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From *guo* to *tianxia*: linking two Daoist theories of International Relations

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Abstract

This study examines the international relations theory (IRT) of Daoism, one of Asia's long-standing traditions to have theorized international politics. Drawing upon Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, this study elucidates two Daoist IR theories. First, Laozi provides a state-focused *guo*-based IRT for conducting foreign policy and managing inter-state relations with emphasis on yielding and softness to overcome violence and domination. Second, Laozi offers a Utopian and globalist *tianxia*-centered IRT based on following the *Dao* whereby inter-state rivalry is dissolved in favor of peaceful planetary governance in harmony with the natural rhythms of the cosmos. Whereas previous scholarship often concentrates on only one of these two scenarios, I argue the two visions are tightly connected with the more pragmatic first theory envisioned as a stepping stone to obtaining the second. This link demonstrates how Daoism offers a sophisticated non-Western IRT with relevance to addressing planetary challenges today.

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This study examines the international relations theory (IRT) of Daoism, one of Asia's long-standing traditions to have theorized international politics (Ling, 2014). In doing so it contributes to a growing literature theorizing non-Western IRT (e.g. Acharya and Buzan, 2010, 2017; Acharya, 2011, 2014, 2021; Chen, 2011; Eun, 2018) and international politics from a Daoist perspective (e.g. Rand, 1979, 2017; Yan, 2011; Zhang, 2012, 2015; Ling, 2013, 2014, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Brincat and Ling, 2014; Lo, 2015; Rosyidin, 2019; Fech, 2020; Joshi, 2020, 2022; Chen and Chen, 2021).

Drawing upon the *Dao De Jing* (道德经) (DDJ) attributed to the Daoist sage Laozi (老子), this study elucidates two normative and prescriptive Daoist IR theories. First, Laozi offer us a state-focused *guo-* (国, 'the state') based IRT for managing inter-state relations with emphasis on yielding and softness to overcome violence and domination. Second, Laozi provides us with a Utopian and planetary/globalist *tianxia-* (天下, 'the whole world') centered IRT whereby the destructive international system of inter-state rivalry is dissolved in favor of peaceful planetary governance in harmony with the natural rhythms of the cosmos.[1] As I argue below, there is a sequential link between the two whereby the more pragmatic first theory is envisioned as a stepping stone to obtaining the optimal scenario expressed in the second vision.[2] Since previous studies have largely ignored this link between Laozi's two interconnected IR theories, this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of Daoist IRT.

1 Because the terms *guo* and *tianxia* as used in early Daoist texts from China's Warring States period (475–221 BC) do not correspond exactly to the contemporary Western terminology of 'the state' and 'the global', the original Chinese terms are used here. Nevertheless, from an IR perspective they are sufficiently analogous as *guo* referred to a kingdom under control of a single sovereign king or leader, whereas *tianxia* refers to the world or literally 'everything under the sky', meaning a territorial space in which there would generally be multiple *guo* (i.e. states) barring the unlikely emergence of a world-state. There are always some limitations when transposing ancient concepts and this study invariably imputes contemporary IR discourse when using the language of 'inter-national' and 'state-centered'. However, one should be mindful of the fluidity and non-rigidity of Daoist ontology which would undoubtedly be permissive of such pragmatic attempts to get at meaning across distant times and cultures when done so with humility and recognition of inevitable differences (see Ling, 2018a, 315). As DDJ chapter 1 famously reminds us, even the ancient names are not constant names.

2 While Waltz's (1954) three levels (i.e. individual leaders, states, and the international system) of IR analysis are questioned by Ling (2018a, 319), these terms are still useful in thinking sequentially about IR processes.

As Daoist IRT grants greater ontological and normative value to the ecological world and non-human species than most conventional IRT (e.g. Ling, 2014, 2018a; Nelson, 2020), this study contributes to the advance of non-Eurocentric theorizing of IR which involves both new ways of thinking and the revival of earlier IRT of non-Western origins (e.g. Acharya and Buzan, 2010, 231; Acharya, 2011; Eun, 2018). Knowledge of non-Western IRT helps the global scholarly community in 'moving IR away from its racist and colonial origins' (Acharya, 2021, 319) while displacing conventional Western IR's ontological privileging of humans and the state. As recent scholarship on IR in the Anthropocene has highlighted, current planetary crises including climate change and the sixth mass extinction compel us to question our 'starting assumptions' while incentivizing us to shift 'from a state-centered or "classical" approach to IR to a "planetary" one' (Rothe *et al.*, 2021, 2, 9). Daoist IR offers us such an alternative by departing from 'Westphalian' IR modes of thinking (Ling, 2014) that are generally limited by 'state-centrism … positivist and rationalist paradigms … nature-society dichotomy … and anthropocentrism' all of which tend to 'preclude [us] from building the necessary planetary picture of reality' (Pereira, 2021, 22).

Contrastingly, Daoist IRT offers us a highly developed non-Western alternative to narrower, anthropocentric, secular, egocentric, nationalistic, Eurocentric, rationalist, rigidly positivist, and Westphalian models of IR (e.g. Ling, 2014). Daoist IRT may thus be especially useful in the twenty-first century as globalization accelerates on many fronts hand in hand with large-scale trans-national disasters stemming heavily from domestic and international political decisions and structures put in place over the last several centuries (e.g. Steger and James, 2019; Pereira, 2021). By highly valuing ecological phenomena (including the lives of non-humans) and seeing all in the world as highly integrated, Daoist IRT provides a valuable global IR perspective for those seeking to resuscitate a world undergoing mass ecological destruction (e.g. Nelson, 2020; Joshi, 2022).

Another strength of Daoist IRT is the weight it places on the imperative of meditation and changing our consciousness (e.g. Moeller, 2007; Ling, 2018a). By providing an alternative to emancipate all sentient beings, Laozi offers us an exemplary form of normative theory earning him a distinguished place in the 'international political theory tradition'

amongst classical thinkers who rejected imposing a 'strict separation between political theory and IR theory' (Jørgensen, 2018, 44).[3] In this respect, Laozi's IRT is boldly normative and Utopian.[4] As Brincat (2009, 607, 609) explains, the '*imagining* of alternate worlds is the productive role that utopianism can play in expanding the focus of IR theory' by creating 'an overshoot of normativity that can push forward reality in the dialectical process of emancipation and augment the conditions of human freedom' which is highly appropriate for our purposes given that 'Daoism is, if nothing else, dedicated to the proposition of freedom' (Brincat and Ling, 2014, 680).

Acknowledging different currents within Daoist IR thought, this study focuses on the transmitted version of Laozi's DDJ as the most influential text in the Daoist tradition.[5] This choice was made because other classical texts associated with Daoism typically focus less on inter-state relations or fuse Daoist ideas together with those of other philosophical schools. As discussed in the next section, previous scholarly assessments of Daoist IR thought tend to emphasize its relevance for either the *guo* (state-level) or the *tianxia* (global-level) exclusively while rarely paying close attention to how these two levels are sequentially linked together. Answering Ling's (2014, 152) call for further explorations into Daoist IR thought, I elucidate both the inter-linked *tianxia*-based and *guo*-based IR theories present in the DDJ followed by an explanation of how those two theories are intended to be nested within a chronological sequence. After clarifying these links, I conclude the article by emphasizing how awareness of the holistic, non-secular, and non-anthropocentric Daoist IR vision enriches our understanding of the history of non-Western IRT while having much relevance for contemporary scholars and statesmen re-appraising global IR theorizing

3 Aside from these connections, Laozi's thought also intersects with certain elements of feminist IR (e.g. Ling, 2014; Joshi, 2023) as well as de-anthropocentric and post-humanist IR scholarship contesting the notion that 'the human is the center of all things' (Cudworth and Hobden, 2021, 233).

4 As Kurki and Wight (2021, 26) discuss, 'once [an IR] theorist takes the step of indicating alternative futures or social modes of operation that do not currently exist, but might be brought into being, they have entered the realm of normative theory … normative theory examines what "ought" to be the case'.

5 Unlike the more recently discovered Mawangdui and Guodian versions of the DDJ, the transmitted version of the DDJ as compiled in the third century has been the standard rendering of Laozi's thought over the past two millennia (Ivanhoe, 2002).

and practices at a time when our planet faces pressing ecological, humanitarian, and technologically-induced crises.

1 Literature review

The Daoist tradition has long been an important cultural strand in China dating back over 2000 years to philosophical luminaries like Laozi (sixth century BCE) and Zhuangzi (fourth century BCE). As Lo (2015, 13) relates, shortly after China was finally unified under the Qin dynasty in the third century BCE, Daoist statecraft dominated the first 60 years of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–9 CE) as 'the Han court concluded that the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) underwent a quick demise owing to Legalist statecraft. Daoist statecraft, which emphasized non-coercion, was the diametric opposite of Legalist coercion-ism and was thus embraced as the antidote'. Daoist influence then continued to be extensive in various areas of what is now called China among multiple rulers and dynasties between the 2nd and 10th centuries until the collapse of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) (Clarke, 2000).

As Confucian ideology became ascendant in the following millennium, Daoism was forced to retreat to a more subordinated position. Nevertheless, Daoist IR thought is still valuable as a historical example of a well-developed non-Western IRT and because of its relevance to our era of globalization and mass ecological crises. Meanwhile, elements of Daoist IR thought may actually be more influential today than generally recognized in the West. As one recent study argues, alongside Confucianism, in recent decades 'Daoism has emerged to be an equally important ideology in shaping China's strategic culture' (Rosyidin, 2019, 219).

1.1 Daoism as a comprehensive thought system

In English, the term 'Daoism' refers to China's indigenous religion (道教 *daojiao*) and a philosophy of life centered upon the *Dao* ('the Way') (道家 *daojia*). Ideational roots of these schools are found in the DDJ, the second most translated work of literature in the world after the Bible (Chan, 2000). Containing multiple prescriptions for how to attain a 'reign of great peace', the DDJ has been classified as 'an ethical and

political masterpiece intended for the ruling class, with concrete strategic suggestions aimed at remedying the moral and political turmoil engulfing late Zhou China' (Chan, 2000, 18).

At the core of the DDJ's thought is the supremacy of *Dao* (道, 'the Way') which denotes 'the underlying creative power of the world [that] originally governs and arranges everything to perfection' (Kohn, 2009, 90). Though it has certain regular patterns, *Dao* cannot be fully described by human language or comprehended by the human mind. The DDJ describes it as follows: 'the Way produces all things … Raises and nurtures them; Settles and confirms them; Nourishes and shelters them' (D51).[6]

In the Daoist perspective, all living beings are unique and possess an inner 'nature' (自然 *ziran*) or 'that which is so of itself'. This refers to 'the way people are naturally, their inherent psychological makeup, independent of knowledge or consciousness … . Obtained at birth, it is there naturally and cannot be changed. Any enforced change will result in suffering, as much as any development along its lines will be to the good' (Kohn, 2009, 91). Believing each person, animal, and thing has their own unique in-built personality, style, and preferences, Daoism simultaneously stresses human agency in life as captured by the saying 'my life is in my hands, not in the hands of Heaven' (Zhao, 2015, 132).

In making sense of the world we live in, Daoism also rejects false dichotomies seeing nature as neither inherently 'good' nor 'bad'. Rather, Daoism emphasizes the role of dialectics in the world involving the

> Steady alteration of *yin* and *yang*, two aspects of the continuous flow of creation; the rising and falling, growing and declining, warming and cooling, beginning and ending, expanding and contracting movements that pervade all life and nature. *Yin* and *yang* continuously alternate and change from one into the other. They do so in a steady rhythm of rising and falling, visible in nature in the rising and setting of the sun, the warming and cooling of the seasons, the growth and decline of living beings. (Kohn, 2012, 4)

6 DDJ translations in this article are taken primarily from Ivanhoe (2002). They appear in the form 'D51' which refers to DDJ chapter 51.

In Daoism, the *taiji* (太极) symbol powerfully depicts this interpenetration of dark *yin* (阴) and bright *yang* (阳) as a reflection of 'interdependence between opposite things and concepts' (Liu, 2011, 50) whereby 'within "black" there is "white" and within "white" there is "black". *Yin* represents negative, passive, weak, and destructive while *Yang* represents positive, active, strong, and constructive' (Rosyidin, 2019, 220). Seeing all as inter-related and inter-dependent, the DDJ highlights how both sides in any pair of opposites (e.g. male and female, light and dark, active and passive, strong and weak, state and society) have their own virtues and the supposedly less powerful in each pair often has much greater power and value than we presume (Graham, 1989).

1.2 Daoist IR theory

Applying Daoist thought to IR, the most well-known proponent of Daoist IRT has been the late L.H.M. Ling (2013, 2014, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) who sharply critiqued the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning the Western IR discourse of 'realists' and 'liberal internationalists'. As Ling (2013, 446) asserts, mainstream Western IR discourse 'rationalizes the colonial binary of conversion vs. discipline: convert to be like us or suffer discipline from us' and this 'normalizes a condition of constant, mutual mistrust and hostility'. In her view, this discourse perpetuates the hegemonic idea that

> The US-West offers our best hope for an 'open, rules-based' liberal world order. It alone has the right set of norms, institutions, and practices to forestall anarchy in the international system. I call this version of world politics Westphalia World. It assumes hegemony ensures not just global prosperity but also global peace. All states, societies, and peoples benefit. Westphalia World, I contend, perpetrates a profound violence. It abuses what I call Multiple Worlds: that is, the hybrid legacies produced by subalterns to serve, and thereby survive, generations of foreign occupation by colonizing powers now replaced by multinational corporations … subalterns rarely receive formal recognition for their critical role in *making* world politics. Theories of International Relations (IR) treat world politics as if Multiple Worlds neither existed nor mattered. Most

> insidiously, Westphalia World denies Multiple Worlds *epistemically*. That is, Westphalia World discounts the knowledge of Multiple Worlds and its ways of knowing, even as Westphalia World routinely benefits from the same. (Ling, 2014, 1)

In response to this *problématique*, Ling's proposed solution has been to develop 'a common world that emanates from the [dialogic] *interaction* among Multiple Worlds, including Westphalia World … so world politics would entail less coercion, more inclusion, and greater respect. Only then could we realize what the *Dao* has always intended and continues to wish for us: a world of compassion and care' (Ling, 2014, 14, 5).[7]

As Ling stresses, the root difference between Westphalian IRT and Daoist IRT is that 'four key epistemological premises ground Daoist dialectics: 1) ontological parity; 2) creative and transformative mutuality; 3) knowledge *from* here, *in* place; and 4) agency in context' (Ling, 2014, 42). Emphasizing relationality, resonance, interbeing, and the idea that 'all of us – make world politics' (Ling, 2013, 568), she contends that Daoist dialectics can democratize IR theory and practice while significantly increasing possibilities for transformative action by recognizing the interpenetration of all things whereby 'you are in me and I in you' (Ling, 2014, 120).[8] From this standpoint, Ling determines there is no need for a violent revolution (Brincat and Ling, 2014) as 'Daoist dialectics teach non-coercive action (*wuwei*)' allowing us to 'arrive at the new with minimal violence to the old' (Ling, 2013, 559). Water is the model for this approach - 'despite being a porous, malleable substance, water can break rocks' just like the '"meekest" waves of creativity can penetrate the "strongest" rocks of hegemonic complicity and arrogance' (Ling, 2018a, 324, 333).

7 As Ling (2014, 128) emphasizes, 'instead of viewing IR as a closed, 'rational' structure of competitive, self-interested states' we could 'treat the system of world politics as an organic, open-ended whole, and not just an immutable, Westphalian structure as (neo) realists and (neo) liberals believe?'

8 According to Ling (2014, 17), 'Each part contributes to the whole, just as no whole could form without the individual parts … no one part warrants greater significance than another and no whole commands higher priority than any part…. Daoist dialectics balance the whole with the parts so that change, the inevitable *Dao*, could unfold naturally and holistically'.

Unpacking the putatively unitary state and identifying 'connections and co-creativities' (Ling, 2018b) despite apparent conflicts and contradictions between states and other entities, Ling's Daoist IR theorization teaches us to think creatively about IR to find new possibilities for peaceful transformation by seeking out 'alternative ways of relating to and resonating with *Others*' (Ling, 2014, 22; italics added). Applying her approach to Taiwan–China relations, Chen and Chen (2021, 6) note how Taiwanese Buddhist organizations helping out mainland Chinese through disaster relief shows how Taiwan and China are deeply socially interconnected and this helps us to 'reimagine China-Taiwan relations outside the confinement of the Westphalian "unification vs independence" dichotomy … by offering not only a non-confrontational language but also a locally intelligible one, restoring problem-solving agency to relevant stakeholders'. Yet, while their study is insightful in many respects, I suspect many would still conclude that at the elite level (at least in mainland China) such interactions appear to have been insufficient thus far to cool down long-lasting tensions in China–Taiwan affairs.

In any case, Ling has made a truly path-breaking contribution to both non-Western and global IR theory development by placing Daoist IRT and mainstream Western IRT into meaningful dialogue. Aiming to further extend and enrich this conversation, I contend there are several important aspects missing or underemphasized in Ling's analysis that are deserving of scholarly attention. The first of these is the insufficient attention Ling pays to the important role of sage leaders in the classical Daoist IR thought of Laozi (e.g. Izutsu, 1984; Moeller, 2007; Coutinho, 2014; Joshi, 2023). In my view, the danger of underemphasizing the role of top-level leadership in Daoist IRT could lead to failure on two accounts – not only insufficiently capturing the importance of leaders in traditional Daoist IR writings but also misunderstanding how to substantially resolve real-world problems today.

Secondly, Ling does not distinguish between the varying Daoist IR viewpoints offered by early Daoist thinkers such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, Liezi, and others. While there are some common threads across those classical Daoist texts, specialists will note how they differ in certain respects (e.g. Coutinho, 2014) and this is a shortcoming in Ling's work because the IRT of Laozi (as I will discuss below) is not identical to the IRT of other early Daoist thinkers even if they might belong to the same ideological family.

Thirdly, Ling is rightly critical of Westphalian IR's over-emphasis on state sovereignty and she promisingly presents Daoist IRT as an antidote to the shortcomings of Westphalian IR. Yet, it is worth pointing out that classical Daoist IR viewpoints offer a complex set of perspectives regarding state sovereignty and Laozi's IRT even appears to endorse state sovereignty at times (at least in the case of small states) as being a superior alternative to being attacked, defeated, dominated, or interfered with by larger states. Ling also appears to overstate her case in several instances. For example, in a dialogue over dialectics, Ling stands unwaveringly behind the Daoist position that water is always beneficial, whereas Brincat mentions how water sometimes comes in the form of hurricanes or floods which can be very harmful (Brincat and Ling, 2014). Thus, while water may generally benefit people as emphasized by Laozi, Daoist metaphors should perhaps not be taken too far and on this point Ling is unable to provide a fully convincing defense. Thus, while Ling makes a fairly strong and compelling case overall, she seems to rely at times on propositions that are almost unfalsifiable or tautological and she does create a bit of a strawman out of Westphalian IR.

Fourthly, Ling's Daoist-inspired de-centering of mainstream IR methodologically utilizes an unprecedented combination of 'aesthetic articulations' (Ling, 2014, 18) including films, novels, plays, poetry, and songs to diversify the repertoire of modalities through which IR can be taught and analyzed. This approach is admirably novel and refreshing. However, I would contend that one need not necessarily apply such methods to successfully critique mainstream Western IRT or to highlight the strengths of Daoist IRT.[9] Moreover, a key point is that most scholars would likely assert that meditation is an indispensable methodological component of Daoist IR thought and practice.[10] To her credit, Ling (2018a, 313) notes that 'we need to emancipate IR *spiritually* .... By this, I mean an open mind and heart when encountering difference

9 Another potential consequence of relying too heavily on alternative methodologies might be inadvertently making Daoist IRT look less serious compared to its competitors. Admittedly, Daoism puts much emphasis on non-mainstream forms of communication (such as meditation) and not being too concerned about one's social reputation so this is probably more of a strategic than a substantial issue.

10 Meditation plays an essential role not only in contributing to non-coercive IR actions but also in letting go of socialized consciousness and attaining pure consciousness. This refers to direct apprehension of being without any intermediating intellectual or conceptual activity (see Ling, 2018a, 326).

through others. Epistemic compassion epitomizes this process'. But, in my view, Ling still underemphasizes the spiritual, de-anthropocentric, and meditative elements of Daoist IRT as well as the role of timing and sequences that might enable humans to transition toward living under more Dao-centered states (*guo*) and in a more Dao-centered world (*tianxia*).

Aside from Ling's influential work, Yan (2011, 27) has interpreted Daoist IRT almost exclusively from the *tianxia* perspective by arguing that Laozi primarily approaches IR from 'the viewpoint of the whole interest of the whole world rather than from that of the advantage of each state'. This viewpoint colors his interpretation of Laozi's putative celebration of the 'small state' ideal in the penultimate chapter of the DDJ. In Yan's (2011, 27) reading of that chapter, 'Laozi's model of the ideal world order is based on many small, weak states, not on strong, big states'. The apparent underlying logic is that if no single state is stronger than any others it will not be able to subject them to domination or annexation. In contrast, Lo approaches Daoist IRT from the *guo* perspective highlighting how

> Laozi's statecraft of non-coercion entailed that one should fight only a defensive war and only as a last resort, that one should fight mournfully, with restraint and without hatred, and that when the war was over one should stay mournful and not impose one's will upon the defeated state. This military ethics was a humanist voice, not a nationalistic one. (Lo, 2015, 13)

Yet, despite their differing levels of analysis, Lo (2015) and Yan (2011) nevertheless agree that Laozi's strong condemnation of war and defensive position contrasts with the Confucian IR position which more or less embraces a version of Just War Theory. Laozi's position calling for unilateral yielding/goodness/trusting regardless of others' behavior also differs from Confucian IR under which sanctions play an essential role (e.g. Zhang, 2012, 2015; Shih, 2022).

Another area of consensus among most scholars is that Daoist IRT is 'constructivist' (e.g. Yan, 2011; Ling, 2014; Lo, 2015; Rosyidin, 2019). Yan (2011, 31), for example, argues that at the epistemological level, Laozi is a *conceptual determinist* as opposed to a materialist determinist. In his view, Laozi believes war can be avoided 'by changing

people's ideas' and 'peace can be realized by constructing concepts' (Yan, 2011, 36, 35). This also resembles Ling's (2014, 2018a) position as discussed above. Similarly, Lo (2015, 13) argues that by 'giving harmony and peace an ontological priority [the DDJ] has challenged the conventional belief that war is a natural circumstance of human society. It is more important to be engaged in peacemaking than to articulate the moral boundary of war-making'. Yet, I contend that it would be inaccurate to claim that Laozi is a total 'conceptual determinist'. Laozi's constructivist position is a moderate one maintaining that all things are shaped by the *Dao* and hence forces outside of our minds are also important determinants of reality apart from our own subjectivity.

Finally, non-IR scholars have written about Daoist IRT in recent years from the perspective of Daoist studies in religion and philosophy. Departing from the methodological nationalism and normative anthropocentrism characteristic of many Western IR theories, they have noted how Daoism stresses *yangsheng* (养生, 'nourishing life') of both human and non-human species through physical and mental cultivation (e.g. Michael, 2015; Miller, 2017; Nelson, 2020; Joshi, 2021). By implication, a Daoist approach to IR would need to be supportive of ecological health, environmental well-being, human health, and the minimization of waste and violence. As Moeller (2007, 69) stresses, the central pivot in such a transformation is the impartial sage who serves as 'the "one body" that integrates the whole of society'. Daoist sages as envisioned by Laozi, however, are likely to be relatively hidden from the public and in a role such as an advisor to a political leader rather than being a king or military general (Michael, 2015, ch. 6).

To conclude, recent literature on Daoist IR thought tends to focus primarily on either the *guo* (e.g. Lo, 2015; Rand, 2017) or the *tianxia* (e.g. Moeller, 2007; Yan, 2011) levels. Ling (2014) discusses both levels but it is not clear in her writings how the two are connected in Daoist thought aside from the general principles of relationality, relativity, and dialectics. Ling's Daoist IR theorization also underplays the importance of sage leadership. Missing in her analysis and in much of the IR literature is the fact that in the early Daoist IR thought of Laozi, the state (i.e. *guo*) still has a legitimate role, is seen as relatively neutral, and is a crucial dialectical means to the *tianxia*. In other words, Laozi's IR thought is actually neither pro nor anti Westphalian, because the sovereign state can potentially function as a vehicle to achieving great peace.

It is these omissions that I address in the following sections by specifying the two separate but interlinked *guo*-based and *tianxia*-based IR theories embedded in the transmitted text of Laozi's DDJ.

2 The state-centered *guo* model of Daoist IR

The first normative IR theory found in the DDJ is the *guo* model. This theory is relatively more 'state-centered' as it takes the state (rather than the world) as its primary focus or 'unit of analysis' (to borrow a term from contemporary Westphalian IR terminology). Though not appearing very often, the term 'state' (*guo*) appears in roughly one seventh of the DDJ's (11 of 81) chapters usually accompanied by strategic prescriptions for the statesman. Two counter-intuitive imperatives of this IR theory are *yielding* (不敢为天下先, 'not daring to lead the world') and *not fighting* (不争, 'non-contentiousness').

A. Yielding (softness): A key prescription of Laozi for statesmen conducting inter-state relations (aside from selecting or becoming selfless, wise 'sage' rulers) is diplomatic and military *yielding* based on the principle of 'never daring to put oneself first in the world' (D67).[11] Instead of being overtly confrontational, states governed by sages are to mimic the great goodness of water whose 'softness/weakness' (弱, *ruo*) paradoxically enables it to eventually defeat all in its way.[12] As the DDJ tells us,

> The soft and weak conquers the hard and strong. (D36)
>
> The supple and weak are the disciples of life. This is why a weapon that is too strong will not prove victorious. A tree that is too strong will break. The strong and the mighty reside down below. The soft and the supple reside on top. (D76)
>
> In all the world, nothing is more supple or weak than water yet nothing can surpass it for attacking what is stiff and strong. And so nothing can take its place. That the weak overcomes the strong and

11 This principle is one of 'three treasures' mentioned in DDJ chapter 67 alongside compassion/loving-kindness and frugality/simplicity.

12 As Moeller (2007, 96) asserts, 'the triumph of the weak, soft, and feminine over the strong, hard, and masculine exemplifies the Daoist paradox'.

> the supple overcomes the hard, these are things everyone in the world knows but none can practice. (D78)

Laozi also likens the strategy of a state yielding in IR to a motherly or feminine approach whereby the forces of *yin* are equal to or more powerful than those of *yang*.[13] As 'weakness/softness is how the Way operates' (D40), Laozi calls for a state's leaders to yield or 'take the lower position' in inter-national relations when a dispute arises between states:

> The large state can annex the small one by taking the lower position (being modest); The small state can gain the trust of the large one by taking the lower position … . The large state wants to put the small one under its protection, The small state wants to be shielded by the larger one, thus both can satisfy their wishes. But the large state should be more willing to take the lower position. (D61)

Here Laozi is advising the sage leaders of 'small states' (小国 *xiao guo*) who are constantly under the threat of attack or domination by larger states to ensure their survival by being cautious and yielding to or allying with more powerful states to gain their protection. In fact, the DDJ portrays yielding to be such an effective strategy that even 'great states' (大国 *da guo*) ought to yield when dealing with small states as doing so would be to their putative advantage.[14]

B. Not Fighting (non-contention): Laozi's second prescription for conducting inter-state relations is 'not fighting/avoiding conflict' (不争 *buzheng*). This principle serves the Daoist aim of preserving, nourishing, and 'nurturing life' (养生 *yangsheng*). In contrast to Confucian advocacy of engaging in punitive expeditions or 'just wars' (i.e. 'righteous wars' 义兵), Laozi opposes such engagements because they still inflict

13 See also Chan (2000, 23) on this point. Here *yin* refers to 'cooperative' approaches associated with the feminine like 'soft power, dialogue, empathy, tolerance, benign' while *yang* reflects 'coercive' approaches based on masculine traits like 'aggressive, ambition, force, assertive, confidence' (Rosyidin, 2019, 224).

14 According to Yan's (2011, 22) interpretation, 'the logical cause of Laozi's thinking is that he believed war originated from human desires and for a large state to cede power to others indicated that it had no desire to swallow up other states. When a large state has no desire to annex other states and small states have no power to do so, then wars of annexation can be avoided'.

violence.[15] Instead, Laozi advocated having a well-trained military but only for the purpose of self-defense (see DDJ chapters 67–69).[16]

As the DDJ proclaims: 'The Way of Heaven is to benefit and not harm. The Way of the sage is to act but avoid conflict' (D81). Depicting 'the military as an ominous instrument' (D31), Laozi calls on leaders to minimize the use of force and to refrain from the use of armies and weapons as instruments of violence. As Laozi states, 'those who serve their ruler with the Way will never take the world by force of arms. For such actions tend to come back in kind. Wherever an army resides, thorns and thistles grow. In the wake of a large campaign, bad harvests are sure to follow' (D30).

Laozi insisted that '"the violent and overbearing will not die a natural death." I shall take this as the father of all my teachings' (D42). In line with the Daoist priority of all creatures living a full life and dying a natural death in old age, non-violence and avoiding conflict appear throughout the DDJ in multiple passages such as:

> The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them .... In government, the good lies in orderliness .... Only by avoiding conflict can one avoid blame/disaster. (D8)

> Those good at conquering their enemies never confront them. Those good at using others put themselves in a lower position. This is called the Virtue of avoiding conflict .... This is called matching up with Heaven, the highest achievement of the ancients. (D68)

> To be courageous in daring leads to death. To be courageous in not daring leads to life .... The Way avoids conflict but is good at victory. (D73)

15 As Chan (2000, 22) explains, righteous wars only address 'the symptoms but not the root cause of the disease'. The Daoist sage Zhuangzi also opposed partaking in 'righteous war' claiming 'the very intention to do so reveals a lack of "sincerity" and leads to the opposite result' (Fech, 2020, 2).

16 In classical Chinese thought, the natural world consists of both 'civil' (文) and 'martial' (武) forces, but Laozi strongly preferred civil/diplomatic solutions over martial ones (Rand, 2017). As Clarke (2000, 110) notes, Daoists supported non-violence because 'violence has a way of producing more violence, and so never achieves the end intended'.

What these passages convey is that sagely leaders of a state avoid both intra-state and inter-state conflict because conflict is destructive, counterproductive, and contrary to the *Dao*.[17]

To sum up, according to the *guo*-based IR model found in the DDJ, the sage-like statesman should practice yielding and avoid conflict in IR. The primary reasons are because conflict is destructive to the lives of humans and other species and because that which is soft and weak (like water) ultimately overcomes that which is hard and strong. Thus, Laozi encouraged leaders of states to be patient rather than pugnacious, virtuous rather than violent, and desire-less rather than desire-full.

3 The planetary/globalist *tianxia* model of Daoist IR

The second normative IR theory found in the DDJ is the *tianxia* model. This theory is planetary/globalist because it takes the whole world rather than individual rulers or nation-states as its main focus. Found in two fifths of the DDJ's (33 of 81) chapters, *tianxia* is one of the most frequently appearing words in the text. Literally referring to 'everything under the sky' or 'all under Heaven', the *tianxia* concept relates to the Daoist belief that all beings are equally created by the same *Dao* (i.e. the origin of everything) and therefore no individual person or group is entitled to dominate any other person or species. This theory proposes that the current system of contentious IR marked by inter-state rivalry and warfare should be replaced by harmonious planetary governance featuring 'great peace' (太平 *taiping*). Two key pillars of this Utopian vision are 'the sage' (聖人 *shengren*) and 'effortless action' (无为 *wuwei*).

A. Shengren: The most important protagonist in both Laozi's *guo* and *tianxia* IR theories is the 'sage' or 'holy man' (聖人 *shengren*), a concept appearing in 26 (of 81) DDJ chapters. At the *guo* level, the sage is pivotal to bringing peace and harmony. In the *tianxia* model, the key to attaining harmonious global governance is likewise for the sage(s) to 'embrace the One' (i.e. the *Dao*) (D22) and 'follow the Way

17 As Moeller (2007, 74) notes, 'the sage ruler's aversion to war goes along with his absence of self-aggrandizement and yearning for goods. He aspires for neither fame nor wealth. These aspirations are among the main reasons for war, and when rulers do not have them, war becomes less likely'.

in all that one does' (D23). In doing so they become 'a model for all the world' (D28).

The reason why sages are uniquely qualified to govern and bring great peace to the world is because they have attained oneness with the *Dao*. As seen earlier, sages are key to governance at the *guo* level for the state to practice yielding and non-contention in international affairs. The importance of sages is then further amplified when we take things up to the global level. As multiple DDJ passages attest, modest, altruistic sages play the crucial role in achieving optimal global (and not just state-level) governance;

> Sages do not have constant hearts of their own. They take the people's hearts as their hearts. I am good to those who are good; I also am good to those who are not good …. Sages blend into **the world** and accord with the people's hearts. The people all pay attention to their eyes and ears. The sages regard them as children. (D49; bold added)

> The Way of Heaven takes from what has excess and augments what is deficient. The Way of human beings is not like this. It takes from the deficient and offers it up to those with excess. Who is able to offer what they have in excess **to the world**? Only one who has the Way! This is why sages act with no expectation of reward. (D77; bold added)

> Sages do not accumulate. The more they do for others, the more they have. The more they give to others, the more they possess. (D81)

Neither arrogant nor boastful, the sage's benevolent contribution to planetary governance is supporting all (including non-human species) while never claiming credit for doing so. On the outside sages may seem just like ordinary people but distinguish themselves as they 'care for **the world** just as much as they take care of their own life and body' (D13; bold added).

B. Wuwei: A primary method by which Daoist sages bring about peace in both the *guo* and *tianxia* theories is through *wuwei* (无为), a term found in nine DDJ chapters. Translated by Ling (2014) as 'non-coercive action', *wuwei* represents a particular type of disposition

conducive to yielding and non-violence.[18] Avoiding coercive and unnecessary actions, a *wuwei* method of governance employs meditation and stillness (to prevent anger or other destructive emotions from hijacking one's mind), avoidance of violence and cruelty, and a marked refusal to seek public attention or fame for one's actions. To employ *wuwei* does not mean that rulers always practice inaction but it means they adopt something like a default tendency to not artificially interfere with things when doing so is unnecessary or counterproductive.[19] This point is reiterated in multiple DDJ passages.

> In the pursuit of the Way, one does less each day. One does less and less until reaching wuwei. Through **wuwei** one can succeed in everything. To govern **the world** well, one must take inaction as the principle. One who governs with too much action will fall short of gaining the world. (D48; bold added)

> The more taboos and prohibitions there are in **the world**, the poorer the people. The more sharp implements the people have, the more benighted the state.… The more clear the laws and edicts, the more thieves and robbers. And so sages say, 'I practice **wuwei** and the people transform themselves; I prefer stillness and the people correct and regulate themselves…. I am without desires and the people simplify their own lives'. (D57; bold added)

> Sages act with no expectation of reward. When their work is done, they do not linger. They do not desire to make a display of their worthiness. (D77)

In a nutshell, the utopian *tianxia* IR model articulated in the DDJ revolves around (i) the sage(s) who is/are at one with the *Dao* and (ii) who through a mode of governance that includes the method of *wuwei* bring(s) about (iii) a great peace and non-contention between states and peoples by getting all humans and the myriad creatures in the world to live together harmoniously in line with the natural rhythms of the

18 *Wuwei* is sometimes alternatively translated as 'effortless action' (Slingerland, 2000) or 'without [undue] action' (Rand, 1979, 194).

19 As Ling (2014, 137) explains, 'sometimes we need to simply pause and consider all the options, openly and with confidence, free of outside interference or noise'.

cosmos. As a result, the current rivalrous system of IR (and all the human and ecological destruction it causes) is superseded by harmonious planetary governance and world peace. As Laozi emphasizes, when rulers repress desires and follow a *wuwei* path then 'the whole world will be naturally at peace' (D37).

4 The link between *guo* and *tianxia*

As demonstrated above, there are two IR theories embedded in the DDJ, one taking the state (*guo*) as its level of focus and the other addressing a planetary/global (*tianxia*) level of analysis. As I will now argue, there is a close relationship between these two theories because they are sequentially nested. First, both theories call for rulers to be sagely and follow the *Dao* with emphasis on *wuwei*, nurturing life (*yangsheng*), and sustaining peace (i.e. avoiding war, conflict, and instability). Secondly, despite emphasizing different levels of governance, the seemingly more pragmatic state-based *guo* model is intended by Laozi as a precursor or means to eventually achieving the optimal, globalist *tianxia* model as I will now explain.

From Laozi's perspective, the ideal ruler of both the *guo* and the *tianxia* should follow the *Dao*. However, the *guo*-based IR model advises rulers on how to conduct state affairs within the current adversarial inter-state reality, whereas the *tianxia* model specifies a Utopian ideal Daoists wish to someday experience and which may have (according to Daoist lore) existed in the past. The question of how to achieve this Utopia is implicitly answered in the DDJ by the view that a transformation must first take place at the level of the individual after which it can be scaled up to their community, the state, and eventually the world. This inference stems from the five levels of governance specified in DDJ chapter 54; the self/the body [吾/身 *wu*/*shen*], the family [家 *jia*], the village [乡 *xiang*], the state [国 *guo*], and the world [天下 *tianxia*] (D54). The relationship among these levels proceeds from the smallest to the largest. As Laozi states,

> Cultivate it in oneself and its virtue will be genuine. Cultivate it in one's family and its virtue will be more than enough. Cultivate it in one's village and its virtue will be long-lasting. Cultivate it in one's state and its virtue will be abundant. Cultivate it throughout the

world and its virtue will be everywhere. (D54)

Additional support for the idea that Laozi believed progress toward peace in IR proceeds from the smaller unit to the larger appears in multiple DDJ passages emphasizing how progress in governance and other endeavors proceeds from the small (first) to the big (later) such as:

> Plan for what is difficult while it is easy. Work at what is great while it is small. The difficult undertakings in the world all start with what is easy. The great undertakings in the world all begin with what is small. (D63)

> Work at things before they come to be. Regulate things before they become disordered. A tree whose girth fills one's embrace sprang from a downy sprout. A terrace nine stories high arose from a layer of dirt. A journey of a thousand leagues began with a single step. (D64)

> The way is forever nameless…. If barons and kings could preserve it, the myriad creatures would all defer to them of their own accord; Heaven and Earth would unite and sweet dew would fall; The people would be peaceful and just, though no one so decrees. (D32)

> The Way does nothing yet nothing is left undone. Should barons and kings be able to preserve it, the myriad creatures will transform themselves. (D37)[20]

As seen in these last two passages, once a baron or king (at the *guo* level) adopts the Way (*Dao*) it should lead all in the world (closer) to the *tianxia*-based IR ideal.

Finally, the DDJ's concluding stanza in chapter 81 reveals that Laozi's *guo* theory is a means to the *tianxia* ideal. Here Laozi states that 'the way of Heaven is to benefit and not harm' (天之道利而不害) (D81). This refers to the Utopian *tianxia* scenario because it postulates that the way of 'heaven' (*tian*) is to have all people benefitted and none harmed which presumably no mere human could ever do. In the

20 This passage seemingly indicates that 'just as people flock to a place where music is played and a feast is served, they will naturally rally around the ruler who is in accord with the cosmic rhythm of the Dao' (Moeller, 2007, 84).

following line, Laozi then states that 'the way of the Sage is to act but not contend' (聖人之道为而不争) (D81) which refers to the (relatively) more pragmatic *guo* model because it acknowledges that Sages must consciously act (*wei*). This is because even sages are not at the level of heaven (or the *Dao*) who are the only entities capable of fully practicing being completely free of coercive/conscious action (i.e. *wuwei*). Nevertheless, what sages can do when acting (since all humans must inevitably act) is to 'not contend/avoid conflict' (*buzheng*). This is not only because avoiding conflict is one of the highest achievements mere humans can do in Laozi's vision but also because sage-rulers avoiding international conflict will putatively bring their state and the world closer to harmonious and peaceful planetary governance. Once all states are ruled by sages who reject engaging in conflict and violence then the supremely peaceful Daoist *tianxia* IR vision can become a reality.

5 Conclusion

This study identified two classical Daoist IR theories present in Laozi's DDJ and the sequential link between them. First, Laozi provides us with a *guo* theory of IR which is relatively state-based. It provides guidance on dealing with contentious inter-state relations by advising rulers of states to paradoxically act non-contentiously as a winning strategy to avoid/minimize conflict and to preserve themselves. This theory is relevant to contemporary international society because unhealthy and excessive inter-state competition and violence is a primary source of both human misery and ecological destruction in our world today. Notably, whereas in Western IR discourse, the behavior of states yielding to great powers is often framed as 'bandwagoning' (e.g. Schweller, 1994), Laozi is endorsing neither capitulation nor 'surrendering'. Rather, the aim is to prevent violence, to bide time, and to concede that people living in smaller states are more likely to survive and be treated well if their leaders yield to a greater power. Following Lake's (2009, 11) terminology, such yielding creates a provisional IR 'hierarchy' among states that may actually yield greater benefits to small states such as mutual aid, reduced defense costs, and increased trade between states compared to conditions of 'anarchy' which may entail greater costs than benefits. For those holding a positive-sum mindset and focusing

on 'absolute' over 'relative' gains unlike IR realists (e.g. Grieco, 1988), this could result in systemic benefits for all states.

The second theory offered by Laozi is the *tianxia* or planetary/globalist theory – an optimal normative theory prioritizing global life nurturing (of humans, animals, plants, and trees) given Daoist beliefs regarding the ontological equality of all living beings in the world. This implies respectful treatment for all humans regardless of race, nationality, class, or gender – something held in common between Daoism and contemporary global human rights advocates. By granting greater value to the ecological world and non-human species than most conventional IR theories, Laozi's IR thought has much relevance for thinking about how to save our planet from ecological crises including the global climate crisis and widespread habitat destruction which are rapidly destroying millions of species and might end human existence. Committed to respect for all sentient lives on the planet, Laozi fiercely opposed war and his vision of great peace is an eco-friendly one upholding human security and non-violence against humans and other species.

As for other implications of Daoist IR thought in the contemporary world, a primary theme in the DDJ is that 'one cannot force others to be good. If one resorts to force, one's actions will eventually rebound in kind upon oneself. The only way to affect others and turn them to the good is through the power of one's *de*, "Virtue"' (Ivanhoe, 2002, 99). Thus, yielding and building trust right from the outset is a means to get leaders of other states to be more open-minded and to listen to a small state's views. Otherwise, adversaries might never be open to their arguments. In many ways, this is an early articulation of the well-known IR constructivist claim that the only (or best) way to start a virtuous cycle of benevolent partnership and mutual trust may be to selflessly give first and then trust can be built through a tit-for-tat process of mutual exchange and relationship building (e.g. Wendt, 1992).

While the strategic value of Laozi's *guo*-based IR theory may be obvious to IR scholars and practitioners in today's world, his *tianxia*-based planetary governance vision in which a sage or sages as rulers bring about the elimination of inter-state rivalry may also be of longer-term value for contemplating and imagining how a non-Eurocentric, de-anthropocentric 'wordlist IR' might operate (e.g. Ling, 2014). Drawing from Laozi's thought, a single or some collective governing

(or at least advisory) body of sages might be very helpful for combating pressing global issues like the climate crisis, Covid-19 pandemic, wars, inflation, food insecurity, rampant human rights abuses, poverty, gender inequality, and (un)sustainable development. In a more planetary-centered (i.e. *tianxia*) governing system, there could presumably be either a single benevolent world-state ruled by sages, no states at all but a governing council of sages, or a large number of exclusively small states all ruled by sages. As Laozi is a non-dogmatic thinker, any of these alternatives could theoretically be congruent with his vision. But in any case the defining feature of his vision is that there would no longer be a world in which states fight against each other whereby large states dominate or destroy small states and whereby people dominate or destroy other species or the planet. While those who take a more combative position or are already wedded to other IR schools may dismiss this vision as too 'utopian', scholars like Brincat (2009, 581, 582) have powerfully championed the 'utopian imagination as a vital and necessary component in IR theory' with particular emphasis on 'open-dialectical' versions of utopianism (like Daoist IRT) that offer 'a stimulus to motivate change towards something "better"' by helping us to imagine 'alternate "better" worlds'.[21]

In conclusion, Laozi's IR thought teaches us that significant improvements in our lives both individually and collectively begin with a change of consciousness. Given that Daoist IRT epistemologically embraces the practice of meditation and invites us to engage in radical and creative reflection on a whole new world of 'alternative possibilities for emancipatory transformation in world politics' (Ling, 2014, 103), IR scholars and practitioners stand to gain much from such mindfulness. It will also be helpful going forward if more scholars can contribute to advancing and refining our understanding of: (i) Daoist theorizing of IR, (ii) links between Daoist IRT and other IR approaches, (iii) diversity within Daoist IRT, and (iv) the empirical implications of Daoist IR theories. Humility is likewise essential as it is important to recognize that no single theory or school of IR (including Daoist IRT) can answer everything. As the opening verse of the DDJ famously states, 'the way that can be spoken of is not the eternal way'.

21 As Smith (2021, 7) notes, theories 'based on epistemological positions far removed from positivism … allow us to reflect on just how we think about the world'.

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