immanent humanity was my attempt at the external complexification so that Chinese IR, with the help of Wagner's theory, can destabilise and complexify the category of 'culture'. Along with non-Western ontologies studied in the recent pluriversal IR, Chineseness as immanent humanity problematises the modern IR's infrastructural concepts such as culture and nature since it does not sustain the stark division of moral humanity and inanimate nature. Furthermore, Chineseness as immanent humanity disrupts culture as the perspective through which the modern IR tradition looks at Chineseness. Chinese IR is not a cultural variation of the universal IR discipline. From the perspective of Chineseness as immanent humanity, it is Chineseness that is universal. The whole IR discipline as a knowledge of interstate relations is but a part of this immanent humanity. This reversion questions the usual practice of positioning Chinese IR as a particular project *vis-à-vis* a singular encompassing IR discipline, be it global, post-Western, or pluriversal.

In sum, the transcultural Chinese IR is the non-national and non-sceptical complexifications within and without Chinese IR. Chih-yu Shih's theorisation of Confucian roles and relations illustrates how the transcultural Chinese IR would advance double complexifications by leveraging differences *in* and *of* Chineseness.⁷⁷ He draws from Confucian texts to propose, in place of the familiar social contract, interlocking roles and relations as an alternative means to escape from the anarchical state of nature. He invents a difference *of* Chineseness that is the transcendence of anarchy through reciprocal relations rather than social contract.

Simultaneously, his use of Chinese texts can encourage others to examine hidden differences *in* Chineseness. For example, while Shih's Confucian relationality presupposes a reciprocal exchange of duties, the Song Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi suggests the irrelevance of reciprocity in interstate relations. He says, 'although the smaller state might be disrespectful towards it, the bigger state's mind that loves the small with its benevolence cannot of its own stop loving it.'⁷⁸ Zhu Xi emphasises the necessary tendency of mind that unfolds regardless of the other's reciprocating acts.

This transcultural Chinese IR as double complexifications is an ally to the various proposals for pluralising the IR discipline. In other words, though it is not a proposal for a pluralisation of the overarching discipline of IR, it does advance many agendas suggested by such pluralising visions as global, relational, post-Western, and pluriversal IR, albeit with important differences. This is no place to delineate these experimental approaches properly. I use these names as short-cuts to clarify how my proposal relates to some of their main agendas. Following the global IR, the transcultural Chinese IR promotes the non-Western agencies.⁷⁹ However, it rejects the idea of both the unified field of global IR and the singular universe. As David Blaney and Arlene Tickner

⁷⁵Patrice Maniglier, 'Anthropological meditations', in Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon, and Peter Skafish (eds), *Comparative Metaphysics* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 109–32.

⁷⁶Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro, 'The politics of ontology'.

⁷⁷Chih-yu Shih, 'Role and relation in Confucian IR: Relating to strangers in the states of nature', *Review of International Studies*, first view (2021), pp. 1–20.

⁷⁸Zhu Xi, *Sishu Zhangju Jizhu [Collected Commentaries on Four Books]* (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 1983), p. 215.

⁷⁹Acharya, 'From Heaven to Earth'.

pointed out, the global IR assumes a singular universe that plural traditions of the integrated global IR describe.⁸⁰ The transcultural Chinese IR views the singular universe as a product of the particular Western ontology that differentiates human knowledge from innate nature. Chineseness as immanent humanity does not follow this division and cannot accept the notion of Chinese IR as one of many knowledges on the singular universe.

As for the (global) relational IR, the transcultural Chinese IR sympathises with their analytic and normative focus on relations against substance as long as the concept of relations can be leveraged to invent differences of Chineseness *vis-à-vis* other IR traditions.⁸¹ However, it does not give any priority to relations. As Morgan Brigg and others have pointed out, prioritising an alternative ontology of relations risks obscuring the complexity of other political traditions like Aboriginal Australia that combine aspects of both relational and mainstream ontologies.⁸² Likewise, the lineage of Chineseness encompasses innovative differences *in* Chineseness that go against the ontological and normative emphasis on relations. For example, whereas Qin contrasts Confucian relationality against Western individualism, William Theodore De Bary has traced a vibrant individualist strand in the Ming thought.⁸³

Also, similar to the relational approaches in Qin Yaqing's *zhongyong* dialectics and L. H. M. Ling's Daoist dialectics, the transcultural Chinese IR does problematise the difference between the self and the other. However, the transcultural Chinese IR does not aim to provide any general theoretical stance towards the problem of difference. In particular, it does not suggest that the other is immanent to the self as Qin and Ling do when they quote the saying 'you in me, and me in you'.⁸⁴ For the transcultural Chinese IR, a difference is rather something that has to be invented and transferred through meticulous works.⁸⁵ Either Chinese IR can engineer a difference out of itself and let other traditions incorporate it, or it can use other traditions to invent a difference to be incorporated within its lineage. The challenge is that the difference should be novel and efficacious enough within the tradition of its landing to allow that tradition to capture novel reality. Chih-yu Shih's theory is an example of exporting a difference of Chineseness to the Western IR theories as it illustrates a novel way to escape anarchy.

As to post-Western and pluriversal IR, the transcultural Chinese IR largely goes together with their goal of pluralising concepts and methods for understanding and realising a world and the plurality of worlds they create.⁸⁶ In particular, Pinar Bilgin's idea of double vision is structurally similar to double complexifications as both require simultaneous awareness of two distant contexts.⁸⁷ However, its goal ultimately departs from the two. Unlike post-Western IR, the primary goal of the transcultural Chinese IR is not 'rendering IR less Eurocentric'.⁸⁸ Rather, it is to reinvent the

⁸⁰Blaney and Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR'.

⁸¹Nordin et al., 'Towards global relational theorizing'; Qin and Nordin, 'Relationality and rationality in Confucian and Western traditions of thought'; Tamara A. Townsell et al., 'Differing about difference: Relational IR from around the world', *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:1 (2021), pp. 25–64; Amaya Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis: Relational methods for a pluriversal IR', *Review of International Studies*, first view (2021), pp. 1–16.

⁸²Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham, and Martin Weber, 'Relational indigenous systems: Aboriginal Australian political ordering and reconfiguring IR', *Review of International Studies*, first view (2021), pp. 1–19.

⁸³William Theodore De Bary, 'Individualism and humanitarianism in late Ming thought', in William Theodore De Bary (eds), *Self and Society in Ming Thought* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 145–248.

⁸⁴Ling, *The Dao of World Politics*, p. 21; Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, p. 171.

⁸⁵The invention of difference is inspired by the method of controlled equivocation of Viveiros De Castro. Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, pp. 184–94.

⁸⁶Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR?'; Blaney and Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR'; Milja Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations', *Review of International Studies*, first view (2021), p. 8; Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis'; Cheng, 'Quanguoguoji guanxi xue shi yezhongdi "Zhongguo xuepai" goujian'.

⁸⁷Pinar Bilgin, 'A case for re-thinking geo-cultural pluralism in International Relations', *International Politics Reviews*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 292–5.

⁸⁸Bilgin, 'How to remedy Eurocentrism in IR?', p. 492; Hwang, 'Reappraising the Chinese School of International Relations'.

lineage of transcultural Chineseness as the basis for another IR tradition. It is to build China-centric IR, whose Chineseness is transcultural and complexifying.

Likewise, the pluriversal IR's 'project of worlding multiple worlds' seems too ambitious as a goal.⁸⁹ The realisation of pluriverse might come about as the combined effects of the multiple IR traditions, but pursuing it actively seems to contradict the promise and practical necessity of the transcultural Chinese IR. Chinese IR already has too much complexity and too many ontologies within itself to allow free exploration of other worlds beyond its dynamic lineage. Peter Sloterdijk's notion of co-isolation might help elucidate my difference from the pluriversal IR that attempts to include diverse cosmologies.⁹⁰ In contrast to images of interconnection, co-isolation emphasises the bounded character of entities even though they are always in constant contact.⁹¹ Entities in the world are situated and resonant with each other.⁹² However, they are also bounded, and to experience others' worlds, something more than resonance is required. It requires complexifying the perceptual organs of one entity by incorporating an (invented) part of another's world within its bounded world. Thus, being connected and resonant with other ontologies is not enough. Nor is provincialising the West through the power of non-Western cosmologies, as in Shani and Behera's work, or through epistemic authority of other living traditions, as in Robbie Shilliam's.⁹³ The pre-existing Western conceptual schema has to be transformed through incorporating the difference from its ontological other.

In short, the transcultural Chinese IR is not a proposal for some encompassing pluralised IR that can house multiple ontologies, relations, or worlds. Its proposal is simply to build a new centre for another IR tradition. It will start from whatever the lineage of Chineseness has bestowed upon it and continue to complexify its tradition and other traditions that have come in contact with it. Given the inevitable finitude of human intellectual pursuit, it is not effective to pluralise the basic categories of scholarly projects indefinitely. Also, any enduring and contested tradition of political order such as Chineseness has an extensive internal complexity. Leveraging the complexity of any one of these traditions will exhaust the works of generations of a scholarly community. The problem of finitude and complexity is particularly acute for Chinese IR, given its vast textual heritage. Thus, the transcultural Chinese IR must centre its project on its internal complexity. At the same time, being exclusively dedicated to the Chinese tradition is also not reasonable in a world where no intellectual tradition can ignore its complex relations with other traditions. The transcultural Chinese IR reconciles this tension between finitude and complexity by envisioning its trajectory as a finite and doubly complexifying endeavour. By anchoring its project within the received tradition of Chineseness, it willfully admits its finitude and yet leverages the ontological complexity within and without its lineage.

Yet, admitting its finitude does not mean it is a particular school, such as the English School, of the universal and pluralised field of IR, waiting to become someday universal as more and more groups pick up its theories. Nor is it a proposal of a national school for advancing a kind of geocultural pluralism, which risks the dangers of essentialism, parochialism, and statism.⁹⁴ I hope the preceding discussion amply attested that the Chineseness of Chinese IR need not be exclusively associated with the Chinese nation. Rather, my proposal is to negate that very division of particular and universal. When one inhabits the world of Chineseness as immanent humanity, then the conceptual apparatuses such as *Tianxia* and Chineseness are the universal categories that provide an overarching account of the world. However, when viewed from the

⁸⁹Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR', p. 8.

⁹⁰Shani and Behera, 'Provincialising International Relations through a reading of Dharma'; Kurki, 'Relational revolution and relationality in IR'.

⁹¹Peter Sloterdijk, *Foams: Spheres Volume III* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), p. 237.

⁹²Querejazu, 'Cosmopraxis', p. 14.

⁹³Shani and Behera, 'Provincialising International Relations through a reading of Dharma'; Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anti-Colonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 1–12.

⁹⁴See the forum on geocultural pluralism in *International Politics Reviews*, 9:2 (2021).

outside, these concepts are particular symbolic operations by the participants of Chineseness.⁹⁵ Likewise, the transcultural Chinese IR is a universal intellectual project viewed from the inside and particular viewed from the outside. As Shani's inter-cosmological relations suggest, there are many worlds, 'each with their own understanding of universality and particularity.'⁹⁶ I would just add that the different senses of universality and particularity might have more to do with perspectival differences than with the contents of different cosmologies. Both Chinese IR and other IR traditions are universal within their own world and particular towards the others. There are just multiple traditions of IR learning that are both universal and particular, depending on one's perspectival position.

In search of lost Chineseness

Throughout its history, Chineseness has been a perennial attractor to those who aspired to a political ideal. Commenting upon the status of the Chinese people under the Qing rule, Pak Chiwön, the Korean *shi*, lamented, 'Of all the *shi* in the sub-celestial realm, who would ever forget "China"?'⁹⁷ His reference to China pointed neither to the past Ming dynasty nor to the presiding Qing power. In fact, his comment did not refer to any actual entity. It simply denoted the openness of China as a political ideal, and by not forgetting China, the *shi* members like Pak were able to imagine different political possibilities. China is this unforgettable attractor that is indeterminate and yet generative. It is the perpetual medium of political innovation that caused so many thinkers and leaders of this region to reinvent their own Chineseness according to the needs of their time. Chinese IR theorists are the latest participants who are drawn to this ideal, but their rendering of Chinese IR as a national school is but one possibility among many that are open to its future. As the previous history of Chineseness has been a dynamic field of political contestation, the trajectory of Chinese IR, too, is open to possibilities other than those proposed by the current proponents. In fact, the true challenge for Chinese IR might be whether it can choose a trajectory out of various possibilities that might again revitalise Chineseness as a powerful attractor of political and moral aspirations.

I argued in this article that Chinese IR as a transcultural project might be that trajectory. It is an intellectual project based on the rich and complex history of Chineseness and its distinctive ontology as immanent humanity. Cultivated properly, such a project can contribute greatly to the complexification of the other IR traditions while simultaneously complexifying its Chinese tradition. As Chineseness in history reconstituted itself through its transcultural encounters, the transcultural Chinese IR can complexify itself by reinventing its tradition through encounters with foreign traditions. At the same time, its distinct ontology as immanent humanity will make other IR traditions more aware of their ontological specificity and thereby lead them to complexifying ontological encounters.

The poet Arthur Sze once observed the magical power of the Clouds Hands position of Taichi that contains 'so many worlds' within its 'invisible Globe' while simultaneously being 'this world' of its own. This image, I believe, offers a condensed visual simile of the prospect of the transcultural Chinese IR as double complexifications. The transcultural Chinese IR would function as an 'invisible Globe' that contains the complexity of 'so many worlds' in itself while simultaneously being 'this world' of immanent humanity that complexifies other IR traditions. It is the magical 'Clouds Hands' that disrupt and complexify categories of the others while complexifying itself.⁹⁸ It is always a double move.

⁹⁵This argument is inspired by the ontological turn. Holbraad and Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn*, pp. 173–9.

⁹⁶Shani, 'IR as inter-cosmological relations?', p. 308.

⁹⁷Pak Chiwön, 'Hojirhuji [Afterword to Hojir]', available at: {http://db.itkc.or.kr/inLink?DCI=ITKC_BT_1370A_0050_010_0110_2003_001_XML} accessed 13 March 2021.

⁹⁸Arthur Sze, *Sight Lines* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019), p. 15.

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