How to Change the Story of the Pandemic with Daoist IR

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/20/how-to-change-the-story-of-the-pandemic-with-daoist-ir/

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Stories play an important role in our lives. Tragedies, romances and comedies come to us in the form of fairy-tales and bedtime stories when we are children, and when we are older in the form of novels, movies and plays. Not only do we passively listen to these stories, we also actively create them. We use them in order to make sense of our lives and to guide our expectations (Kuusisto, 2009). As a result, stories hold an enormous power. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains in her Ted Talk: the stories that we know about people informs our perception of them. There is power in who tells these stories, how they are told, when they are told and how many there are. Therein lies the danger of a single story; it narrows our horizon and robs people of their dignity (Adichie, 2009).

International Relations is not different in this regard. IR scholars tell stories about the world and the way it works. The type of stories they tell influences our perception of the world. And herein, again, lies the danger of the single story: currently International Relations Theory (IRT) is dominated by different versions of a single story of Western IRT (Thakur, 2015). This risks seeing the world in a unidimensional way, in which there is no room for other stories, or they are not understood. For this reason, Smith argues that in order to make space for non-Western contributions in IR, we need to change the stories we tell and how we tell them (Smith, 2009).

In this paper I will build on this by looking at story plots or narratives. First, by building on Suganami (2008) and Kuusisto (2018), I will argue that IRT tends to follow certain narrative patterns. While different traditional IR theories use different narrative patterns, they can be seen as different versions of the same story. Second, I will present another type of story, building on Ling (2013): Daoist stories that are based on the Chinese idea of relationality. Then, I will apply this way of storytelling to the way in which we perceive the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, state leaders tend to securitize the Corona crisis and strictly divide the domestic from the international sphere, which can be seen as telling a tragic or romantic story. This does not leave space for other possibilities and interpretations. Finally, I argue that if we opt for telling the story of the pandemic in a Daoist way instead, this would open up space for flexibility, solidarity and open-mindedness.

Stories and IR

As Suganami (2008) argues, when we explain the occurrence of an event, we share our understanding of the event with others. In order to explain it, we need a starting point: what the world looked like before the event took place. The final point of our explanation is the event and what the world looked like afterwards. The link between these two points we explain by using a narrative, which tells us how the starting point led to the middle parts and finally, to the event (Suganami, 2008). Theorizing, particularly as done by IR scholars, is similar to this, as the theory is presented as a narrative explaining how a starting point leads to an end result. This makes Thakur argue that “all theories are stories since it is the element of fiction, the propensity to abstract away from reality, which makes them possible in the first place” (Thakur, 2015: 216).

While all IR scholars, therefore, can be seen as story tellers, they do not all use the same narrative patterns to tell their stories. Western stories can be seen as following one of four distinct narrative patterns: tragedy, romance, comedy and satire (Kuusisto, 2009). According to Kuusisto (2018), many IR scholars, mostly Realists, view world

politics as a tragedy, a story in which no happy ending is possible. Realists generally perceive violence as inherently unavoidable and they are often pessimistic regarding human progress (Kuusisto 2018). Many Liberalists, instead, perceive the world as a romance. They have a more optimistic view and believe that through international cooperation we can overcome the problems we face. Thus, after a time of struggle, a happy ending is in sight, just as in a romantic story. Practitioners of IR use romantic storylines as well. Western powers, for instance, often frame military interventions in other countries as romances, in which they take up the role of hero that saves innocent citizens from a monster (Kuusisto, 2009). Social constructivists can be perceived as comic story writers (Kuusisto, 2018). In a comedy, the characters stumble and fall, but their problems are not to be taken too seriously (Kuusisto, 2009). Most social constructivists are optimistic as well, and because they emphasize flexibility and subjectivity, they are often less deterministic than Realists and Liberalists. The last group of IR scholars I want to highlight here are critical scholars. Many of them use the narrative pattern of satire, in order to criticize the foundations of traditionalist thought, often based on moral standards and values (Payne, 2013).

As such, it seems that these Western IR theories all have a distinct way of viewing and explaining the world. However, as Qin (2016) argues, they all have individualistic rationality as their theoretical hard core. This means that these theories are all based upon a certain perception of the world, which is, in the West, individualistic rationality. Social constructivists and critical theorists may not agree with this. However, social or structural constructivism still imagines a world composed of individual agents and systemic structures in which rationality plays an important role (Qin 2016). Therefore, social constructivism can be perceived as sharing the same core of individualistic rationality as Liberalism and Realism. Critical theorists, in order to be able to critique the theories, need to share some common ground with them. Besides, as most critical scholars are from the West, or engage in the Western way of theorizing, they arguably still belong to this Western IR world (Krishna, 1993). Therefore, it can be concluded that these four Western IR theories all share the assumption of individualistic rationality and can therefore be seen as different versions of the same story. To this single story of IRT, non-Western IR can offer an alternative. In this paper the focus will be on Chinese IR.

Relationality and Chinese IR

Instead of individualistic rationality like Western IR theories, Chinese IR has relationality at the core of its theory (Qin, 2016). This relational theory, as explained by Qin (2016), is based on three assumptions. First, everything is interrelated. The world is viewed as existing of continuous events and ongoing relations, rather than substantial separate objects and discrete entities. Second, actors are, and can only be, "actors-in-relations" (Qin, 2016: 36). There is no independent identity of the self, it is constructed and reconstructed in relation with others. For this reason, the relational view argues that relations between states or other actors should be studied, not the actors itself. Third, these relations between actors are dynamic and ever changing, they form processes. International society itself is a process as well; it is always moving and transforming.

This idea of relationality is based on the Daoist dialectics of *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* represents all aspects that are usually associated with the feminine, such as cold, soft, and weak, whereas *yang* represents the hot, hard, and strong (Ling, 2013). In this relationship one side does not dominate the other, instead they complement each other. The relationship is also not static but constantly moving; both parts constantly interact with each other and both carry a part of the other in itself. In this way, the Daoist dialectics differ from Western, Hegelian dialectics, in which both parts form static opposites of each other (Ling, 2013). Ling (2013) builds on these dialectics a model of 'worldist dialogics'. In order for this model to come about, three elements are needed. The first of these is relationality, as explained above. Ling interprets relationality as asking "Who is saying what to whom and why?" (Ling, 2013: 20). She focuses here on relational power and how unequal power relations between West and non-West are sustained, which is done by narratives that keep these relations in place. In order to break this cycle of inequality, Ling argues, the West has to recognize the non-West in itself and vice versa. In this way, by emphasizing the relationalities that normalize power, we can understand that new narratives are needed to obtain new power relations.

The second element is resonance, which asks: "Where are alternative discourses coming from and what do these mean?" (Ling, 2013: 21). This points us to alternative narratives that emerge in different areas of the world and how they resonate with each other. By resonating with each other, these discourses are strengthened and can signify the

emergence of a new order. This teaches us that multiple subjectivities exist and that what we know about something changes when our relationship to it changes. This asks for creativity.

The third element is interbeing, which asks: "how can I act ethically and with compassion?" (Ling, 2013: 21). Relationalities and resonances lead to interbeing, which is the Buddhist idea of 'co-dependent rising'. This involves the recognition that "you are in me and I in you" (Ling, 2013: 21). This realization guides us towards action that is ethical and compassionate.

The role of Daoist stories

In this worldist way of doing, stories, as well as creativity and aesthetics, play an important role, because they can help us understand how to act (Ling, 2013). In Daoist teaching, stories have always played an important role (Towler, 2012). The (moralistic) stories often teach the readers how to be an Authentic Person, in this way illustrating the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi (Ames, 2016). The stories teach readers that "to be authentic or enlightened means to be at once a part of the world of change and yet also be able to operate outside space and time" (Towler, 2012: 5). This means that one must learn to be able to work with the constant change that takes place in the world. This constant change is an important aspect of Daoist dialectics, in which *yin* constantly becomes *yang* and the other way around. In the stories this is exemplified, for instance, by characters changing roles, such as a foe becoming a friend (as illustrated in Ling, 2014). Daoist stories are thus much less deterministic than romances or tragedies, in which the line between good and bad is much stricter.

Ling demonstrates the role that stories can play in IR by writing her own IR story about the fictive characters Sihar and Shenya (Ling, 2014). She argues that stories can complement the *yang* prevailing in IR and world politics by adding the *yin*. Her story demonstrates the importance of Daoist dialectics, by showing that *yin* and *yang* must be in balance in order to have harmony. It exhibits that when *yang* action is informed by a *yin* way of doing things this can lead to more peaceful international relations and open up possibilities that could not have been imagined from only a *yang* perspective. This has implications for world politics as well, and raises questions such as: how can Daoist dialectics be used to open up new ways of doing politics and more peaceful international relations? What is the role of stories in this? Let us apply these questions to a case: the discourse around the Corona crisis.

Stories about COVID-19: a narrative of war

Now that the pandemic has been going on for a while, it becomes increasingly clear what the important role of narratives is. Countries differ in the extent to which they frame the virus as a threat and they set up their approach accordingly; where some countries take it very seriously, others do not do so. Besides, a geopolitical debate seems to be going on, in which the USA blames China for the spread, and China blames the USA (Al Jazeera News, 2020b). In this cacophony of opinions, I focus on two aspects that can be noticed in the responses of state leaders, mostly those of Western countries in the first months of the pandemic. First, the framing of the crisis as a 'war against an invisible enemy'. Second, the split between the national and international sphere and the 'us-versus-them' narrative. These will be explained below, as well as how they relate to the story narratives of romance and tragedy. Finally, an approach based on Daoist stories will present an alternative way of telling this story.

In speeches of different state leaders, a general tendency can be observed: the comparison of the corona crisis with a 'war against an invisible enemy'. The French President Macron in particular stated that his country was in a war, or, more specifically, that he was fighting "a kinetic war" in which the enemy is constantly moving and quick action is required (Momtaz, 2020). NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg strengthened this narrative by turning the coronavirus into a collective threat for NATO members: "This is a common invisible enemy and therefore, we need common and coordinated efforts by NATO allies" (in Ng, 2020). This war rhetoric invokes the need for aggressive policies, in order to fight this external threat. In the words of the American President Donald Trump: "This is the most aggressive and comprehensive effort to confront a foreign virus in modern history" (The New York Times, 2020). What we see here, thus, is that these leaders portray the virus as an enemy that should be fought aggressively.

These state leaders are not the only ones that employ this war-like comparison. Multiple countries have invoked a

state of emergency, enabling extraordinary measures (Al Jazeera News, 2020b). Regardless of the question whether such a response is necessary or not, the rhetoric that is used can have far-reaching consequences. According to securitization theory, a rhetoric of war securitizes a certain issue. This happens when a political actor portrays something as an existential threat. As a result of this act, the political actor is enabled to use extraordinary measures to combat the threat (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). An effect of this securitization is that other possibilities and narratives are ruled out. In this crisis, we have already seen this in countries such as Russia, Zimbabwe and Turkmenistan in which spreading misinformation about Corona can be punished with large fines and even prison sentence (Al Jazeera News, 2020b). In addition, states such as Hungary, declared a state of emergency with no set end date at the time of writing. This can result in repression and human rights violations. Apart from these authoritarian practices, the war rhetoric itself portrays the virus as an external threat that states have to deal with and which requires mobilization of the people without dissent. This gives the impression that all efforts have to be directed towards fighting the virus, more than anything else.

This war narrative bears resemblances with the romantic narrative. In a romance, an enemy has to be defeated in order to save innocent people or to catch a prize, often a princess. In this type of story, clear roles are assigned to the actors, which only make one story plot possible. This means that the enemy has to be defeated, for "proper princes do not cut deals with the dragon" (Kuusisto, 2009: 607). The above-explained narrative of COVID-19 as an enemy resembles the romantic narrative in the need for an 'all-or-nothing' approach. In this narrative, state leaders present themselves as strong leaders that are fighting the virus in order to protect the innocent citizens. As a consequence, there is no room for dissent or other efforts that are not directed towards fighting the virus.

Stories about the Pandemic: the domestic/international split

The second thing that is remarkable about the narrative of many state leaders is the split between the domestic and the international sphere and the different narratives in and about these spheres. Within the domestic sphere, state leaders call for solidarity. In March, Trump stated for instance: "We are all in this together. We must put politics aside, stop the partisanship and unify together as one nation and one family" (The New York Times, 2020). The Dutch Prime Minister Rutte also called for national solidarity: "I would like to close with an appeal to you all: despite all the uncertainty, one thing is perfectly clear: the challenge we face is enormous, and all 17 million of us will have to work together to overcome it" (Government of the Netherlands, 2020). In contrast, in the international sphere there is less state cooperation and more state competition. It seems that many states want to demonstrate that their policy to fight Corona is better than that of other countries. The Chinese ambassador to the Netherlands stated for instance: "The reason why the Chinese figure is much lower than those in other countries is the most comprehensive, thorough, and strictest prevention and control measures taken in a relatively early stage by Chinese government which were not applied in other countries" (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, 2020).

This focus on state performance and competition in the international sphere also leads to finger-pointing to other states, such as how president Trump refers to the coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus' (Al Jazeera News, 2020a). In this way, the transboundary, stateless issue that the pandemic is, suddenly becomes an issue of states, in which one state poses a threat for the other. The result of this is an 'us-versus-them' narrative, in which states see themselves as in competition with other states regarding their performance in fighting the virus. This leads to more protectionism instead of solidarity and cooperation. In particular, there seems to be little attention and aid for developing countries. The UN Secretary-General Guterres warned against this lack of solidarity by stating: "Current responses at the country level will not address the global scale and complexity of the crisis" (Guterres, 2020). Instead, he called for more international solidarity and a vision of the world as one 'human family'.

This lack of solidarity fits with a narrative of tragedy. In tragedies, the main actor is involved in an ethical dilemma in which there is no harmless way out. Whatever the actor does, (s)he ends up hurting him/herself or someone else, and this situation could not have been prevented (Kuusisto, 2009). The discourse surrounding the coronavirus follows this narrative in a certain way: the virus is portrayed as putting us in a position about which nothing can be done. We find ourselves in a situation of enmity and disaster which could not have been prevented. States are desperately trying to keep their head above the water and as a result, the own nation state is put first. The lack of solidarity towards non-Western states also fits in this tragic narrative. The situation is portrayed as hopeless, in terms of: 'no

matter what we do, we would not be able to help those poor countries.' The reasoning is that if that is the case, we better do nothing at all.

These two points, the likening of the pandemic to a war and the split between the domestic and international sphere, reflect a certain narrative in which each state fights a battle against an external enemy and each state has to do this on its own. The result is a lack of solidarity and suspicion towards other states. Daoist dialectics could change this in three ways, based on the three elements of the worldist dialogics of Ling (2013).

A Daoist story of the pandemic

First, relationality teaches us that everything is related with each other, there is no sharp distinction between the domestic and the international sphere. The Coronavirus pandemic is an international issue, which does not follow state borders. This means that states need to realize that all human beings are connected with each other and that there is no distinct Self and Other. In order to understand this, we need to find the Other in ourselves (Ling, 2013). This 'Other in ourselves' can be, for instance, immigrants and their descendants that live in our states and recognizing that they, and their culture, are as much part of our states as other citizens. In this way we can recognize the Other in the Self, and realize that problems far away are also our problems.

Secondly, we need to realize that there are alternative narratives possible. These could be, for instance, narratives based on interconnectedness and solidarity. More significantly, however, other conceptions of health could guide us towards new solutions. In different places of the world, people have a different conception of what being healthy entails, but only the Western conception of health has become mainstream. For instance, both Ayurvedic tradition and Chinese medicine are based on the idea that illness results from an imbalance in the body that causes a disturbance or blockage of the life energy (prāna or jīva in ayurveda; qi in zhongyi or Chinese medicine) (Ling, 2013). That means that it is not the coronavirus itself that causes people to get ill or die, it is how resistant they are to the virus and how healthy they already were. The solution to the pandemic may therefore not lie in finding a vaccine, but in preventing the spread by strengthening the health and resilience of people (Panda et al., 2020). Both in this idea of health and in its importance in international relations, resonance is key. Resonance, understood in the sense that there is balance inside and outside a person, makes room for lasting health and happiness (Ling, 2013). Resonance in the international sphere indicates that similar ideas from multiple places in the world can strengthen each other and teach us that alternative ideas are possible (Ling, 2013). In particular, it shows that there is a myriad of conceptions of health, identity, power and politics in different areas of the world that are similar to each other, which demonstrates that the Western conception is not as mainstream as it often seems.

Thirdly, when we recognize that we are all interrelated and that there are resonating alternative ideas, there is room for interbeing. Particularly during this crisis, it would be useful to recognize that we are all in this together and that "we are all in the soup" (Ling, 2013: 99). This recognition, then, can help us to identify ways in which we can act compassionately and ethically. For instance, we can explore how we can find a truly global solution for this global problem.

In this way, the narrative about the Corona crisis can turn into a Daoist story, in which the world goes on a journey of personal growth that enables space for mistakes and learning. This would be a story in which the *yin* of vulnerability and compassion can complement the *yang* of doing and heroic action, and in which there is room for flexibility and adaption to change. As such, it could become a story with a happy ending in which the world gains wisdom and becomes a more Authentic being.

Conclusion

In sum, in this paper I aimed to discover whether it is possible to find a new narrative about the COVID-19 pandemic that would enable other possibilities and more solidarity between states. This was done by focusing on the role of stories in IR, which demonstrated that most major Western IR theories are built on the same idea, that of individualistic rationality. In order to open up space for other approaches, most specifically non-Western approaches, I argued that we need to welcome other stories. In this paper, I focused on Chinese IR and Daoist stories to sketch

what such an approach would mean for our understanding of major world events. This was done, first, by showing how the current response to the Corona crisis by state leaders of (mostly) Western states is based on the traditional narrative patterns of romance and tragedy. After this, it was sketched what an approach informed by Daoist dialectics and Worldist dialogics would look like. Pursuing this approach, it was demonstrated that a Daoist approach could lead to a revaluing of mainstream conceptions of health, solidarity and the value of immigrants. This would allow for alternative conceptions and more solidarity and understanding, culminating in a truly global response to a global problem. In this way, this paper illustrates how non-Western approaches can lead to different understandings of world events and solutions for them, thereby demonstrating the value of decentering the field of IR and enabling room for non-Western approaches. If we apply this to the Corona crisis, we can, then, perhaps conclude this story with a happy ending.

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Written at: Leiden University
Written for: Dr. K. Smith
Date written: May 2020