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Political healing in East Asian international relations: What, why, and how

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Abstract

The opening article of this collection serves as an invitation to academics and practitioners of international relations to rethink and transform, not merely observe and contain, long-standing conflicts in East Asia and beyond. Traditionally such conflicts, and the violence that has emerged around them, have been understood through the lens of dichotomous frameworks associated with Westphalian modernity. We need alternative paradigms in East Asian political discourse to think and do differently. Here, we contribute to this effort by examining how East Asian medical thought and practice can facilitate political healing in the region. The use of medical analogies and metaphors is not uncommon in academic and policy discussions, and our approach underscores terminologies and thought processes that resonate with many in the region. East Asian medicine (EAM) is rooted in Daoist *yin/yang* dialectics and the concept of *qi*, both of which stress attention to balance, ontological parity, and inter-connectedness. It offers inspiration for a creative analytical approach, metaphorical imagination, and normative inspiration to diagnose ongoing confrontations. Despite apparent divisions, we propose that ongoing conflicts can be treated as ailments afflicting a shared political body.

Keywords: conflict resolution; *Dao*; East Asian medicine; international relations; political healing

Tao produced the One.

The One produced the two.

The two produced the three.

And the three produced the ten thousand things.

The ten thousand things carry the Yin and embrace the Yang and through the blending of the Qi they achieve harmony (Tao-te Ching, ch. 42).

Introduction

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan, *The Wall Street Journal* published an opinion column on economic and geopolitical repercussions of the pandemic, with the headline “China is the Real Sick Man of Asia” (Mead 2020). In voicing the newspaper’s support for three fellow reporters consequently expelled by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), its editorial countered that Beijing should have learned from “resilient democracies” about the necessity of a free press, since “a free media sends signals and information that allow an outlet for grievances and alert leaders to problems before they become crises” (*Wall Street Journal* 2020). The “sick man” metaphor reminds us of Michel Foucault’s (1994) notion of medical gaze—the newspaper examined China’s body as if it was a doctor equipped with scientific knowledge who achieved unparalleled, true understanding of the patient: “You are sick, because there is no free press capable of speaking truth to power. Democratisation can make you resilient against the virus fallout.”¹ The doctor looked for a precise, isolated cause (lack of press freedom) for a specific, relatively well-defined disease (the coronavirus outbreak). This diagnosis came with a description that was likely to bring up memories of the “century of national humiliation” to many Chinese, but that was irrelevant to the doctor who knew what was good for China’s health. The frictions over the pandemic outbreak took place alongside worrisome developments in East Asia, from the escalating trade war between the United States (US) and the PRC to Beijing’s retaliations against Washington’s support for the anti-extradition bill protests in Hong Kong as well as US arms sales to Taiwan, and from North Korea’s frequent testing of missiles to the spill-over of Japan’s “history issue” into the realms of commerce and security cooperation in its relationship with South Korea. How can we diagnose the underlying patterns of these discords and conflicts and treat them accordingly, without resorting to the oft-seen pathologized approaches in International Relations (IR) which tend to perpetuate the problems they purport to address?

This collection draws on the principles and practices of *zhongyi* (中醫) or East Asian medicine (henceforth EAM) to heal, not just contain, various confrontations that have long ailed East Asia. Contributors are inspired by the late Professor L.H.M. Ling’s work (2016) that sought to rehabilitate the body politic of India–China by integrating two local medical systems—*ayurveda* and *zhongyi*—to reframe and prescribe treatment for the India–China border dispute. As periodic standoffs between India and China show, a “trust deficit” festers between the world’s two most populous states. The study and practice of IR that draws on a Westphalian imagination of clear divisions and separation between state units continues to emphasise the inconclusive border war fought between the two in 1962. By contrast, Ling argued that *zhongyi* and *ayurveda* can turn this border dispute into an eminently treatable problem: a blocked meridian that requires systemic release of what is referred to as *qi* (氣) in *zhongyi* or *prana* in *ayurveda* (often, but misleadingly, translated as essential vitality or energy in English).² On this basis, Ling proposed a framework which highlights four therapeutic strategies:

- 1) Restore balance (within a common system or body politic). For example: by “rediscovering the complementarities that bind...despite the...conflicts that push [India and China] apart” (Ling 2016, 117–118).
- 2) Release flows (by removing blockages). For example: by permitting cross-border circulations of “goods, capital, and labor [as well as] collections of memory, identity, and social relations” (Ling 2016, 118–119).
- 3) Identify resonance (to consolidate commonalities).³ For example: by focusing on common problems like environmental protection and biodiversity conservation (Ling 2016, 119–120).
- 4) Strive for interbeing (across and within civilisations).⁴ For example: by implementing the Buddhist endeavour of finding “you are in me and I am in you” (Ling 2016, 120–122).

Certain regional plans, such as the Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar (BCIM) economic corridor, can be said to have already implemented some policies in line with these strategies (Lama 2016). With Asian medicine as a guide, Ling believed that academics and practitioners can put forward a more holistic, sustainable, and on-going treatment of complications in the East Asian body politic, and not just respond to problems on a compartmentalised, *ad-hoc*, and one-time basis. Holistic medical analogies and metaphors do not call for external interventions, be they military or otherwise. Local stakeholders are not merely passive “sick men” under the medical gaze of an intervening professional; for Ling, they all possess the potential of self-therapy.

When we use the term *zhongyi* in this article, and in the collection that it introduces, we do not mean what is known today as “traditional Chinese medicine” (TCM). TCM consolidated in the mid-1950s after the founding of the PRC. It is a standardised, textbook-based, and hybrid form of *zhongyi* that follows guidelines partly derived from biomedicine for diagnosis and treatment; it is arguably more scripted than historical *zhongyi* and does not necessarily seek to grasp the intricacies present in a patient and their presentation (Shea 2018, 24–25; see also Lei 2014). This collection is not concerned with whether or not there remains an “authentic” medical tradition understood as *zhongyi*, intact from the influence of biomedicine in the twenty-first century. Rather, it is more urgent for researchers to develop ontological translation skills that take unfamiliar ideas and practices *in their own right* and *on their own terms* without forcing or reducing them into dominant categories (Trowsell et al. 2019). Against the conventional translation of *zhongyi* as “Chinese” medicine, which arguably reproduces a Westphalian and modernist trope, Ling (2016, 214) reminded us that the character *zhong* (中) actually refers to the Daoist concept of “the middle way,” shared by the Confucian classic *Zhongyong* (中庸 *The Doctrine of the Mean*). Together with *yi* (醫), meaning to treat or cure, *zhongyi* refers to an approach of “curing through the middle way” (Ling 2016, 214). In our usage, we prefer *zhongyi* or EAM over common labels such as TCM, traditional Japanese medicine (TJM), or traditional Korean medicine (TKM), for these labels tend to evoke Orientalist-cum-nationalist misimpressions. When used here, the adjective “East Asian” in EAM is not so much geographic or ethnic as epistemic. It refers to an epistemic community of practitioners who adopt the Daoist-Confucian approach to “curing through the middle way” in pursuit of inner balance and harmony. The relatively weaker geo-ethnic designations of the term *zhongyi*

may make it less open to being lumbered with orientalisising or ethno-nationalist connotations that are unhelpful. Likewise, we do not intend to romanticise *zhongyi* or EAM as a “surviving tradition” or radical alternative to biomedicine, which would only reproduce the tired “East vs. West” dichotomy and ignore their rich cross-fertilisation.

Our research explores why and how East Asian medical thought and practice can facilitate political healing in East Asian international relations specifically, and alternative ways of thinking, doing, being, becoming, and relating in world politics more generally. In our pursuit, we benefit from existing literature that examines the ways in which various international as well as domestic political issues are pathologized (and to what effect), or that itself operates through medical terminology. This literature includes, for example, Foucault’s (1988; 1994) classics on hospitals and mental health; Jacques Derrida’s (2003) notion of autoimmune democracy; Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose’s (1994) work on therapeutic authority under advanced liberalism; Thomas Szasz’s (1989) concept of the therapeutic state; Stefan Elbe’s (2010) writing on the medicalisation of security; and Venassa Pupavac’s work on international humanitarian aid in terms of psycho-social intervention and the global rise of therapeutic governance (Pupavac 2001; Hughes and Pupavac 2005). While these insights have illuminated how socio-political issues are pathologized or medicalised, and how the notion of medicine or therapy is appended to political power or governing, their analyses derive mostly from experiences in Western geocultural sites and their discussions of medicine are exclusively conceptualised in light of biomedicine (Nordin 2016a, ch. 4; 2016b for a discussion beyond biomedicine). This collection helps to provincialize (Chakrabarty 2007) the aforementioned literature by exploring the productive and transformative aspects of medicine in politics beyond what may be conceived as a Western, Westphalian, or biomedical imaginary.

Another body of literature with which this project engages seeks to rethink the “international” (Bilgin 2016) or the underlying cosmology (Trowsell et al. 2022) that underpins approaches to the confrontations at hand. It takes issue with two temporally linear-progressive and spatially Eurocentric assumptions that have arguably characterised disciplinary IR:

- 1) that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) established “international society” as a unique institution to maintain inter-state order and stability (Suzuki 2005; Kayaoglu 2010); and
- 2) that the post-war waves of decolonisation have been more or less completed following the “expansion” of Westphalian international society into the rest of the world (Hobson 2012; Seth 2013).

The hidden hegemony of such assumptions has been increasingly revealed in a region like East Asia, which is rich with its own inter-communal norms and traditions, practices, and institutions (Chen 2016; Bilgin and Ling 2017). That said, scholars of IR should not rest just at the findings that, in a hybrid East Asia, local people and their communities retain agency to varied degrees despite (and due to) the arrival of Westphalian norms and institutions. This collection goes further to ask: what does happen and what should happen *after* hybrid learning takes place? Indeed, this point has been missed by some scholarship that aspires to overcome Western domination or bias of IR knowledge production by promoting more pluralism from, and engagement with, the ostensible non-West (Acharya and Buzan 2019; Eun 2023), if not their own national schools of IR (Ren 2016; Qin 2016).

Learning from EAM for healing East Asian (inter)national politics does not mean that this collection prescribes *zhongyi* literally. With the exception of Peter Karl Mayer, none of its contributors is an EAM physician by training. Nor do we suggest acupuncture as a policy instrument. We do, however, seek to draw from the thinking and vocabulary that underlies such a prescription as acupuncture (Mayer et al. 2023), for thinking about and acting on some disputes and conflicts in East Asia and beyond. We engage with EAM as a source of analytical, metaphorical, and normative inspiration, not to be applied mechanically. Indeed, *zhongyi*'s classic *Huangdi neijing suwen* (黃帝內經素問 *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon Basic Questions*) stresses that the patient's particularities are of utmost importance to the healer, as if the latter were tied to the former (Unschuld et al. 2011, 230–231). As such, EAM does not advocate any general, one-size-fits-all approach of treatment, although general principles (such as restoring flows of *qi*) may be at work.

Having explained the broad purposes of this collection, the remainder of this article will discuss why EAM specifically is conducive to rethinking some foundational building blocks of Westphalian IR, and how EAM can enable academics and practitioners to diagnose and treat patterns of disharmony in specific conflicts. It will also summarise insights offered by each contribution to the collection and consider the values they add to current debates and research.

Why East Asian medicine?

Research that is informed by a medical tradition from East Asia, as diagnostic for treating disputes and conflicts in East Asia, does not endorse any of the following positions: “Asian problems are for Asians to solve,” “Asians know best how to solve Asian problems,” or “Asian problems can only be solved by Asian methods.” After all, pan-Asianist or nativist attempts to overcome Westphalian modernity would paradoxically lead to its reification (Latour 1993). In fact, such a project was already put into practice by intellectual and political elites in Imperial Japan, with disastrous results (Takeuchi 2005; Calichman 2008). Historically, the pursuit of harmony that sits at the heart of EAM was abused in the justification of that political violence (Shimizu 2022), as it has been in relation to violent “harmonisation” elsewhere (Hagström and Nordin, 2020). Arguably, that project of “overcoming modernity” failed, not because Japan could not prevail in a suicidal war against the US and the United Kingdom (UK), but because Japanese leaders did not transform the Hegelian master/slave logic of the Westphalian world and simply wanted to replace the Western master with a Japanese one (Tosa 2009). By contrast, a *zhongyi* approach points to the possibility of systemic transformation, not merely replacement. This is because, as the Daoist *yin/yang* (陰陽) dialectics that undergirds EAM implies,⁵ Westphalia is already in Asia and Asia is in Westphalia.

Figure 1 around here.

Figure 1 illustrates a way of thinking, doing, being, and becoming that seeks to operate without binary distinction in favour of an interconnected relationality that “denies the dichotomously structured concept of ‘thesis vs. anti-thesis’ or ‘us vs. them’” (Qin 2016, 40). The point, then, is

not to replace one (“Western”) way of approaching IR with another (“Asian”) approach. As Ling (2016, 122) indicated, overthrowing or replacing Westphalia would simply “cause another imbalance.” What is at stake is deeper, thorough engagement with Westphalia and its associated narratives and practices. Such engagement should not presuppose who is superior or able to speak by default. As the Daoist dialectics illustrates, although *yin* (black) and *yang* (white) are two polarities, each has a dot of co-implication inside it. The synthesis thus formed embraces both continuity and change, sameness and difference, particularity and universality, without having one polarity subsumed under the other (Ling 2016, 104–105).

To be sure, *zhongyi* may not be the only way to rethink and transform existing disputes and conflicts in East Asia, or indeed elsewhere. It does, however, carry the potential to enrich ways of engaging with Westphalian modernity on the basis of ontological parity. *Zhongyi* can help scholars and practitioners disentangle themselves from various loaded, binary categories in social science, providing a methodology of nondualism for exploring what the “international” is and what it could be. It allows for the possibility that “what is seen” may be different from “what one may have expected.” A similar kind of ontological turn discussed elsewhere in IR entails not so much a matter of *seeing the world differently* as a matter of *seeing different worlds* (Shani 2021).

At this point, we may pause to ask: is there much chance that *zhongyi* will be taken up and welcomed into an IR discipline traditionally focused on Westphalian “high politics”? From a *zhongyi* perspective, we may answer that medicine and politics were always co-implicated in the first place, so we are not introducing something entirely new so much as making more explicit something that was already there. Good health extends beyond one’s physical body, for it involves an intimate relationship between the cosmos outside and the vast interior inside. Moreover, *zhongyi* often posits body and health in political and military terms. In the description of the *Huangdi neijing suwen*, the heart “rules” the body like a benevolent king and the other major organs assist as its “twelve officials.” Other bodily sites function as “palaces” and “depots” to “levy/collect” or “transport/move” precious *qi*. Good health requires “guarding *qi*” with military-style “camps” (Unschuld et al. 2011, 155). In *zhongyi*’s imaginaries, the body may be “invaded” by the “evil *qi*” and the “right *qi*” is needed to restore inner balance. This collection is an invitation to re-imagine East Asian politics through such medical analogies and metaphors.⁶ An East Asia informed by *zhongyi* pursues balance, not power. Individual, concrete relationships decide what is understood as a problem, as well as its treatment. This contrasts with the positing of a universalised, synchronous structure (such as an assumed Westphalian inter-state system), that forces all differences into self-same units (such as imagined nation-states), with identical interests, problems, and strategies (such as a stipulated balance of power). Another reason to engage with *zhongyi* in IR at this point is that, whether one likes it or not, Westphalian modernity has been manifesting itself in scholarly and policy discourse—for example through biomedical analogies such as “surgical strikes” that rationalise policies to discipline so-called failed states or to bring about regime change (Tsui 2021, this issue). *Zhongyi*’s emphasis on relationality and resonance is arguably conducive to the pursuit of a

more equitable and sustainable global politics that works with, through, and beyond Westphalia (Ling 2014).

Similar attempts to grapple with the relationship between medicine and Westphalian modernity have also emerged. As medical anthropologist Byron J. Good (1994, ch. 1) observed, medical science does not mirror nature in any direct way, but the image it projects is made possible by a culturally specific distinction between objective empirical knowledge and subjective wishful belief. Accordingly, historians of medicine have investigated the roles of medicine (“traditional,” “modern,” or neither) in the formation of modern nation-states and the struggle over modernity in twentieth-century East Asia. For example, John P. DiMoia (2013) shows that, despite its contemporary image as the “Republic of Plastic Surgery,” the history of medicine in South Korea is more than a “natural” adoption of Western biomedicine. Instead, the proliferation of private health care and acceptance of American models of bodily intervention in the post-colonial anti-communist state was as ideological and tied to its nation-state project as North Korea’s adoption of socialist models of health care and *Juche*-style reluctance to accept international assistance (DiMoia 2013, 16).

Reflecting specifically on the role of *zhongyi*, Hilary A. Smith (2017) argues that the conventional wisdom that Western medical knowledge “solved” intractable health problems in East Asia could not have been sustained had historians not ignored:

- 1) premodern *zhongyi* literature, through particular translations of non-Western disease names (such as foot *qi*) into modern medical terms (such as beriberi) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and
- 2) the relationship between the outbreaks of many modern diseases and the arrival of imperialism in the same period.

Elsewhere, Sean Hsiang-Lin Lei (2014) painstakingly takes on the binary opposition of “tradition/modernity” in the historiography of medicine in China. Rather than keeping afloat a “survivor” of premodern China amid the encroachment of modern science and biomedicine, he finds that the advocates of *zhongyi* in the late 1920s sought neither its preservation, nor its modernisation understood as Westernisation. Using the metaphor of biological evolution, Lei documents the speciation process of national medicine, or *guoyi* (國醫), that involved a dual transformation of medicine and of the new Republican Chinese state. The story of *guoyi* thus complicates the linear, teleological conception of modernity and affirms the plausibility of crossbreeding between such polar opposites as the modern and the traditional grounded on the Daoist dialectics. Even Paul U. Unschuld, one of the most prominent historians of *zhongyi*, wrote a small book on how China healed the trauma of Western and Japanese invasions incurred during the “century of national humiliation.” In his interpretation of the history of modern China, the country prescribed for itself a therapy following the principle of *zhongyi* that sees its own deficiencies and mistakes as the “first and foremost” cause of its illness, for “[e]vil can penetrate from outside only if one opens up a breach for it” (Unschuld 2013, 8). He believes that this self-therapy helped China to take “a path of reason and fundamental renewal” rather than allow individual aversions to the West or Japan to grow into national revenge-seeking against the former aggressors (Unschuld 2013, 8; and in contrast to Lin 2023, this issue).

How can International Relations draw from East Asian medicine?

It may be said that the practice of biomedicine does not involve any overarching theory of diagnosis and treatment (it has a system of such explanatory schema as infectious diseases, nutritional diseases, autoimmune diseases, and molecular-genetic diseases). *Zhongyi*, however, is manifestly based on the theory of *yin/yang* and the concept of *qi*, with some metaphysical assumptions that are not typically found in biomedicine. This section will discuss these *zhongyi* foundations in detail and consider how IR researchers can benefit from such insights.

Much biomedicine is concerned with identifying agents of disease, which it tries to isolate, control, or destroy. Following this logic, the primary task of the biomedical physician is to look for a specific cause of a clearly defined disease; their diagnosis is analytical. This type of approach has its parallel in IR. In his classic *Man, the State, and War* (2001), for example, Kenneth Waltz explores why war occurs in international relations by sorting “immediate causes” and “underlying causes” along three “levels of analysis” (he also called them “images”): individual, domestic, and international. Waltz’s triple scheme was further reduced into the unit and system levels in his *Theory of International Politics* (1979), treating states as “like-units” and locating the principal driving force of international politics in the material structure of the international system.

By contrast, *zhongyi* is primarily concerned with identifying a “pattern of disharmony,” which is then used to address the resulting imbalance in the patient’s body. The *zhongyi* physician gathers as much information as possible about the patient, for symptoms do not exist in the human body in isolation from the individual’s varied relationships in the world—rather, they are mutually constituted. Treatment is based on the total configuration of all discerned information to restore sustainable harmony to the individual. This article’s opening quotation from the Daoist classic *Tao-te Ching* (道德經) illustrates such an all-inclusive and all-interdependent ontological presumption in *zhongyi*. This presumption explains why causation was viewed differently in premodern China. Biochemist and Sinologist Joseph Needham (1991, 280–281) describes it elegantly:

Concepts are not subsumed under one another but placed side by side in a *pattern*, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of ‘inductance’... Things behave in particular ways not necessarily because of prior actions or impulses of other things, but because their position in the ever-moving cyclical universe was such that they were endowed with intrinsic natures which made that behaviour inevitable for them.

Zhongyi researcher Ted Kaptchuk’s (2000) “web of phenomena” metaphor further illustrates these two different orientations. For positivists, the ultimate concern is always the weaver (that is, the cause), since given phenomena are only its reflection. For Daoists, the priority is to grasp the inter-relationships or patterns within the web to become attuned to its unfolding dynamic. Who the weaver is, or whether they exist at all, is less urgent. Effects are not “grounded” on discrete materiality so to understand such inter-relationships or patterns within the web requires one to understand how things are related organically, not mechanically, to sustain

functions of the web or socio-political body (see Krickel-Choi, Chen, and Bukh 2022, this issue for how this insight helps to rethink territorial disputes).

It is rare for research in IR to be informed by the kind of relational ontological monism that is seen in *zhongyi*. An exception is Deepshikha Shahi's (2018) introduction to the concept of *Advaita* in Hindu philosophy, which stresses the globe as an "already-connected single reality" within which no part holds higher ontological significance. Ling's *The Dao of World Politics* (2014) is the first book-length endeavour that employs the theory of *yin/yang* to dissolve varied conflict-prone dichotomies (such as democracies vs. autocracies, West vs. Rest, etc.), without absorbing the Other into the self through conversion or destroying the former altogether (see also Joshi 2024).

To further understand the contribution of this *yin/yang* dialectic to diagnosis and healing in East Asia's political body, we recall the aforementioned symbol (Figure 1) where a large circle is divided into two complements. This philosophical construct stresses that all things have two aspects to the extent that a part can only be understood in relation to the whole and cannot exist in and of itself. While *yin* is associated with such qualities as cold, passivity, inwardness, and decrease, and *yang* is associated with heat, activity, outwardness, and increase, they are not of an essentialised, absolute nature. They always contain within themselves the possibility of opposition and change. This dialectical logic is well illustrated in the opening paragraph of the *Heike Monogatari* (平家物語 *The Tale of the Heike*), which describes the struggle between the Taira clan and Minamoto clan for control of Japan in the Genpei War (1180–1185):

The sound of the bell of Gionshoja echoes the impermanence of all things. The hue of the flowers of the teak tree declares that they who flourish must be brought low. Yea, the proud ones are but for a moment, like an evening dream in springtime. The mighty are destroyed at the last, they are as the dust before the wind.

Furthermore, *yin* and *yang* do not only mutually generate one another. The dynamic curve dividing them shows that *yin* and *yang* are constantly merging; they control one another and transform into one another. This is because *yin* cannot continue to exist in an extreme, unbalanced relation to *yang* without some change occurring, and *vice versa*. A gradual rebalancing or radical transformation will take place—if not an end to the relationship, which will in turn mark the start of another relationship. In IR terms, a *zhongyi* approach to conflict transformation to an extent expects disharmonious systems to self-correct over time, although this does not mean that each self-correction necessarily leads to a less violent relationship (Lin 2023, this issue). Indeed, it is important to recognise that conflicts and discords are part of the *yin/yang* dialectic which we find ourselves in (Seo 2021, this issue).

When it comes to encouraging such self-correction or healing, the notion of *qi* is a key concept in *zhongyi* thought, comparable to power in political science or currency in economics. Like *yin* and *yang*, there is no equivalent term in the English language that can satisfactorily grasp *qi*'s meaning; the best-selling English-language *zhongyi* textbook simply refers to *qi* in Romanised Chinese (Maciocia 2015). *Qi* cannot be reduced to vital energy or life force, as *qi* permeates everything in the universe, organic or otherwise. Nor is *qi* some primordial material.

It refers to the state of being of every phenomenon; without exception, everything is composed of, and defined by, its *qi*. *Qi* takes, and can become, various forms; as the “substratum of the cosmos,” it is the “cause, process, and outcome of all activity” (Kaptchuk 2000, 44). Philosopher Wei-Ming Tu (1985, 37–38) argues that the idea of *qi* has been historically conceived in a “fruitfully ambiguous” way, for it allows scholars to “explore realms of being which are inconceivable to people constricted by Cartesian dichotomy” between spirit and matter. Although *qi* seems inadequate to provide a philosophical grounding for the development of positivist science, Tu observes, it serves as “a metaphorical mode of knowing, an epistemological attempt to address the multidimensional nature of reality by comparison, allusion and suggestion” (Tu 1985, 37–38). *Zhongyi*’s conception of *qi* finds similar expressions in the quantum understanding of substances in that at the sub-atomic level substances are also processes of occurrence and becoming, as a distribution of potentialities or propensities rather than fixed or discrete things (Pan 2021). Like *qi*’s “fruitful ambiguity” that cannot be categorised as either spirit or matter, quantum theory uses the famous double-slit experiment to illustrate that a sub-atomic thing (light) can be in two or more states (wave–particle) at the same time. It is our expectation that Daoist-*zhongyi* perspectives will join force with quantum theory and other critical approaches’ efforts to dissolve persistent dichotomies in IR (see, in particular, Fierke 2022).

In addition to the aforementioned generic meaning, *qi* in clinical practice has a more specific sense, referring to the dynamic of engendering, movement, tension, and activation (Kaptchuk 2000, 46–52). It functions as the source of all movement and protects the body, enables harmonious transformation, ensures stability, and provides warmth to the body. *Qi* disharmonies may occur if *qi* is deficient or even collapses. *Qi* becomes stagnant or even rebellious if its usual movement is impaired or goes in the wrong direction. Discerning such patterns of disharmony is essential when applying this concept to diagnosing and encouraging healing in IR. For example, in two apparently parallel relations examined in this collection, North Korea–South Korea (Lee 2021, this issue) and China–Taiwan (Chen and Chen 2021, this issue), the former is analysed as suffering from *qi* stagnation whereas the latter is understood to have been facing *qi* deficiency. Encouraging a healthy flow, movement, or activation of *qi* can help overcome such stagnation, deficiency, or blockage, for example, as in Ling’s prescription at the outset of this article, by rediscovering (cultural, political, or economic) complementarities; by enabling (cross-border) circulation of goods, capital, and labour; by focusing on common concerns like environmental protection; or by emphasising philosophical grounds for interbeing. Each of the articles in this collection seeks to outline its own examination, diagnosis, and recommendation for healing in the East Asian body politic.

How can East Asian international relations be healed?

Including this opening article, this collection consists of 9 articles that suggest ways in which East Asian international relations can be healed. As an exploratory project, we choose to focus on some ongoing and long-lasting conflicts in East Asia, although this does not imply that other more recent cases are of less relevance.

As a ground-clearing exercise for this collection, the first article, by Kosuke Shimizu and Sei Noro (2021, this issue), draws upon Mahāyāna Buddhism to interrogate some taken-for-granted metatheoretical assumptions in IR such as the existence of autonomous subjects and the way they are related to their “Others,” typically in a temporally linear fashion. Buddhism is another important source of inspiration for EAM (Salguero 2022), and Shimizu and Noro’s contribution shows that it shares many insights with the Daoist approach introduced earlier. Learning from the Mahāyāna Buddhist medical practice that blurs the counterproductive distinction between the subject/practitioner and the object/patient, they argue that IR scholars must examine mutual constitution between themselves and the international problems that they claim to tackle, ontologically, spatially, and temporally.

In the second article, Chin-Kuei Tsui (2021, this issue) engages with both mainstream and critical literature on the intimate relationship between medicine and politics. It is already established that, as a superpower during the Cold War and the sole hegemon in the post-September 11 era, US security discourse has often been narrated in a pathologized way. However, Tsui finds that the medical metaphors employed by US policymakers in the processes of securitising perceived communist and religious extremist threats are specifically biomedical ones, with particular consequences in world politics. His research thus calls for a non-coercive, non-dichotomous, and more endogenous approach to conflict resolution inspired by EAM.

From the third and fourth articles, by Jooyoun Lee (2021, this issue) and Andrei Yamamoto (2022, this issue) respectively, this collection turns to some ailments of Westphalian modernity manifested in East Asian international relations. There is no exaggeration that the headline-grabbing “North Korea problem” has been among such ailments in which many stakeholders and outsiders alike see the nuclear-armed “hermit kingdom” as a clear and present danger to liberal international order, and/or as a human rights-violating Other to be disciplined or contained (if not eliminated). Seeing the two Koreas not as two opposing sovereign states on the opposite sides of the demilitarised zone but one social body suffering from *qi* blockage, Lee’s analysis highlights ontological inter-connectedness and reclaims agency of ordinary people unseen in Westphalian IR to facilitate *qi* flows across the inter-Korean borders. Informed by the theory of *wuxin* that conceives the “five elements” as a set of organised and inter-related emblems, Yamamoto questions the role of emotions in the conflict resolution literature typically understood in binary terms. He suggests that it is more helpful to not see emotions as essentially good or bad but rather as in excess or in deficit. Accordingly, he proposes counter-emotions as a creative approach to healing emotional imbalance in North Korea.

Beyond the Korean body politic, the fifth article, by Jungmin Seo (2021, this issue), reflects on a well-known academic and policy puzzle in East Asian international relations: Why do South Korea and Japan seldom get along with each other, even though the two states have so much in common (both are politically democratic, economically developed, culturally “Westernised” yet Confucian, while facing common security challenges by North Korea as fellow US allies)? Inspired by EAM’s monist worldview and interbeing image, Seo suggests that the two nations’ identity formation is co-constitutive in a way that diplomatic difficulties between them are arguably the manifestation of a *qi* imbalance, emotionally felt for each other as contempt

and anger. His research thus rejects the illusion of a quick “policy fix” and calls for a reformulation of national identities with long-term patience.

The sixth article, by Nina C. Krickel-Choi, Ching-Chang Chen, and Alexander Bukh (2022, this issue), revisits one of Japan’s three territorial disputes: the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands issue involving both China and Taiwan. Reconsidering the notion of the body in light of recent developments in Ontological Security Studies (OSS), Krickel-Choi, Chen, and Bukh show why these tiny islets, once seen as part of an exclusionary Westphalian state body, can become existentially important for the claimant states and why the dispute endures. Yet, they also argue, such a dispute is not without an ontological exit if the territories in question do not resemble anatomical organs (as discrete entities to be protected or controlled) but the EAM ones (embedded in their relationships with other body parts to produce life-sustaining functions). In other words, the health of the Japan–China–Taiwan body can benefit from promoting functional cooperation over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

The Taiwan Strait is another regional “flashpoint” for many observers of East Asian international relations. The seventh article, by Boyu Chen and Ching-Chang Chen (2021, this issue), opens with an empirical puzzle concerning how to make sense of some Taiwanese Buddhist organisations’ donation of face masks to the earliest COVID-19 pandemic-hit areas in China at a time when relations across the Taiwan Strait were (and, for many, are still) deteriorating. Employing the interbeing image, Chen and Chen argue that it is possible to rethink cross-Strait relations without reproducing the “Taiwan-is-(not)-a-part-of-China” narratives. While the unbalanced China–Taiwan body has failed to turn the increase of “food” (cross-Strait exchanges) into more “blood” (“we-ness” or good-will), they find that these Buddhist organisations’ activities are conducive to “blood-making” and their potential in destabilising the Westphalian unification/independence dichotomy is worthy of attention.

The eighth and final article of this collection, by Wan-Ping Lin (2023, this issue), moves onto another of China’s thorny issue over which Beijing has been facing numerous international criticisms: Hong Kong. While the imposition of the Hong Kong National Security Law in 2020 and the further integration of the former British colony into the Chinese mainland makes it tempting to conclude that their different systems cannot coexist in the same country, Lin argues that the success or failure of Beijing’s “One Country, Two Systems” (OCTS) formula for Hong Kong is neither one-sided nor pre-determined. From a Daoist-*zhongyi*’s perspective, she suggests, the OCTS can be seen as an example of dialectical statecraft, whose potential for political healing or authoritarian control depends on the extent to which the Beijing and Hong Kong authorities follow or deviate from *Dao* (道).

Conclusion

Contributors to this collection learn from *zhongyi* that it is possible to imagine that all politics, within and across state borders, operates within a body politic. As a knowledge tradition and practice not imposed by any geocultural core, a *zhongyi*-inspired approach to conflict transformation in East Asia (and beyond) encourages local agents to resolve their problems on

their own terms and in their own contexts, enabling stakeholders to conduct enquiries more organically. Another contribution that *zhongyi* can bring to the IR discipline lies in its potential to facilitate “worlding beyond the West.” This is not because *zhongyi* is “traditional” (in the Orientalist sense), or because it adds non-Western “differences” to the apparent diversity of a Eurocentric subject of enquiry claiming to be “global.” When confronted with biomedicine as the hallmark of science in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, medicine became a narrow space of modernity that was deemed too crowded to allow *zhongyi* to coexist alongside biomedicine (Lei 2014). However, the co-existence (if not yet co-constitution) of these two systems of thought has become increasingly common today (Kaptchuk 2000). Similarly confronted with a scientific discourse of modernity, IR scholars can benefit from *zhongyi*’s methodology for envisioning a “world of many worlds” (Agathangelou and Ling 2009), within which Westphalia is neither dominant nor excluded. Finally, like all essential *zhongyi* texts which comment on and modify the *Huangdi neijing* that was written before them, the articles presented in this collection can be read as another modest commentary that attempts to release *zhongyi*’s fuller potential beyond the human body. In other words, our diagnoses are not absolute and are necessarily open to different creative interpretations. While our proposed treatment echoes some previous calls for transforming the bodies and maladies at hand, this project goes further to help such calls find increasingly solid (meta)theoretical grounding and transformational vocabularies for healing the political body in East Asia and beyond.

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Notes

¹ The issue in question is not about whether democracy is the regime type most conducive to pandemic prevention but rather how democracy has become a new "standard of civilisation" in what Foucault termed the "regime of truth."

² Although *qi* is central to Chinese and other East Asian culture, it is not unique in human civilisations. Derived from Stoic philosophy, Athenais of Attaleia (ca. 50 BC) turned the doctrine of *pneuma* into a life-giving principle that echoed the *qi* concept (Unschuld 2009, 99).

³ In EAM's cosmology, change or transformation is always immanent, because *qi* connects all things by evoking their already existing propensity or disposition. This *qi* method of influencing other things through connecting is called *gan-ying* (感應) or resonance, recalling Bruce Lee's famous advice in his 1973 film *Enter the Dragon*: "Don't think. Feel." The *qi* of one thing (Lee's student) resonates with that of another thing (the student's surroundings), bringing forth something anew (a perfect kick).

⁴ Ling (2014, 120) defined interbeing as "co-dependent arising" where "the self 'flows' into others through intersubjective reverberations." The interbeing image is derived from a Buddhist

formulation of relationality, *pratītyasamutpāda* in Sanskrit or *engi* (縁起) in Japanese (Shimizu and Noro 2021, this issue).

⁵ *Wuxin* (五行 five phases) is another important theoretical foundation of *zhongyi*, which was originally used in the political context before it was incorporated into the *Huangdi neijing*. Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water are conceived as a set of emblems by which all things and events in the cosmos could be organised and related to one another. See Yamamoto (2022, this issue).

⁶ Without using *zhongyi*'s imaginaries, William Callahan (2023) similarly stresses the importance of thinking and feeling visually for a multisensory appreciation of (international) politics.

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Figure caption

Figure 1. *Yin–yang* diagram. Source: Wikimedia public domain image.