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Popular culture and politics: re-narrating the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute

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Abstract Narrative, we argue, can (re)construct social reality. Alternative imaginaries of 'being in the world' can lead to alternative ways of 'doing in the world'. We discuss the current dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands as an example. Westphalian logic would have the two countries come to blows, if not go to war, over the Islands. The Westphalian account of the dispute centres on the key principle of sovereignty. But what if we utilized a different imaginary to re-narrate the conflict? We turn to popular culture in both Japan and China as a guide, and juxtapose two anime, *Appleseed* and *Time of Eve*, with one Chinese TV drama, *Nirvana in Fire*. Each of these upends conventional analyses of the Islands dispute and offers alternative conceptions of sovereignty. We conclude by considering the implications of such alternative imaginaries for the study, if not practice, of international relations.

Introduction

Westphalian international relations (IR) concludes: China and Japan will come to blows, if not go to war, over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The Islands dispute exhibits all the symptoms of classical power politics: (1) a sovereignty dispute over contested territory,[1] with (2) potential strategic significance,[2] has provoked (3) military tensions that continue to escalate,[3]

[1] In September 2012, the Japanese government purchased eight uninhabited islets from private ownership, calling them the Senkaku Islands. However, China also claims sovereignty over the same islands, calling them the Diaoyu Tai (*Global Times*/*Xinhua* 2012). See Drifte (2003, 2014) and Hunt (2017).

[2] Rumours claim that rich oil reserves lie underneath these islets. Others cite the islets' 'strategic location' in the middle of international shipping lanes and fishing grounds (*The Economist* 2013).

[3] Beijing and Tokyo have each increased their military budgets due to tensions in the East China Sea (*The Guardian* 2015; Reuters 2016; BBC News 2017).

thereby affecting (4) overall inter-state relations.[4] It is a zero-sum game, Westphalians agree.[5] That oil reserves rumoured to lie under the islets remain untapped and unconfirmed, and that their small size (7 km^2) and remote location[6] render the islets useless for either defensive or offensive purposes seems not to dampen the clamour for 'strong' national security postures in both Beijing and Tokyo. For Westphalians, only outside intervention in the form of a global superpower—that is, the United States (US)—can avert war in the region.[7] Indeed, the governments of Japan and China seem intransigent about their own positions on the Islands dispute.

Westphalia's culture of sovereignty drives this scenario. Indeed, the fact that China and Japan have competed over these small and rather insignificant islands demonstrates how pervasive and widespread the Westphalian logic of sovereignty is. Fixed by territorial borders (Agnew 1994), sovereignty ensures security not just geographically but also *ontologically* (Mitzen 2006; Hwang and Frettingham 2018). A 'purified' and 'essentialized' national identity becomes a benchmark of state value: can the state 'protect' the nation (Krishna 1994)? Unity, totality, assimilation and homogeneity are taken as the norm; difference, ambiguity, hybridity and liminality are denied or expected to disappear. Military capability, not culture, is what counts in inter-state relations (Waltz 1979). The current status of hegemony and hierarchy of Westphalian IR resembles an epistemic side of colonialism in its structure (Agathangelou and Ling 2004). At best, Westphalians recognize 'soft power' as an attractive handmaiden to the state's 'hard power' (Nye 2004; see also Winkler 2019). At worst, Westphalians dismiss knowledge possessed by the local people or non-specialists, and 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1988) or 'epistemicide' (Santos 2014) take place. After all, colonialism imposes the belief that anything White is better than non-White. For the person of colour, therefore, Westphalian IR invariably lacks nuance (Pan and Kavalski 2018). Little separates different schools of thought within Westphalian IR, since all share the same ontological premise: world politics begins with chaos, anarchy and competition (Agathangelou and Ling 2004).

The notion of sovereignty may be taken for granted in the Westphalian imaginary, yet 'it is possible to construct, in its own terms, a competing narrative which denaturalizes and unsettles the dominant way of constructing the world, thus prying open the space for an alternative interpretation concerned with the entailments of identity' (Campbell 1992, 197–198). In this article, we conduct a thought experiment. We ask: what if we retell the story of inter-state conflicts and crises, like the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, with a different imaginary? How would a new narrative generate insights and possibly solutions? To this end, we turn to popular culture for insights and juxtapose two

[4] In 2012, many commemorative events marking the fortieth anniversary of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Japan and the PRC were postponed or cancelled (*Daily Yomiuri* 2012). No high-level Chinese leader had visited Japan until Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit to Japan in April 2018, the first such visit in nine years (Reuters 2018).

[5] By 'Westphalian', we refer here not to one particular author or school but rather to a discourse widely shared among IR scholars who understand world politics in terms of fixed state sovereignty.

[6] The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands are located east of China, northeast of Taiwan, west of Okinawa Island and north of the southwestern end of the Ryukyu Islands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2014).

[7] The US considered sending Navy patrols to the East China Sea in May 2015 (Lendon and Sciutto 2015). More recently, the Trump administration has made assurances to help Japan should a conflict with China arise (Al Jazeera 2017).

long-running anime—*Appleseed* (1985–2014)[8] and *Time of Eve* (2008–2010)[9]—with the 2015 Chinese TV drama *Nirvana in Fire* (Kong and Li 2015).[10]

None of these three sources deals with the Islands dispute directly. Yet each suggests a different trajectory for re-narrating the Islands dispute story. In this regard, the selected material is not intended to demonstrate how representative those cases are among a broader population. Instead, they have been selected to undertake a thought experiment for testing ideas relating to territorial disputes between Japan and China. In other words, the chosen anime and TV drama could reveal alternative visions of political realities and thus help to develop innovative ideas about sovereignty. By examining the ideas manifest in the source material, this article will illustrate how alternative connotations of 'sovereignty' could be conceptualized and imagined.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section sets a theoretical and methodological ground for studying narratives in popular culture as doing IR. The second section analyses two anime and one TV drama, respectively, as a thought experiment and addresses their implications of alternative imaginaries of sovereignty. The third section discusses further the ways in which these anime and TV drama can retell the story of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. The article concludes by suggesting that not only can narrative (re)construct social reality, but it can also transform world politics (see Gustafsson et al 2019). By offering an alternative imaginary about 'being in the world' (Ling and Chen 2018), narrative can help us innovate ways of 'doing in the world'.

Interpretations of power and narrative

Culture matters in politics. Culture—especially its various active *sub*cultures—bears its own interests and needs, power and agency (Ling 2004). For example, narrative structures from popular novels, films and TV series offer suggestive reading of US foreign policy discourses (Weldes 2003; Ling 2004; Buzan 2010). In brief, culture can and does change the state, sovereignty, even power politics. Just note, for example, the role of domestic, non-state forces in ending the US government's war in Vietnam (Ling 2017a). And with today's advances in technology, culture—especially *popular* culture—fills our collective and individual imaginaries. Films, television, commercials, advertisements, social media and other instruments of mass communication daily affect our decisions and preferences, needs and desires, big and small.

Power, in our understanding, is diffused throughout the social field, shaping and reshaping knowledge about the world, thereby constituting the actual world. Some scholars, such as Jameson (1984), conclude from this that any

[8] *Appleseed* has been a media franchise since the publication of the original manga by Shirow Masamune in 1985. It has been adapted into animation several times (Katayama 1988; Aramaki 2005; 2007; 2014; Hamana 2011). In this article we analyse the anime *Appleseed* (2005).

[9] *Time of Eve* was initially directed by Yoshiura Yasuhiro as an online series. It was subsequently turned into a feature-length film.

[10] TV dramas hold a pre-eminent position in China. In 2002, TV dramas constituted more than 30 per cent of overall television consumption, and 90 per cent of all revenue from television advertising came from TV dramas (Zhu et al 2008). A popular TV programme not only nets China's huge domestic audience but also fans from Korea, Japan, Southeast Asia, North America and the Middle East (Keane 2008).

kind of resistance is impossible and ultimately pointless. Nevertheless, as Foucault (1988, 123) reminds us, as soon as there is a power relation there is the possibility of resistance. 'Resistance' for Foucault refers to the challenge of subjectification, the formation of a subject. The subject is constituted in discourse, which is defined as a 'general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements' (Foucault 1989, 90). Because the subject is produced within power relations, liberation accordingly signifies a renunciation of the subject. Foucault therefore calls for the deconstruction of the subject and sees this as a key political tactic (Foucault 1980, 117).

This article treats the notion of 'sovereignty' as a form of power, produced in discourse and shared as narratives. Narratives are 'discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way … and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experience of it' (Hinchman and Hinchman 2001, xvi). Narratives are powerful 'cognitive tools': we make sense of our world and shape our identity through narratives. A good story can capture our minds, create a common interest and become a basis for collective action (Mayer 2014). Narratives do not simply reflect reality, but construct and maintain particular forms of reality such as state identity (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019). For instance, antagonistic narratives of the ongoing Sino-Japanese territorial dispute are not simple reflections of reality, but the product of ongoing power struggles between Tokyo and Beijing, and they produce effects within both states such as a normalization of rearmament and legitimization of violence as inevitable (Hagström 2012; 2015). These identity narratives seem to be very powerful, but they are not the only way to narrate Sino-Japanese relationships.

Narratives can also be used to imagine possible worlds that are different from the actual world (Chen and Shimizu 2019). This ties in with a belief that one can change the world in a particular direction by making a political intervention as a form of resistance. Many writers and critics share the view of science fiction and utopian literature as thought experiments, the primary function of which is to ask questions and to perform and process thought, rather than to find an answer. For example, novelist Ursula K Le Guin suggests that the essential function of science fiction is 'question-asking: reversals of a habitual way of thinking, metaphors of what our language has no words for as yet, experiments in imagination' (Le Guin 1979, 163). Narratives, particularly in science fiction and utopian literature, allow us to interpret a text as 'an alternative historical hypothesis' (Suvin 1979, 49) and thus to see our familiar world differently. In this vein, this article explores different visual narratives in popular culture and utilizes them to re-narrate Sino-Japanese relations.

Recent scholarship in the broader field of IR has discussed the significance and implications of visual art and popular culture in global politics (Weldes 2003; Campbell 2007; Dodds 2007; Bleiker 2009; 2018; Grayson et al 2009; Hansen 2017; Moore and Shepherd 2010; Buzan 2010; Shim 2017; Thorsten 2012). This approach is often called 'aesthetic' IR and has included an ongoing debate about, and development of, theoretical and analytical approaches. For instance, Grayson et al (2009) conceptualize popular culture and world politics as a continuum and call for further investigation of how the political possibilities and limits of the politics produced and/or shaped by popular culture

may lead towards a deeper understanding of IR. They also point out that such investigation should go beyond a mere popular illustration of world politics. This article contributes to the 'aesthetic turn' (Bleiker 2009; 2018) in IR. Not only does it give us another way to formulate the Islands dispute, but the aesthetic turn also finds substantiation in a 'real world' problem.

In this vein, the field called 'film philosophy' or 'film as philosophy' is helpful for IR scholars examining the political and philosophical significance of popular culture, film and TV drama in particular (Read and Goodenough 2005; Wartenberg 2007; Mulhall 2008; Litch 2010). Their approach is inspired by the work of Stanley Cavell (1979; 1981; 1996), who argues that film has affinities with philosophy and can offer philosophical insights of its own. Among them, Wartenberg (2007) argues for the thought experiment as a particularly important practice linking philosophy and imagination. For Gendler (cited in Wartenberg 2007, 57), to conduct a thought experiment is 'to reason about an imaginary scenario with the aim of confirming or disconfirming some hypothesis or theory'. Both philosophy and film rely on fictional scenarios, and just as philosophers use thought experiments in various ways, philosophers can also use films in different ways: thought experiments can be used to confirm or disconfirm a theory (as counterexample); establish the possibility of a world; demonstrate impossibility; or build an idealized model of the world (Wartenberg 2007, 58–67). Thought experiments based on narratives in popular culture will also be a useful approach for IR scholars to test ideas and/or propose the possibility of a counter-world.

The next section looks at different narratives in popular culture that highlight hybridity rather than purity, thereby enabling a different set of possibilities and negotiations from the traditional Westphalian narrative. We first look at two anime *Appleseed* and *Time of Eve*, and label them as Hybridity I and Hybridity II, then the TV drama *Nirvana in Fire*.

A tale of multiple imaginaries

Hybridity I: Appleseed

Appleseed takes place in the twenty-second century. After a devastating global war, human scientists have engineered a new species called 'bioroids' by crossing robots with the best human genes, and built a utopian city named Olympus. Olympus serves as the last hope for humanity to survive the apocalypse. Now comprising half the population, bioroids are designed to create a peaceful society. Nonetheless, some believe that bioroids remain a threat to humans; others feel that humans themselves are the biggest source of threat to society. The story revolves around the protagonist Deunan (human), a highly skilled soldier, her navigator Hitomi (bioroid), and other government officials and citizens in Olympus.

From the very beginning, *Appleseed* depicts the contradictory boundary between humans and bioroids in various ways. In character and motion designs, it is difficult to distinguish bioroids from humans, especially in the case of the main characters such as Hitomi and Deunan. In fact, the two characters are created in the same way: 3-D computer-generated imagery (CGI) with motion and facial capture technologies and toon shading to create lifelike

motions and facial expressions of the characters with a cel-anime-like texture. Lively voice acting also plays a crucial role to breathe life into the bioroid characters.

Moreover, the narrative leads the audience to engage more emotionally with attractive characters like Deunan and Hitomi than with less appealing ones like soldiers and the members of the Elders who govern the city along with the central artificial intelligence (AI). The contrast between inhumane humans and humane bioroids also blurs the boundary between humans and post-humans.

Over the course of the story, two conspiracies endanger the coexistence of humans and bioroids in Olympus. One is a terrorist attack against bioroids led by the Regular Army; the other, an attempt by the Council of Elders to extinguish humans using a virus. Both conspiratorial groups are human and subscribe to an essentialist distinction between humans and post-humans. They attempt to persuade Deunan not to disrupt their plans but she refuses them each time. Through these episodes, the audience sees Deunan's firm determination to reject any essentialist views.

There is a symbolic scene after the final battle against essentialists is over. The main characters Deunan, her boyfriend Briareos (cyborg) and Hitomi and Yoshitsune (bioroids) get together and share their joy.

Briareos says to Deunan, 'It's left to us. It's all up to us.'

Deunan nods affirmatively. Deunan's final voiceover narration follows: 'It's not as if anything's changed. Perhaps the sins of man [sic] will only deepen. But I will continue the struggle. For our children, the true new race.'

Appleseed underscores the contradictions and limitations of a fixed homogeneity for human and post-humans. In the very last scene, Deunan decides to continue the struggle for the true new race—neither human nor post-human only, but *both*. *Appleseed* envisages the survivors' struggle to create a new hybrid identity going beyond the existing human–post-human boundary.

Hybridity II: Time of Eve

The next example, *Time of Eve* (Yoshiura 2010), also deals with the issue of human–post-human hybridity, and it suggests to viewers a way of imagining a new humanity though creating a radical heterotopic space. *Time of Eve* thus explores the creation of what Jameson (2005) calls a 'utopian enclave'. It invokes critical reflections on everyday life and imagined political alternatives. In the near future, human beings use robots and androids widely throughout society. The authorities require human beings to treat androids as tools, and to strictly distinguish human beings from androids. Yet, in reality, the appearance and abilities of androids have become so close to those of human beings that the boundaries between human beings and androids are blurred.

The story begins with Rikuo, a high-school student. Tracing an unauthorized action by his house android, Rikuo and his friend Masaki end up in a mysterious café called Time of Eve. Its house rule stipulates, 'no discrimination between humans and robots'. Rikuo and Masaki are at first very suspicious of the café but they start going there out of curiosity. Through spending time with the café owner, Nagi, and her regular customers, Rikuo and Masaki experience various relationships between humans and androids in the café.

The anime effectively differentiates the café as a unique space by contrasting between inside and outside through the depiction of androids. For example, outside the café, androids use very formal language and speak to humans in a very artifical manner. The volume, pitch, timbre and speed of their speech are flat and fixed; their speech is always acompanied by echoes and beeps. Visually, they do not use many gestures or facial expressions, and their status mode (active/stand-by) is always displayed above their head.

Inside the café, by contrast, androids shift their speech style to a very natural human manner. They speak with emotion and use gestures; they change various features of their voice and speech styles. There are no mechanical sounds or status mode displays. In the café, androids and humans meet, talk and care about others. Androids have empathy and compassion for others. The film shows humans and androids living together in ways that challenge existing laws, social norms and the strict hierarchy between humans and androids.

Time of Eve urges us to imagine possible alternative futures. But, more importantly, it leaves the question open for the viewer to decide. For Nagi, *Time of Eve* is a space of *becoming* rather than being as such. When Nagi describes how she sees the café, she says, 'This café exists through everyone's minds. I just want to see it through … how far can this circle grow?'

Love and devotion in Confucian governance: Nirvana in Fire. An emancipatory imaginary doesn't need the trappings of sci-fi, robots or futuristic visions. It can also stem from a traditional tale set in sixth-century China. *Nirvana in Fire* captured the highest ratings of any television programme in China in 2015. A 54-episode drama set in a fictional dynasty (Liang) in the sixth century, *Nirvana* won all the major national awards in the film and television industry the following year and the Chinese government has branded it a 'national product' (*guochan*). Unlike the anime mentioned above, the drama relies on traditional storytelling. *Nirvana* focuses on a feudal ruling class consisting of all the usual characters—emperors, princes, princesses, genderals, warriors and the like—yet it rings out a revolutionary message: not even an emperor can escape accountability.

Nirvana tells the story of an ambitious man who uses friends and allies to become emperor. Once on the throne, he ambushes his greatest general for fear of power rivalry. The General happens to be the Emperor's close friend, political ally and brother-in-law. Their sons are cousins and best friends. The ambush kills the General's 70,000 men, along with the General himself and his 19-year-old son—or so the Emperor thinks. The Emperor also arrests the Crown Prince, accusing him of conspiring with the General. The Crown Prince dies by poison in prison; his mother commits suicide. The rest of the General's family is either killed or scattered into exile. The Emperor thus betrays the five Confucian bonds of emperor–subject, father–son, husband–wife, brother–brother and friend–friend.

Twelve years pass. One day, a mysterious stranger—a master strategist by the name of Mei Changsu—appears in the capital and everything begins to change. Mei turns out to be the General's son, Lin Shu. Ultimately, Mei/Lin

clears his father's name and that of the late Crown Prince, thereby avenging the deep wrong done to both families.

This drama highlights the Confucian concept of *zhong*. Typically, dictionaries translate *zhong* in English as 'loyalty'. When anglophone readers consider loyalty in an Asian context, the word tends to conjure an image of 'oriental despots' and their mindless minions (Minuti 2012). Another, more accurate understanding of *zhong*—and the one conveyed by this drama—is 'devotion'. It encompasses far more than loyalty. This sense of devotion is not just directed towards the state or its miniature, the family, but also towards one's friends, one's beloved and especially oneself.[11] Early meanings of *zhong*, especially before the third century BCE, include 'treating people right', 'being honest with oneself in dealing with others' and 'adjudicating a case fairly' (Goldin 2008).

Devotion lies at the heart of *Nirvana*. The low-ranked prince who was cousin to and best friends with the General's son refuses to believe in the conspiracy—and Mei/Lin, the Master Strategist, helps him gain the throne. Both defy the tests of time, distance, politics and fate. A wife tearfully rejoices at finding her husband alive, even though he is changed beyond recognition. Other kinds of devotion from friends, lovers, parents, children, lieutenants, soldiers and so on fill the tale.

Another defining feature of the drama is the contrast between Mei/Lin's extreme mental acuity and his deteriorating physical body. Here, the drama resonates with ancient Chinese philosophy. As Sunzi (544–496 BCE) cautions in *The art of war*, physical strength does not necessarily ensure victory because nothing stays the same for ever (Hwang and Ling 2009). In one scene, Mei/Lin trains three boys to defeat a huge strongman. The strongman's towering size and bulging muscles cannot compete with the boys' agility, speed and inventiveness. The strongman crumples to the floor, an unconscious heap.

In this way and many others, Mei/Lin brings one emperor to his knees and raises another to the Dragon Throne. But Mei/Lin is not the sole protagonist to 'speak truth to power'. The confrontation with the Emperor takes place publicly, collectively and situationally. On his birthday, a day of supposed celebration, the Emperor finds himself facing a band of devoted followers of the deceased Crown Prince and General; moreover, the Emperor's own ministers now also request a review of the charges against the Crown Prince and General in the interest of justice. The Emperor calls on his palace guards, but they are stopped by those of the new Crown Prince. The Emperor stumbles out of his palace, dishevelled and disoriented, to an empty chamber nearby.

The Emperor summons Mei/Lin and tries to excuse his various crimes by claiming that each of his 'rivals' had contested and debated his decisions.

'Is it the Emperor's *tianxia* [realm] or is it *theirs*?' he screams.

Mei/Lin retorts, '*Tianxia* belongs to the people of *tianxia*! Without the people, how could there be a Son of Heaven [*tianzi*]? Without the land and its crops [*sheji*], how could there be lords and masters [*junzhu*]?'

[11] The Great Learning (*Daxue*, c 5 BCE) teaches a reciprocal, intimate relationship between the universal order (*tianxia*), state governance (*zhiguo*), family management (*qijia*) and personal cultivation (*xiushen*) based on a rectification of one's heart (*zhengxin*) secured through sincere thoughts (*chengyi*) and extended to the utmost of one's knowledge (*zhizhi*) to investigate all things (*gewu*) (Legge 1992, 2–7).

Ultimately, the Emperor gives in. He agrees to reopen and re-investigate the case against the General and the deceased Crown Prince—but on one condition. Mei/Lin must die. The Emperor cannot have the son of the late General around to remind people of his, the Emperor's, folly. Mei/Lin agrees. Then, contrary to all protocol, Mei/Lin turns his back on the Emperor and walks out.

Implications

How can we retell the story of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute with these samples of popular culture? Equally important, what do these anime and TV dramas tell us about IR theory? This section draws inspiration from *Appleseed*, *Time of Eve* and *Nirvana* to re-narrate the story of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute in a different way. This is followed by a discussion of what this thought experiment implies for imagining another kind of world politics and IR.

Liminalities for China and Japan

Three themes resound from the stories above: (1) the emancipatory potential of hybridity; (2) the significance of separate, heterotopic (out-of-normal) spaces; and (3) an understanding of change as a collective, interactive process. The survivors of *Appleseed* escape the rigid binary of humans versus post-humans by building a new city accommodating both. In *Time of Eve*, the teenager Rikuo discovers his own humanity through that of androids at a 'radical' café. Likewise, *Nirvana in Fire* hybridizes its hero by turning the General's son, Lin Shu, into the Master Strategist, Mei Changsu. Although the latter no longer resembles the former, Lin still lives within Mei just as Mei now represents more than Lin. That both histories and memories survive within the Master Strategist heightens his ability to out-manoeuvre his enemies. In the last episode, Mei/Lin integrates both when he returns to fight on the battlefield where it all started: that is, where the Emperor's ambush killed his father and their army of 70,000.

A heterotopic space enables radical departures in thought and action, feeling and spirit. *Nirvana* constructs a heterotopic space by jumping back in time: its fictional Liang dynasty resembles yet differs from actual Chinese history. Hence, the story of forcing accountability on an emperor becomes easier to tell and more convincing. *Appleseed* ends with a new Olympus in the making while *Time of Eve* makes a more explicit claim for a heterotopic space in the here-and-now. In the café's 'utopian enclave', individuals can find space to reflect on and stay distant from the dominant discourse, albeit temporarily. They see both the current domination of anti-robot discourse outside the café and other possibilities where humans and androids have no distinctions inside the café. In juxtaposing the two, the café's regulars begin to question the legitimacy of anti-robotism. A discrepancy surfaces between what they are told to believe by society and what they experience in the café. They begin to see that androids, like humans, have empathy, intention, identity and the ability to interact with humans. Androids, in short, *are* human.

With hybridity and heterotopia comes the possibility of change. But to have a real impact, these vignettes of popular culture suggest, the change must reflect a collectivity. Deunan and her comrades in *Appleseed* will build the new Olympus *together*. Likewise, Mei/Lin succeeds in forcing the Emperor to review the charges against his father and the late Crown Prince by rallying the court and its ministers, not just Mei/Lin's followers. More so than underscoring the necessity of collective power, *Time of Eve* suggests a deeper, philosophical and spiritual point: change and transformation must remain open and interactive to prevent the creation of another oppressive, hegemonic system. For this reason, Nagi sees her café as a product of 'everyone's minds' whose 'circle' remains unbound and ungagged.

With these memes in mind, it is possible to retell the story of Senkaku/Diaoyu by reframing the relationship between China and Japan as an open, heterotopic space of linked hybridities.

A heterotopic space: linked, hybrid civilizations. China and Japan need to recognize their *linked*, *hybrid* fates under Westphalia. Japan joined the West's imperialist club in the nineteenth century only after witnessing China's painful inability to withstand the ascendancy of the Western powers in Asia (Ling 2002). It is well known that, historically, Japan's culture, religions and political system have been hugely influenced by Chinese civilization (Sugimoto and Swain 1978). At the same time, both positively and negatively, Japan has figured prominently in the making of modern China.

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere of the 1930s–1940s rationalized Japanese military aggression against China and elsewhere in the region, and the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) inflicted the largest and most destructive war ever on the Asian landmass (*The Economist* 2015). Nonetheless, Japan also served as a beacon of hope for an Asian version of Western modernity. Almost all of China's revolutionary leaders have sought and received refuge in Japan at critical times. They range from Sun Yatsen, founder of the Chinese republic, to Zhou Enlai, prime minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Mao's faithful lieutenant for almost four decades. Scientific knowledge from the West entered China primarily through Japan (Zheng 2008) as Chinese intellectuals eagerly sought new knowledge for a new era. Japanese neologisms like 'revolution' (*geming*) and 'republic' (*gongheguo*), for example, helped to mobilize Chinese struggles for national renewal. Even at the height of the anti-Japanese war, segments of Chinese society refused to succumb to interpersonal, anti-Japanese sentiment. Some members of China's wartime urban elite, for example, circulated Erich Maria Remarque's 1929 anti-war novel, *All quiet on the Western Front*, in comic book form. This rendition of the novel, entitled *Xixian wu zhansi* (Aikesi shudian 1930–1940?), depicts friendly interpersonal relations between Chinese and Japanese despite the war.[12]

Modern Japan played a hybrid and ambiguous role in East Asia (Ching 2001). On the one hand, Japan, with its achievements in terms of modernization and nationalization, became a model that China and other East Asian

[12] The Rauner Special Collections at Dartmouth College store a copy of this comic book. See Rauner Special Collections Library (2013).

countries tried to follow. In particular, Japan sparked a modernist and nationalist movement in China. On the other hand, Japan turned into a colonial and imperial power, annexing first Taiwan and Korea, and subsequently Manchuria as well as the majority of Southeast Asian countries.

Arguably, European imperialism/colonialism and the racism that accompanied it[13] victimized *both* China and Japan equally. China went through a 'Century of Humiliation' through unequal treaties, territorial colonization and national bankruptcy after the Opium War; while Japan, even as a colonial power, was constantly mindful of its non-Western (or non-White) status among the imperialist nations. More importantly, Japan, with its mimicry of European imperialism, also victimized its own citizens during the Pacific War (Suzuki 2009). With these *linked*, *hybrid* fates under Westphalia, China and Japan should be recognized as comrades in the nineteenth century.

Today, contemporary popular culture has found a new regional community in Asia (Iwabuchi 2002). Music, films, TV dramas, anime and manga stream from Japan to its regional neighbours (Katsumata 2012), just as cultural products from Japan's former colonial outposts—China, Hong Kong, Korea, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan—flood into Japan (Ling 2014; Lee 2017). The flow of those cultural products effectively transcends state borders, and challenges the idea of self-contained sovereign states. This entwined history reflects an older hybridity between China and Japan. Chinese art, poetry, calligraphy, language, philosophy, customs, institutions and a myriad of other aspects of culture have crossed into Japan, and vice versa, over millennia (Maruyama 1974; Ooms 1985; Najita 1987).

This broader, deeper history necessarily diminishes the salience of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. As civilizations, China and Japan have greater cultural and political resources to deal with sovereignty than those provided by the Westphalian imaginary. The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands initially belonged to the Ryukyu Kingdom, which had *double* tributary status in the Confucian world order (Chen 2017). That is, the Ryukyu Kingdom paid tribute to both China and Japan. By obligation, then, both the Qing dynasty and the Meiji government shared in the protection of and access to the Ryukyus. Such doubleness or ambiguity regarding sovereignty could be updated to comparable notions of overlapping, mobile or graduated sovereignties, much like Deng Xiaoping's 'one country, two systems' for Hong Kong and China or the response of third-world governments to neoliberal globalization (Ong 2000).

Three additional insights apply. Firstly, as *Nirvana* underscores, power comes from a sacred trust between rulers and ruled. Once narrow self-interest or even sheer incompetence breaks that trust, the people can and will replace the leader—even an all-powerful emperor. Without the people, Mei/Lin reminds his emperor, there can be no Son of Heaven. The leaders of China and Japan must take heed. Emotional patriotism stirred by jingoistic campaigns may provide a temporary bulwark against criticism but it can last only for so long. The people will eventually question how good the policy is for *them* in comparison with the leaders. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party

[13] Even liberal thinkers like Mill (1859/1984) claimed that imperialism/colonialism was justified because non-interference was a principle that applied only among European powers and not to non-European neighbours.

(CCP) should know this lesson well. After all, the Nationalists lost the mainland due to rampant corruption and hypocritical policies.

Secondly, mere strength does not ensure victory. The episode of the strongman and the three little boys in *Nirvana* reinforces ancient Daoist dialectics on power. Laozi, the mythical founder of Daoism, likened the Way (*dao*) to water. It does not discriminate against what may seem soft, fluid and female (*yin*), as opposed to that which seems hard, stiff and male (*yang*). The *Classic of the Way* (*Daodejing*, c 4 BCE) teaches that '[t]he meekest in the world [can] [p]enetrat[e] the strongest in the world … Nothing in the world can match it' (Laozi quoted in Thompson 1998, 17). Accordingly, neither the Chinese nor Japanese governments can sustain demonstrations of military power to indicate a 'strong' national defence.

Lastly, Chinese and Japanese audiences embrace the themes of hybridity and heterotopic space viscerally because they are culturally so familiar. As noted above, ancient philosophies like yin/yang theory have flowed through China and Japan, as well as the region generally, for millennia. These concepts influence daily life through food, medicine, literature, art, lifestyle and so on. Asia has long had a Westphalian tradition of its own: that is, military prowess as the basis of state power. But the intricacies of Asian politics, usually centred more on palace intrigue than military campaigns, also suggest that there is *more* to power than brute force. The game of power, in other words, rarely proceeds so linearly and predictably as in chess; rather, it involves multiple goals at multiple levels achieved by simultaneous, multiple moves as in *weiqi* (in Chinese) or *go* (in Japanese). It is one's ability to deal with exigencies and surprises, *The art of war* teaches, that makes the superior general.

Nagi, the café owner, expresses a well-known, Daoist/Buddhist sentiment: 'becoming' matters more than 'being'. Such openness allows freedom from convention. On this basis, the Buddhist monk-teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1998, 3) reminds us, we may reach the reality of our 'true mind':

> What are we to be in touch with? The answer is reality, the reality of the world and the reality of the [true] mind … Getting in touch with true mind is like digging deep in the soil and reaching a hidden source that fills our well with fresh water. When we discover our true mind, we are filled with understanding and compassion, which nourishes us and those around us as well.

The Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute, in other words, *can change*. It is not eternal, frozen or fixed. Westphalian assumptions about national identity as united, total, assimilated and homogeneous do not—cannot—stick. As the long history between the Chinese and Japanese civilizations shows, the Islands brim with difference, ambiguity, hybridity, liminality and in-betweenness. On this basis, it is possible to find nodes of socio-cultural commonality despite the state-centric manner in which the conflict has been framed. And herein will lie the resolution to the 'crisis'.

Retelling IR. The thought experiment undertaken in this article has implications for IR theory as well. This exercise helps IR scholars to unlink epistemically from Westphalia (Mignolo 2007) so that we can re-link with it but on ontologically equal, de-colonial terms (Kataneksza et al 2018). Besides its

'Whiteness' (Amin 2009, Hobson 2012, Vitalis 2015), Westphalia's colonial hierarchies (Ling 2017b) privilege the US as the only possible arbiter in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. An epistemic, not just structural, hegemony follows. It propagates Western history and tradition, norms and practices, as the only source of valid, reproducible knowledge.

However, as the *dao* suggests, opportunities for change and transformation always exist. As the dip into Chinese and Japanese popular culture indicates, many voices contend within Chinese and Japanese society, not just the official one of the government. Furthermore, it is important not to mistake the government for a monolith, either. The leaders of China and Japan may pay lip service to Westphalia for now but they also harbour alternative imaginaries of their own. One source of transformation may be China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in Kazakhstan in 2003. It articulates new norms of international relations based on the principles and spirit of the ancient Silk Roads (Ling and Perrigoue 2018). Critics may charge that the BRI is merely a cover for the same old power politics, but the policy is still too young for a definitive judgment. What the BRI signals, at the very least, is that leaders in Asia are 'doing' world politics differently by 'being' in it differently.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that looking at different narratives in popular culture as a thought experiment provides a distinctive and useful perspective to rethink the current dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In other words, imagination matters in politics. Not only can it entrench cultural stereotypes, as the Chinese and Japanese governments try to do, but imagination can also bring to light alternative futures that have not been previously considered, as *Appleseed* and *Time of Eve* have shown. In addition, *Nirvana in Fire* demonstrates how intelligence can overcome brute force, integrity can overcome status, and justice can overcome power—no matter how long it takes.

This article also argues for the relevance of looking at alternative futures and alternative histories beyond Westphalia. In Sino-Japanese relations, for example, Westphalian IR often overlooks culture, long histories between Chinese and Japanese civilizations, and socio-cultural commonality and interaction between peoples. Yet, viewed through the lens of popular culture and history, the Westphalian take on the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute becomes de-centred. Inter-state relations melt into a broader, deeper canvas of inter- and intra-civilizational relations. Foregrounding the latter unveils ancient philosophies and problem-solving strategies that are denied by Westphalian IR but could be applied fruitfully and enduringly to the Islands dispute. Military tensions could be reduced through concepts of doubleness or mobility or graduated sovereignty. The game of power offers multiple entries for interpretation and intervention and need not remain a zero-sum standoff. Indeed, the concept of sovereignty itself could evolve. Sovereignty could shift to an ability to *negotiate* borders rather than stay trapped by them (Ling and Perrigoue 2018).

Isn't this, alone, liberating?

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