ANALYTICAL ESSAY

China's "Politics of Harmony" and the Quest for Soft Power in International Politics

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This article engages with China's "politics of harmony" to investigate the dangers and possibilities of soft power as a concept and practice. Chinese sources claim that China will be able to exercise soft power due to its tradition of thinking about harmony. Indeed, the concept of harmony looms large in Chinese soft power campaigns, which differentiate China's own harmonious soft power from the allegedly disharmonious hard power of other great powers—in particular Western powers and Japan. Yet, similarly dichotomizing harmony discourses have been employed precisely in the West and Japan. In all three cases, such harmony discourses set a rhetorical trap, forcing audiences to empathize and identify with the "harmonious" self or risk being violently "harmonized." There is no doubt that the soft power of harmony is coercive. More importantly, the present article argues that it has legitimized and enabled oppressive, homogenizing, and bellicose expansionism and rule in the West and Japan. A similarly structured exercise of soft power may enable violence in and beyond China, too. Ultimately, however, we argue that China's own tradition of thinking about harmony may help us to theorize how soft power might be exercised in less antagonistic and violent ways.

Keywords: China, harmony, Japan, power, soft power, the West

Introduction

Worries abound in policy circles and academia that China's rise will generate conflict and war (Friedberg 1993; Allison 2017). Chinese political leaders and scholars, however, insist that the rise will be harmonious and peaceful, despite China's accumulation of economic and military capabilities in recent years. They claim that where other great powers, past and present, have engaged in coercion, violence, and belligerent imperialism, China's long tradition of thinking about harmony makes it uniquely able and disposed to exercise soft power in world politics (Ba 2010; Xi 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Such claims are themselves made in attempts to attract domestic and international audiences, and the concept of harmony has loomed large in Chinese soft power campaigns for some time (Li M. 2008; Hunter 2009; Heng 2010; Nordin 2012, 2016; Callahan 2015). Ding (2010, 255) explains: "when a rising power tries to develop its soft power resources and wield its soft power, its revisionist policy orientation will greatly decrease." By portraying itself as harmonious, Chinese leaders thus seek to convey China's overall benignity to the world and to attract domestic and international audiences. Since these attempts to exercise soft power juxtapose harmony with forms of violence in a very similar way to how soft power itself is differentiated from hard power, a politics premised on harmony might even be considered soft power par excellence. Do these Chinese visions of harmony really epitomize the exercise of an essentially different kind of power that is indeed "soft"? Can they help to prevent the regional conflicts that some believe are imminent?

The aim of this article is to analyze the dangers and possibilities of soft power as a concept and practice through the lens of harmony. China's harmony discourse clearly operates in line with how international relations (IR) scholars have conceptualized soft power. Paradoxically, however, this means "it isn't so soft" (Bially Mattern 2005). To begin, the self to which audiences are to be attracted is produced by discursively differentiating flawed and unattractive others (Callahan 2015). This dichotomization of good and bad, moreover, tends to set a "rhetorical trap" that forces domestic and international audiences to empathize and identify with the self or risk being lumped together with the other (Bially Mattern 2005, 586). Along these lines, the Chinese harmony discourse differentiates harmonious China from allegedly disharmonious Western powers and Japan.[1] The latter are represented as the hard power–prone imperialists that the Chinese government blames for its "100 years of national humiliation." The desired effect of such dichotomization is to make audiences empathize and identify with the Chinese self and against its Western and Japanese others.

The first section contributes to the power literature in IR by demonstrating how such an already coercive soft power can legitimize and enable the use of hard power, that is, the coercive use of military instruments of statecraft and physical violence. In short, the exercise of soft power may make it appear reasonable to domestic and international audiences to "harmonize" the allegedly "disharmonious," as well as those who do not clearly disavow them.

The second section illustrates this point by comparing present-day Chinese soft power campaigns that rely on a harmony discourse with similarly structured discourses in the West and Japan. It demonstrates that harmony discourses played a defining role in the highly oppressive Western and Japanese systems from which the Chinese government seeks to differentiate its own alleged harmony. Soft power did not figure as a concept in these Western great powers or in Imperial Japan, so unlike present-day China they could not exploit the performative potential of the soft power concept by portraying themselves as such and making explicit links

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[1] We use the terms "Western" or "the West" because the discourses discussed operate by deploying such categories. Like "China" or "Japan," "the West" is produced by and productive of the wider discourses in which it is embroiled and gains significance in relation to those other categories.

between soft power and harmony. Nonetheless, the concept of soft power can still be used to understand how harmony discourses legitimized and enabled the use of hard power in those settings too.

The third section revisits China to argue that, in its current form, the dominant Chinese harmony discourse gives little reason to hope that the country will be able to exercise soft power with any less violent consequences than other great powers have done in the past or do in the present. Indeed, a harmony discourse is already legitimizing and enabling the violent harmonization of domestic dissenters.

As the promise of soft power increasingly seems to have been blocked, we end the article by arguing that recent attempts in IR to draw on premodern Chinese thinking about harmony might after all help to envisage the exercise of what might be called soft power in world politics. In its Daoist guise, this kind of power is again generated through empathy and identification. This time, however, it is the self who must empathize and identify with the other by recognizing their similarities, albeit without neglecting their particularity or singularity.

Soft Power Legitimizes and Enables Hard Power

Since coining the term soft power in 1990, Joseph S. Nye has proposed many and varied definitions. It is the ability to "get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (Nye 2004, x); to persuade "others to want what you want" (Nye 1990, 31–32); to "shape the preferences of others" (Nye 2004, 5); and to "win over the hearts and minds" of others (Nye 2011, 20). Soft power thus pinpoints the production and reproduction of peaceful agreement, consent, acquiescence—or, indeed, harmony. However, in most cases, soft power analysis has been subsumed into the dominant tendency in IR to operationalize power as capabilities (cf. Hall 2010). In the case of soft power, this involves a focus on the possession and distribution of cultural or otherwise "soft" artifacts that may or may not be attractive to audiences and have foreign policy consequences (e.g., Nye 2004; Lam 2007; Heng 2010). In other cases, soft power has been interpreted as revolving around distinct and essentialized actors in line with the relational power literature (Baldwin 2016). Here, soft power is often understood as *A*'s capacity to cause effects against the professed interests of *B*, using "soft" rather than "hard" means (e.g., Kronig, McAdam, and Weber 2010; Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014). However, neither of these literatures succeeds in pinpointing how consent is culturally produced in line with the above definitions.

This article builds on scholarship that seeks to address this issue by transcending the explicitly rationalist epistemology and individualist, causal, and often materialist ontology that underlies much of the existing soft power literature. This work has also begun to problematize the alleged "softness" of soft power and its juxtaposition with hard power. We summarize the gist of these contributions but take the argument one step further. We contend that soft power, understood in these terms, can legitimize and enable hard power, understood here primarily as the coercive use of military instruments of statecraft and physical violence (Baldwin 2016, 178–88).

To begin, William A. Callahan argues that the positive representations of the self that tend to be associated with a country's soft power—for example, as "democratic," "liberal," or "peaceful"—are necessarily complemented by negative representations of others as the opposite, namely "undemocratic," "illiberal," and "unpeaceful." Negative othering is thus part of how audiences are attracted to the self (Callahan 2015, 219–20; see also Sun 2012, 19; Hagström 2015). This understanding of soft power is admittedly not the one that made the concept popular. According to Callahan's argument, however, the self cannot be idealized without differentiating and even ostracizing others. From this perspective, soft power is closely related to the identity literature in and beyond IR. Indeed, understood in these terms, soft

power might even be defined as the capacity to produce collective identity through differentiation.

Moreover, Janice Bially Mattern argues that the "attraction" in one of Nye's definitions of soft power above is generated through "representational force." One example is when President George W. Bush "attracted" other states to join US-led military campaigns in the "war on terror" by setting up the option of being "either with us or with the terrorists" (Bially Mattern 2005, 606). In her rendering, soft power is enmeshed in and serves to perpetuate the speaker's identity, at the same time as it threatens to insert unbearable inconsistencies and contradictions into the identity discourses on which audiences build their purported sense of ontological security unless they are duly "attracted."

Despite challenging the distinction between attraction and coercion, Bially Mattern concludes that the soft power of representational force, "however unappealing, is normatively more appealing than the power politics of war, empire and physical conquest" (Bially Mattern 2005, 611–12). In contrast, we believe that representational force and the dichotomization of self and other are key to legitimizing and thereby enabling the use of hard power. Hence, we argue that soft power, as currently conceptualized and exercised, is *even less* soft than previous critics have suggested.

We argue that the dichotomization of a good self in opposition to a bad other that epitomizes soft power in this understanding is productive of reality, as in Michel Foucault's (1977) notion of "productive power." It happens in such a way that violent action against others and those that do not clearly disavow them can be legitimized and enabled. These discursively produced subject positions are thus co-constituted with courses of action (Weldes and Saco 1996). They do not determine particular policies but promote or exclude possibilities and delineate the "range of imaginable conduct" (Doty 1993, 299). Previous research outside of the soft power fold suggests that the narrative and discursive constructions of self and other legitimized and enabled wars in, for example, the former Yugoslavia (1991–2001), Chechnya (1999–2001), and Iraq (2003–11) (Krebs and Lobasz 2007; Subotic 2016; Wilhelmsen 2017).

In Bially Mattern's analysis, a distinct voice exposes its audience to the non-choice of identifying with, for example, the "democratic" self and against the "terrorist" other. Such non-choices may be given their starkest and clearest formulation in utterances by specific actors. We do not agree, however, that only individual speakers exercise this kind of power. The audiences for any discourse may be subjected to similar non-choices that compel them to empathize and identify with the self and against the other (Wilhelmsen 2017). The notion that democratic states are morally superior to terrorists, for example, was not Bush's own invention. His statement was attractive or coercive precisely because it reproduced a common trope that already resonated with most potential audiences (cf. Lee 2011). This argument relies on a shift from an ontology of "things" to a narrative or discursive ontology of "relations" (Nordin and Smith 2018). Because it tends to identify discrete actors as holders of power or as its distinct senders and receivers, much of the previous soft power scholarship misses the fundamental point that actors can be understood ontologically as in a process of becoming through narratives and discourses (Somers 1994; Shepherd 2015).

In sum, others have demonstrated that hard power attributes can be subsumed under soft power logics, and vice versa (Gallarotti 2011; Kearn 2011; Rothman 2011). We argue more fundamentally that physical violence becomes politically possible exactly through the way in which soft power is exercised by dichotomizing the good self and the bad other. Representational force and self/other dichotomization do not *necessarily* or *inevitably* result in the exercise of hard power, but it is difficult to think of an instance of physical violence or the coercive use of military statecraft that was not made possible by soft power understood in these terms.

Soft Power and Discourses on Harmony in China, the West, and Japan

This section examines China's harmony discourse, which is explicitly situated in the country's soft power campaign. Because this discourse relies on self/other dichotomization and representational force, moreover, it is also clearly an *instance of* soft power as understood in this article. If successful, this discourse makes audiences empathize and identify with harmonious and soft power–prone China and against the allegedly disharmonious and hard power–prone Western powers and Japan that inflicted so much suffering on the Chinese people over two centuries. The section focuses on statements made by President Xi Jinping, as representative of current government policy, contextualizing them in broader Chinese harmony discourses from Confucius to Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao.

The section goes on to demonstrate that China shares a harmony discourse with its two allegedly disharmonious others. Although the cases of the West and Japan antedate the concept of soft power, and Western and Japanese leaders did not couch their discourses on harmony in terms of soft power, harmony in these contexts clearly did not epitomize any "normatively more appealing" (Bially Mattern 2005, 612) ways of exercising power. In both cases, harmony discourses legitimized and enabled the coercive use of military instruments and physical violence. Even though harmony never meant exactly the same thing, its various deployments in the West and Japan had strikingly similar consequences. By comparing these harmony discourses, the article illustrates the "analytical generality" of the argument (Pouliot 2014, 252–54)—not only that discourses on harmony tend to legitimize physical violence but also that the exercise of soft power more generally can legitimize and enable the exercise of hard power.

Needless to say, the traditions of thinking about harmony in all of these locales are far more diverse than we can do justice to in this article. In neither case is it correct to imagine one continuous or essentializable line of thought. The purpose here is thus only to show that what others claim to be representative of, or essential to, Chinese, Western, and Japanese traditions share a similar logic in their articulation of harmony, not just within but across those imagined traditions.

But how can we ever know if an interaction is an instance of power—either soft or hard? For example, how can we know that democracy is an important component of US soft power? While we do not want to overemphasize a causal link here, we believe there are essentially two sets of evidence for such a correlation in the case of China, set out below: (a) there is a great emphasis on the harmony concept in the communications of the Chinese government, typically in conjunction with calls to increase its soft power; and (b) the actors below, and especially President Xi Jinping, clearly use these folded-together terms in attempts to get others to empathize and identify with China—in ways that may be simultaneously attractive and coercive in the terms described above.

Gaining Soft Power through "Harmony": The Case of China

A significant ingredient in Xi's explanations of why others should not fear but welcome China's rise is the claim that China will exercise power more softly than other great powers, past and present. Since he became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, Xi has systematically sought to increase China's "national soft power." This aim is epitomized by efforts to "strengthen buildup of its international communication capabilities and discourse power and make Chinese culture go global" (quoted in CNTV 2013). As Xi stated at a 2014 Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: "We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" (quoted in Xinhua 2014).

Xi's argument is that China is well disposed to exercising soft power because it has a tradition of valuing harmony that has been "passed from generation to generation" (Xi 2014c). Harmony, Xi emphasizes, is a "fine tradition and lofty virtue of the Chinese nation" (quoted in Zhang 2015, 173–74; cf. Xi 2014c, 2014d) nurtured on Chinese soil for thousands of years. Others call harmony a "key concept," that is "foundational" to Chinese thought (Ba 2010, 3) and permeates Chinese society (Ni and Qian 2008). In making such claims, Xi traces a line of similar statements in speeches by his predecessors, which peaked after former President Hu began to deploy the twin policy concepts of "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*) and "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie*) in 2004–2005 (Hu 2005a; 2005b). During Hu's time in power, "harmony" (*he*) was declared to be the Chinese character that "carries the most meaning for Chinese culture" (Chin 2010). The concept loomed large in narratives on the country's past, present, and future displayed during the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Callahan 2010, 3–4) and the 2010 Shanghai Expo (Nordin 2012, 2016). Hence, harmony is seen not only as fundamental to China's past thought and culture but as a defining aspect of the "Chinese dream" of national rejuvenation and, again, its capacity to exercise soft power (Zeng 2014, 5–6; Tao 2015, 19).

Given the centrality of harmony in China, there is great diversity in its historical meaning and usage—it is a common theme for Daoist, Buddhist, and various strands of modern, secular, and even Maoist thought, and it has been elaborated by scholars such as Yü Ying-shih, Theodore de Bary, Hsu Cho-Yun, Willard Peterson, Andrew Plaks, Peter Bol, and Benjamin Elman, among many others. However, in contemporary debates, the Confucian tradition is the most common source for thinking about harmony (Bell 2017; see also Cai 1999; Li C. 2008; Xi 2014a; Tao 2015). This tradition is itself diverse, and interpretations of key texts such as the *Analects*, attributed to Confucius, have been contested by thinkers from Meng Ke and Xun Yu to Han Yu, Zhu Xi, Wang Yangming, and Gu Yanwu. That said, in standard Confucian accounts, and arguably in the *Analects*, only the elites who have reached wisdom through education can properly understand harmony (Li C. 2008, 91). Thus, everybody in a harmonious society should fulfill the will of their leaders. Accordingly, a harmonious society is built only when all parts of society play their proper roles and submit to hierarchical rule, so that sons obey their fathers, younger brothers obey their elder brothers, wives obey their husbands, and ministers obey their emperor (*Analects* 1938, XII 11). Beyond the limited diversity of these roles, Confucius saw multiplicity as a potential problem. An incorrect understanding or representation of sociopolitical reality was an evil to be rectified and censored (*Analects* 1938, II.2, 88, IX.14, 141–42). Failure to do so would lead to the rulers' imitation of evil conduct, which would then spread to, and deconstruct, the allegedly harmonious elite-led sociopolitical order. Hence, harmony requires the rectification of problematic multiplicity (Cai 1999, 333–34).

Along similar lines, Chinese leaders and intellectuals suggest that they have privileged access to harmony (Nordin 2016). The outside, by contrast, is portrayed as China's disharmonious opposite—the external bad to China's internal good. Xi, for instance, claims that China will not be the same kind of belligerently homogenizing force as other great powers, past and present (Xi 2014a; 2014b; 2014c). He asserts: "China was long one of the most powerful countries in the world. Yet it never engaged in colonialism or aggression. The pursuit of peaceful development represents the peace-loving cultural tradition of the Chinese nation over the past several thousand years" (Xi 2014c). According to this narrative, which is widespread in scholarship and popular culture, China won the admiration and compliance of its neighbors by refraining from territorial expansion (Zhao 2006; Yu 2008). The allegedly harmonious *Pax Sinica* in East Asia was only disrupted when self-serving Western powers began to feed their growing commercial empires by territorial expansion from the eighteenth century onward. Zhao Suisheng (2015, 963) aptly describes this narrative as one where "the collapse of the Chinese world order . . . was

a result of the clash of civilizations between the benevolent East Asian order and the brutal European nation-state system."

Japan also has its place in this narrative. It is suggested that "while the Europeans led the initial onslaughts, Asia's most Westernized state of Japan delivered the most devastating blow . . . to the dying traditional system" (Yu 2008, 124–25). President Xi has repeatedly highlighted how it is exactly the experience of humiliation at the hands of Western imperialists and Japanese aggressors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that has led a rising China to commit to follow a harmonious and peaceful path (Xi 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b). Juxtaposing militarist, hard power–prone and disharmonious Japan with peaceful, soft power–prone and harmonious China has emerged as a key soft power objective since Xi came to power (Callahan 2015, 222).

In sum, the harmony discourse epitomizes China's current attempt to exercise soft power. It relies on representational force and the dichotomization of a positive Chinese self and negative Western and Japanese others. This discursive logic forces domestic and international audiences to empathize and identify with harmonious China and against its disharmonious others. At the same time, there are already indications that such a harmony discourse in China is not necessarily benign but intertwines with hierarchal rule and calls to battle diversity.

Advocating Hierarchy through "Harmony": The Case of the West

The first other to China's "harmonious" self is thus the West. The dominant Chinese discourse on harmony, however, rarely recognizes that Western thought has its roots in Ancient Greece, which also strongly emphasized harmony as a virtue. A European tradition of thinking about harmony can be traced from ancient philosophers such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, Gottfried Leibniz, Friedrich Hegel, Charles Fourier, and Robert Owen, as well as to more modern harmony advocates such as Wilhelm Weitling.

The infusion of harmony in the purported Greek roots of "Western civilization" can be exemplified by the ancient thinker who is often depicted as the Western equivalent to Confucius: Plato. Despite significant differences between their wider ideas, Plato's account of harmony has striking and significant commonalities with that of Confucius. Both emphasized that social harmony could only be achieved if all parts of society fulfilled their proper roles and submitted to hierarchical rule. To Plato, moreover, a society was harmonious and just when its three classes of people (rulers, soldiers, and workers) did their own proper work in a unified hierarchical structure, and soldiers were ready to enforce rulers' rule with violence when necessary (Plato 1987, 433a). Like Confucius, Plato believed that only elites, who had reached wisdom through education, could properly understand harmony (Smith 2010, 36). Beyond the handful of roles that he thought were useful to social order, Plato shared Confucius' evaluation that "multiplicity leads to the bad and the ugly" (Cai 1999, 331). Moreover, like Confucius, he thought that correct understanding needed to be enforced through censorship (Plato 1987, 401a–b, 398a).

This cursory overview of the similarities between Platonic and Confucian thought shows that both the presence of thinking about harmony and its elaboration might be less uniquely Chinese than some Chinese commentators would have us believe. Moreover, thinking about harmony coincided with violent wars in both Ancient China and Ancient Greece. This suggests that in neither context was thinking about harmony a guarantee of peaceful and harmonious interactions.

Highlighting these ancient similarities is not to say that with modernity, a harmony discourse disappeared from the Western tradition. Previous research has shown that recent European history abounds with talk about harmony. Moreover, such discourses of harmony have legitimized and enabled a range of activities, from mildly homogenizing nationalism to the military expansionism of Nazi Germany. In

interwar Scandinavia, for example, harmony (*harmoni*) appears as part of "idyllizing and harmony-seeking nationalism," expressed in wholesome physical activity in nature (Nielsen 1997, 68). Such a notion of harmony was also a significant ingredient in German fascist quests for the "genuine," as exemplified first by harmony with nature and later by harmony with the racialized "*Volk*" itself (Mosse 2004, 147). Hitler used the rhetoric of "harmony" (*Harmonie*) to motivate his state based on racial segregation and hierarchy. In *Mein Kampf,* he wrote that "a certain harmony must be present" between mind and body (Hitler 1992, 370). In contrast to the harmoniously beautiful Aryans, any apparent "harmony" among Jews was considered fake and said to vanish in the absence of a common enemy or threat (Hitler 1992, 274). This dichotomization of those who embodied proper harmony and those who did not legitimized and enabled extreme violence against those who fell on the wrong side of the divide. Moreover, audiences were attracted, or perhaps coerced, to the cause by having to decide whether they sided with the harmonizers or with those who were deemed in need of harmonization.

The discursive deployment of harmony is also evident in the wake of European colonialism, although it is a matter of debate whether it is a direct legacy of it. In Indonesia, for example, "nationalist idioms of harmony" resonate with local efforts to build harmony between Christian and Muslim communities (Acciaioli 2001, 107). Such efforts, however, have contributed to increased communal tensions by failing to recognize the heterogeneity of local settlements and insisting that a single people's custom must be sovereign in each territory. Disputes between indigenes and migrants have erupted into violence in many parts of the archipelago (Acciaioli 2001, 104, 107–8). Moreover, during Colombia's nineteenth-century wars of independence, racial equality was declared in law in accordance with a "nationalist mythology of racial harmony" (Lasso 2007, 9). However, the elite were able to maintain informal patterns of discrimination by impeding the formation of racially based political associations. In fact, the language of harmony helped to keep the disenfranchised "in their place" by recasting the expression of racial grievances as a mark of unpatriotic divisiveness, criminalized by elites who claimed that racial harmony had already been achieved (Lasso 2007, 13, see also chapter 3). Similarly, the Catholic Church's notion of "class harmony" legitimized inequality between classes as "natural" in twentieth-century Argentina. In this way, working class and socialist notions of class struggle were suppressed. In the Argentinian case, a discourse of harmony was a precursor to illiberal, authoritarian, militarist, and quasi-fascist nationalist conservatism (Rock 1987, 286–87).

In sum, a harmony discourse is not unique to Chinese history of thought but also central to the cradle and development of Western traditions. To both Plato and Confucius, it was the duty of elites to elaborate ideas of harmony and the duty of those deemed inferior to submit to and obey the elites. The next steps in such logic, understood in this article as the exercise of soft power, are to label the disobedient disharmonious and in need of harmonization and to coercively enforce compliance by using the hard power of physical violence. This dichotomization makes audiences align with the harmonizers in word and deed or else be deemed also in need of violent harmonization. The section suggests that the soft power of harmony is potentially, although not necessarily, deeply authoritarian.

Justifying Militarism through "Harmony": The Case of Japan

As seen above, Japan—particularly in its prewar and wartime incarnations—is the second other in relation to which China's "harmonious" self is constructed. The Japan case echoes and reinforces the points made above about the West, and Japanese harmony discourses bear an uncanny resemblance to their contemporary Chinese equivalents.

During Japan's wars in the 1930s and 1940s, the importance of harmony was established most definitively in the 1937 *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan* (*Kokutai no hongi*). By 1945, the Bureau of Educational Reform—the entity in Japan's Ministry of Education charged with thought control—had disseminated approximately 2 million copies of the moral education textbook. The book's aim was to "cultivate and awaken national sentiment and consciousness" (Hall 1949, 11). In his introduction to the English translation, Robert King Hall (1949, 8) characterizes *Kokutai no hongi* as "a literary expression of ideas . . . sincerely held by a very great majority of the Japanese."

In brief, *Kokutai no hongi* set forth the official state doctrine on Japan's civilization and international relations, as well as the mythology and belief systems on which they were based. The central notion was that Japan was "a nation united in harmony as a single large family" under the benign rule of a divine emperor. Moreover, the book dichotomously differentiated this Japanese "spirit of harmony" from Western individualism and egoism (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949 [1937], 93).

One chapter in *Kokutai no hongi* was devoted specifically to the concept of harmony, which is deemed Japan's "fundamental way" (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949 [1937], 93). Analogous to contemporary Chinese discourses, *Kokutai no hongi* singled out Japan as "a unique nation built on the harmony of all things" (Cross 2009, 84). At the same time—and in striking similarity to the Chinese notion of "harmonious society"—harmony was not merely a fact but also a goal. Only by securing Japan's essence could the nation be rejuvenated and overcome "old abuses," "feudal fetters," and the "ideological and social evils" that had allegedly been imported through foreign learning since the nineteenth century (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949 [1937], 51–52).

On the one hand, the book stressed harmony between races, much like the propaganda that was used to motivate Japanese imperialism in the guise of "Pan-Asianism" and the construction of a Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere (*Dai-tōa-kyōeiken*) (Hotta 2007). In this vein, foreign ministry spokesman Kawai Tatsuo stated in 1938, "The objective of Japanese expansion is . . . the realization of harmony and concord among the nations of East Asia and their common happiness and prosperity" (quoted in Culver 2013, 121). On the other hand, *Kokutai no hongi* reproduced the idea that social harmony could exist only if people played their natural and predetermined social roles to uphold a hierarchical social order with the emperor at the apex (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949 [1937], 97–100). Many contemporary Japanese began to envision a similar kind of harmony at the international level—or "harmony with the world" (Zumoto 1927, 14). Different actors probably meant rather different things in their advocacy of harmony (Goto-Jones 2005, 95), but as Japanese expansionism progressed, the favored recipe for building a harmonious world was increasingly to unify various parts of East Asia hierarchically under Japanese leadership. As William Swan (1996, 146) notes, this was intended to produce an "organically functioning entity that would harmoniously follow the political and economic leadership of Japan."

These grandiose and rather idealistic aims notwithstanding, the obvious flipside of the coin was the use of physical violence. Although Japanese rhetoric was meant to make audiences empathize and identify with the idea that harmonious Japan had the right to supremacy, the use of violence and military instruments of statecraft were frequently seen as justified to diminish resistance and secure the harmony sought. *Kokutai no hongi* clearly states: "War . . . is not . . . intended for destruction, overpowering, or subjugation of others . . . [but] for the bringing about of great harmony, that is, peace" (*Kokutai no hongi* 1949 [1937], 95). Accordingly, those who challenged Japan's harmonious cause risked being deemed disharmonious and in need of violent harmonization.

Although current identity discourses in Japan tend to differentiate the peacefulness of postwar Japan from the belligerency of its wartime incarnation (Hagström and Hanssen 2016; Hagström and Isaksson 2019), harmony has remained a central

concept in the country. Japan's identity discourse par excellence in the postwar period, the so-called *Nihonjinron* (or "theory about the Japanese"), is a case in point (Befu 2001, 22). However, Miyoshi and Harootunian (1993, 4) note that a kind of "gangsterism structurally enacts the rule of unity and conformity" in most segments of Japanese society. It does this through what we now recognize as the exercise of soft power, or the rhetorical force of dichotomizing the harmonious from the disharmonious: "One either accepts what he or she is told or becomes ostracized" (Miyoshi and Harootunian 1993, 4; see also Befu 2001, 19). Hirata and Warschauer (2014, 5) indicate that the quest for harmony can "cause harm" through the production of fear of and hostility toward those deemed disharmonious (Hirata and Warschauer 2014, 7–10).

Much as in the case of China, harmony is also emphasized in Japan's official soft power campaigns (Heng 2010; Bukh 2014). These campaigns have in turn been criticized for their resemblance to the cultural politics of Japan's interwar period—for essentializing Japanese culture and disregarding the ways in which cultures intermingle (Shimizu 2014, 696). Moreover, Daisuke Akimoto (2012) argues that the Abe government's notion of "proactive pacifism" gives Japan a mandate to "harmonize" nonpeaceful countries. Although he does not advocate the use of military instruments, the gist of proactive pacifism is exactly that "our peace" must be safeguarded from "their belligerency"—if necessary with the help of military force (Hagström and Hanssen 2016).

In sum, Japanese wartime violence was legitimized and enabled in part through a harmony discourse that implied that war and occupation with harmonious consequences was possible and in the best interest of all "liberated" Asian nations. Decades before it was popularized, what is now termed soft power can thus be seen as having operated in discourses that portrayed it as harmonious Japan's destiny to harmonize less harmonious others (cf. Akami 2014). Despite contemporary Japan's efforts to make a clean break with this particular past, discourses on harmony continue to enforce conformity there—in the final analysis through the use of physical violence.

The Soft Power of Harmony: Dangers and Possibilities

We have shown that the self/other dichotomization and representational force at play in historical harmony discourses in the West and Japan served to legitimize and enable a range of physically violent practices. Our examples indicate that such harmonization can enable and legitimize violence in different ways. The other to be harmonized can refer to various groups and actors that are deemed disharmonious: (a) for being inferior and therefore disturbing the harmonious self—for example, minorities; (b) for not clearly empathizing and identifying with the self who embodies harmony or for resisting that self—for example, political dissenters; and (c) for propagating alternative, distinctly disharmonious versions of world order—for example, external threats. The self then is related to the other differently, and uses force against the other for different reasons.

This section argues that much like the Western and Japanese cases, the harmony discourse that is part of Chinese soft-power campaigns and epitomizes China's exercise of soft power can also legitimize and enable hierarchical sociopolitical structures, war, empire, and physical conquest, through the above ways of enabling and legitimizing violence. In other words, the exercise of soft power is likely to enable the use of hard power in the case of China too, and has already begun to do so domestically. Does the exercise of soft power *inevitably* legitimize and enable the use of hard power? The section ends by suggesting that soft power could be reconceptualized with the help of other Chinese interpretations of harmony in a way that may be helpful in severing the connection with hard power.

Chinese Harmony and the Use of Hard Power

As noted above, the dominant Chinese harmony discourse operates by differentiating China's "harmonious" self from "disharmonious" others in the form of Western great powers and Japan. In this way, it seeks to make domestic and international audiences empathize and identify with China and against its others. However, a significant cohort of reputable historians has repudiated the claim of a historically peaceful East Asia that is the basis for Chinese claims to past harmonious rule. Peter Perdue (2015, 1005), for instance, calls the claim "absurd." It has been estimated that Chinese states fought 3,756 wars between 770 BCE and 1912 CE—an average of 1.4 wars per year (Perdue 2015, 1005). Others argue that the Ming dynasty initiated at least one conflict with the Mongols alone every four years (Johnston 1995, 233). Even proponents of Chinese harmony and the ancient Chinese world order with which it is associated acknowledge that the end-goal of just wars in China's strategic culture was to reestablish the universal ethics of "unity and harmony of heaven and human beings" (Liu 2014, 562). Thus, there is evidence to suggest that talk about harmony has played a role in legitimizing and enabling wars throughout Chinese history—or at least has done nothing to prevent them. Chinese intellectuals and politicians often deal with these less harmonious aspects of Chinese history—including relations with China's neighbors—through various discursive strategies that ignore or euphemize conflicts or simply call them "internal" and therefore not aggressive, as has been discussed by scholars such as Victoria Hui, Zhang Feng, Ge Zhaoguang, Ge Jianxiong, Wang Yuan-kang, and Peter Perdue.

If we want further clues to how harmony discourses might play out in practice in China's international relations, we can also look to current Chinese domestic politics. One of the policies most strongly associated with Hu's "harmonious society" has been increased censorship, especially of the Chinese internet, and this practice has become particularly repressive under Xi. This association is so strong that perhaps the most common use of the term "harmony" in current everyday conversations in China is "being harmonized" (*bei hexie le*), that is, being censored online or through more physically coercive applications of state violence, such as enforced disappearances (Nordin 2016 ch. 4). While the use of harmony emphasizes the value of multiplicity, or "harmony with difference" (*he er butong*), harmony discourses have ended up legitimizing the elimination of voices other than that of the party-state. This use of harmony is also visible in government white papers. One example uses "the multiparty cooperation system" to illustrate harmony with difference. In reality, however, more than sixty years of exclusive and often highly coercive Communist Party rule only allows this multiplicity of parties to rubber-stamp decisions made by the top rungs of party-state elites (PRC State Council 2007, I). Another white paper openly admits that harmonious relations are built on "active communication, enhanced cooperation and elimination of differences" (PRC State Council 2010, V).

It is notable that the era that saw harmony launched as an official policy term coincided with violent crackdowns on potentially "splitist" ethnic minorities in areas such as Tibet and Xinjiang—crackdowns that have now escalated to the point of incarcerating large parts of Xinjiang's ethnic minority population in what are euphemistically called "re-education camps." As a precursor to such escalating "harmonization," and in the context of hundreds of self-immolations and violent clashes between ethnic groups in Tibet and Xinjiang (Cui, Liu, and Chen 2012), a 2009 white paper discussing the harmony of "ethnic unity" already made the following demand:

> all China's ethnic groups, in the big family of the united motherland and on the basis of equality, are required to . . . promote peaceful co-existence and harmonious development, continuously strengthen and develop socialist ethnic relations based on equality, solidarity, mutual assistance and harmony, devote all to the construction of socialist modernization, and make our country strong, our nation thrive and our people happy. (PRC State Council 2009, III)

Accordingly, the divisions between "the harmonious" and "the disharmonious" discussed in connection with China's relations with the West and Japan are also visible in the relations between majority China and minority ethnic groups (Nordin 2016). Violent crackdowns in places like Tibet and Xinjiang have made it abundantly clear that there is a real physical threat to those who find themselves on the wrong side of the divide. The exercise of soft power through self/other dichotomization and representational force have made violent state practices appear legitimate, or at least more palatable, particularly in the eyes of a majority Han Chinese audience. For example, the military personnel deployed against advocates of increased autonomy for the occupied Xinjiang region were called "harmony makers" (Xinhua 2009). By contrast, prominent dissidents such as the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo, who have advocated increased autonomy for occupied Tibet and improved human rights and democracy, have repeatedly been criticized for being disharmonious (Xinhua 2009; Embassy of the PRC to the USA 2010). The former is in exile and the latter died from cancer as a prisoner in July 2017.

Harmony and the Possibilities of Soft Power in World Politics

Wherever they appear, harmony discourses seem inevitably to gloss over, and even justify and enable, oppression and physical violence. Does this make the aspiration for harmony in world politics and IR a lost cause? If harmony discourses are seen to epitomize the exercise of soft power, is the implication also that the quest for soft power is a vain one? We have insisted that, despite attempts to portray it as such, harmony does not offer a soft or nonviolent alternative to existing practices and concepts of power in world politics. However, we are equally insistent that the alternative cannot simply be to fall back on our old Western concepts and practices as though they were any less problematic. The "empty" nature of signifiers like harmony means that they are not fixed but can be deployed in different contexts and read with different emphases to reveal other possibilities. We would like to suggest that the seed of such an alternative might be found in the IR literature that draws on premodern Chinese understandings of harmony. Moreover, this understanding of harmony can inspire a reconceptualization of soft power that might actually help sever its connection with the hard power of physical violence explored thus far in the article.

One important source for the development of these views on harmony is the Daoist dialectic advocated by Qin Yaqing (2016, 2018). This dialectic is often illustrated by the yin-yang symbol, which consists of a black half and a white half that together form a whole circle (see Figure 1). There is a black dot in the white half and a white dot in the black half. This symbol illustrates the co-constitutive nature of apparent opposites and the impossibility of "purifying" one apparent identity, characteristic, or property against which it defines itself or of ridding the self of the other. The Daoist dialectic conceptualizes this as a "process of mutual complementation rather than elimination" (Qin 2016, 8).

Figure 1. Yin-yang[2]

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[2] Wikimedia Commons, "Yin Yang.Svg," http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.svg.

Qin (2016, 38–39) claims that his understanding of power differs from "Western IR theory," which "usually takes power as being possessed by the actor." However, he does not follow through on this attempt to decenter the unified subject. Instead, he understands a given actor as "more powerful" if it skillfully manipulates to its advantage a set of relational circles that are larger, more intimate, more important, or more prestigious than others (Qin 2016, 42). In addition, although Qin is clearly aware that the relational ontology he advocates is not uniquely Chinese—that it has both ancient and contemporary parallels in Europe and elsewhere—his frequent juxtaposition of Chinese thought as good and Western thought as deficient reifies "China" and "the West" as ultimately separate, different, and hierarchically ordered entities. As is so often the case, this attempt to transcend othering ends up othering "the otherers."

A similar understanding of yin-yang relationality is at the root of L. H. M. Ling's work. To her, the black dot in the white and the white dot in the black underscore the postcolonial idea of the other in the self and the self in the other, or what we might call intersectionality and intersubjectivity (Ling 2014, 45). Based on this insight, Ling critiques what she calls "Westphalia World"—or the hegemonic vision of IR that includes "mainstream approaches" such as realism, liberalism, Wendtian constructivism, and their various offshoots. She shows how Westphalia World, and the ontology on which it is based, "perpetrates a profound violence" (Ling 2014, 1) by denying its reliance on those it excludes, their knowledge, and ways of knowing— what she calls "Multiple Worlds." This leads to a nihilistic logic in which the lives of others must be forfeited to save one's own. By calling this dichotomizing configuration Westphalia World and not "the West," however, Ling underlines that this is not a problem that is confined to one geographical, ethnic, or theoretical location. Rather, the Chinese state has emerged as one of the key adherents to this kind of dichotomizing worldview (Zhao 2006). Indeed, as our analysis shows, the dominant Chinese harmony discourse denies the existence of other traditions of harmony in much the same way as Ling's Westphalia World generally denies Multiple Worlds. Such denial is likely to continue to produce anxiety and antagonism in China's relations with its various others.

However, Ling's understanding of the Daoist dialectic not only offers a critique of such a worldview but also suggests an alternative. She writes that in a Daoist dialectic the "complementarities (*yin*) prevail despite the contradictions (*yang*) between and within the polarities. Nothing remains static or the same" (Ling 2014, 15). Hence, she emphasizes the need to recognize the self's complexity as it inevitably includes traces or elements of the other (Ling 2014, 12). This goes further than Qin toward dislodging power from belonging to fixed subjects.

The Daoist dialectic in Ling's rendering is similar to Foucault's concept of power as productive, mentioned above. However, unlike the understanding of soft power in Foucauldian terms, it strives to move beyond the inevitability of dichotomized self/other relations, which have been found to legitimize and enable the hard power of physical violence. The uneasy relationship between soft and hard power in this conceptualization can be broken up only if self and other are considered as co-constitutive in the complementary rather than the contradictory sense of the term. Soft power premised on the Daoist dialectic would then epitomize the capacity to produce nonantagonistic, or at least less antagonistic, identities. Instead of singling out the other as inferior or potentially dangerous, thereby seeking the empathy and identification of audiences with the self and against the other, soft power is now based on the self's empathy and identification *with* the other.

It may appear that the Daoist dialectic described here is dichotomously portrayed as the soft and harmonious opposite to the hard and disharmonious Confucianism encountered above. Indeed, the two schools of thought are often described as yin and yang opposites (Needham 1956, 59–61). This representation, however, underscores how the two schools have been developed in relation to one another.

Each has incorporated elements of the other while remaining recognizably distinct. Therefore, the particular reading of what is called here a "Daoist dialectic" is not only different from but also similar to what we have read under the label "Confucianism." It is also similar to ideas that originate in Japan, such as the work of Tosaka Jun (Shimizu 2014) and the martial art *aikidō* (Pettman 2005), as well as psychoanalytic, postcolonial, poststructuralist, feminist, and queer theorizations articulated in many different locales in and beyond the West (Butler 1990; Walker 1993; Bhabha 1994; Cash 2013).

Ultimately, we disagree with Qin's and Ling's positioning of harmony as a superior ideal. It is just as socially and politically produced as other possible ideals, and it too has been complicit in coercion and violence. Nonetheless, we believe that the yin-yang dialectic foreshadows a possibility to transcend dichotomized self/other relations. Scholars and practitioners who agree that it is their "ethical task" to work out how collective identities can be produced, reproduced, and transformed without violence (Berenskoetter 2014, 283) would do well to focus on seeing and acknowledging the elements of difference and otherness in the self, rather than pretending to purity or absolutism, be it of harmony, "Chineseness," or something else.

Conclusions and Implications

Chinese harmony discourses seek to impress on the world that there is no reason to worry about a rising China; it will be more harmonious and hence fundamentally different from other great powers, both past and present, and particularly from Western powers and Japan. These harmony discourses are not only framed in terms of soft power in China but also operate in line with how soft power is defined in trying to make audiences empathize and identify with the "harmonious" Chinese self and against its allegedly "disharmonious" others. A theoretical contribution of the article is to demonstrate how such already coercive exercise of soft power is also fundamentally enmeshed in legitimizing and enabling the use of physical force; that is, hard power. Harmony discourses in the West and Japan—also understood here as exemplifying the exercise of soft power—have been intertwined with war, empire, and physical conquest for a long time. Moreover, Chinese harmony discourses already legitimize and enable the violent "harmonization" of those branded "disharmonious" domestically. An empirical contribution of the article is to caution against the idea that China's future is any brighter than that of other great powers; and, ironically, to demonstrate that its call for harmony makes it similar to rather than just different from the West and Japan.

This article has thus suggested that an actor's emphasis on harmony can but does not necessarily make it attractive to others. Similarly, an actor's emphasis on democracy, human rights, or liberalism also does not necessarily make it attractive to everyone. Attempts to exercise soft power can obviously fail. Moreover, the exercise of soft power through a discourse of harmony can take different shapes and succeed or fail with different audiences. For example, the domestic oppression associated with China's idea of a harmonious society seems to make China unattractive to many democratic countries. At the same time, those who similarly want to control dissident populations, and who operate in the "hypermasculine" world of international relations, may welcome a repressive Chinese example that further normalizes violent harmonization.

Indeed, some scholars have argued that authoritarian governments—not only China, but also Russia, Venezuela, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others—have "hijacked" soft power to "compete with democracy in the realm of ideas" (Walker 2016, 50). The aim of those governments is allegedly to get audiences in places such as the Balkans, Central Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa to empathize and identify with authoritarian values and against Western democracy and liberalism. In this sense, their soft power is not really soft but "sharp"

(Walker 2018). However, the findings of our article are not just relevant for understanding and critiquing China and its harmony discourse, or similar attempts to exercise soft power by other authoritarian states. The implications are more far-reaching.

Nye (2004, 11) argues that a state is more likely to exercise soft power if the political values it seeks to promote are "universal" rather than "narrow" and "parochial." He exemplifies these "deeply seductive" values by listing a set of traits typically associated with the West and particularly his native United States: "democracy, human rights, and individual opportunities" (Nye 2004, x; cf. Nye 2004, 32, 62). As we have seen, Chinese attempts to exercise soft power have been called sharp power exactly due to China's lacking democracy. This universalization of certain values under the guise of soft power is arguably also the reason why Japanese analysts and commentators recommend that Japan should try to augment its soft power exactly by emphasizing its democracy, human rights, equality, liberty, and, above all, its pacifism and peaceful trajectory since the end of World War Two (Bukh 2014; e.g., Nakamura 2010, 47; Watanabe 2010, 70). However, even these values can be easily turned into empty slogans that just serve to differentiate the good and righteous self from the bad and threatening other. Hence, it is not only the exercise of soft power through a discourse of harmony that risks legitimizing and enabling the use of hard power of physical force. The exercise of soft power based on any political vision that differentiates the self from the other can do this, including values that others might propagate, such as "democracy," "liberty," "human rights," and "peace" (Rasch 2003; Huysmans 2004; Falk 2008; Hagström and Hanssen 2016), as well as the "diversity" and "tolerance" that could be implied in the postcolonial or Daoist alternatives discussed above. Although soft power is marketed as a peaceful way of mediating and reducing antagonism, there is always the risk that it will legitimize and enable the use of physical violence to impose unity and punish dissent.

By now, the quest for soft power in world politics may have begun to seem as vain as the Chinese aspiration for harmony. However, the point, as Foucault (1984, 343) emphasized, "is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad." In this article, we have sought to make the soft power concept slightly less dangerous by drawing on premodern Chinese thinking about harmony. Here, soft power is again generated through empathy and identification. This time, however, it is based on the self's recognition that it is not only different from the other but also similar to it. This is arguably a way to avoid that the values we hold and hope to transmit become so empty that they only serve to distinguish the self from the other. In the case of China, this requires us to recognize how Chinese harmony discourses are already part of other cultural traditions, and vice versa. China's leaders would do well to recognize that China's dominant harmony discourse is uncannily similar to, rather than just different from, discourses in the West and Japan. More humility is also needed on the part of the West and Japan in dealing with China's rise and the ways in which Chinese soft power may legitimize and enable hard power. The actors concerned will exercise soft power if they manage to recognize the other in the self and the self in others so that China's rise becomes less inevitably prone to conflict and war.

Needless to say, to recognize the other in the self is a challenge for the present article too. One way to ensure that we do not end up using hard power to harmonize those who do not buy into our way of connecting Daoist conceptions of harmony with soft power is to recognize and try to live with our own doubts and sense of uncertainty.

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