International Society as a Process: Institutions, Identities, and China’s Peaceful Rise

Qin Yaqing*

Introduction

As China continues rapidly to develop, the question remains, ‘Is it possible for China to rise peacefully?’ It is generally agreed that China’s rise from 1979 to the present has been quite successful, but there is still worry, or at least widespread uncertainty, about its peaceful rise. Realists argue that a rising power will sooner or later challenge the hegemon and the existing international order, probably through violent, systemic war.\(^1\) Liberals worry about China’s political system and ideology. Although they believe that international institutions permeated with liberal ideas and norms will greatly incorporate China and constrain its behavior, uncertainty nonetheless exists owing to the anarchical nature of the international system,\(^2\) the limitations of international institutions, and China’s domestic political and socio-economic processes.

The English School, with its key concept of international society, has similar concerns from a different angle. They are more about identity, i.e.


*Corresponding author: Email: yqqin@cfau.edu.cn

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China’s identity vis-à-vis the English School definition of international society. Barry Buzan’s article, ‘China in International Society: Is Peaceful Rise Possible?’ reflects this perspective and highlights the English School international society approach to the question of a rising power like China. This is a distinct perspective because it homes in on the fundamentally important issue of the institutions of international society institutions, especially the so-called primary institutions, which define international society and the conduct of its members as regards what is and is not legitimate and appropriate behavior.

The peaceful rise of a rising power which does not disturb the order of international society presupposes that power’s acceptance of the primary institutions of international society. Buzan argues, according to this logic, that China’s peaceful rise, if not impossible, will be extremely difficult, because it means that China must accept international society’s changed and changing primary international institutions, in particular those of democracy, human rights, and environmental friendliness. Identity, or identity confrontation, is the key question underlying any discussion on acceptance of international society’s primary institutions. On the one hand, primary institutions constitute the essential features of international society; on the other, China’s identity precludes its acceptance of such institutions. This dualistically structured conflict of identities presents a new form of structural conflict; one which implies that a re-alienated China is more likely to use its rapidly expanded capabilities not to rise peacefully.

This is a crucial question. As I have argued elsewhere, China’s identity in relation to international society constitutes the century-puzzle of the Chinese since 1840. Signs of a solution to it have appeared since adoption in 1979 of the policy of reform and opening up which ended China’s isolation from international society. In this article, I argue that China’s continued peaceful rise is possible. It will depend, of course, not only on China but on the interaction between China and international society, the United States,

5 Buzan argues that the master primary institutions of international society are those fundamental, value-oriented, and constitutive of actors, including sovereignty, territoriality, diplomacy, great power management, nationalism, the market, equality of people, and environmental stewardship. See Barry Buzan, From International to World Society?: English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 167, 187, and 241.
7 Qin Yaqing, ‘Guoji guanxi lilun de hexin wenti yu Zhongguo xuepai de shengcheng,’ (‘The Core Problematic and the Emerging of a Chinese School of IR,’) Zhongguo Shehui Kexue (Social Sciences in China), No. 3 (2005), pp. 165–76.
and other members of the international community. I disagree with Buzan in my argument that although China’s peaceful rise over the next three decades will not be easy, it will at least be no more difficult than it was three decades ago, in light of China’s since having become a member of international society. The membership threshold is crucial to thinking about identity convergence and confrontation. I moreover argue that Buzan’s argument is biased, because the English School definition and interpretation of international society is essentially static and socio-culturally confined. It sees changes in the primary institutions of international society but at the same time fails to understand China’s sea change, and perceives instead a reluctant China that is chasing a moving target.

I therefore take a different approach in this article, based upon the Chinese way of thinking, Chinese dialectics, and Chinese understanding of human society. This approach to international society, in contrast to that of the English School, might contribute to framing a more balanced picture for the future development of this anarchic society and the complex relationships therein.

Two Approaches to International Society

The English School’s greatest contribution to International Relations is perhaps its invention and persistent conceptualization of international society. This concept is unique in two ways. First, it differs from the mere power calculation that has long dominated American International Relations theory; and second its invention and development are based upon European history and experience. Buzan’s findings in tracing the development of the English School as regards its dealing with the expansion of culture are that mainstream English School scholars have structured a Euro-centered story as advanced by the most conspicuous Vanguardist account, joined since the 19th century by the Syncretist account. Although I accept the concept of international society, and believe that it is a most valuable perspective for the analysis of international relations, I disagree with certain English School scholars on how to define and understand it. I next discuss two approaches to international society. One is the English School approach (or as I understand it); the other the Chinese understanding of human society/international society, or what I understand as the Chinese way of understanding it.

International Society as an Entity

The first approach to international society is that of regarding it as an independent ego-entity, by which I mean an ontologically self-organizing and self-evolving ego born in a particular socio-cultural locale that develops its own organs and institutions and expands as it grows. It is essentially a being; it is the subject. This is largely the approach of the mainstream English School, which takes Western/European international society as a well-demarcated ego-category and a central anchorage, and studies its origins, growth, and expansion. Underlying this approach is what I call the taxonomical thinking and conflictual dialectics characteristic of the Western thought process.

The taxonomical thought pattern focuses on the object in both its physical and social forms, which are seen as discrete and independent of each other in the world and categorized according to the similarity [or non-similarity? Polisher] of their essential properties. The independent object, its properties and attributes, constitute the real entity and plays its distinct role. This object is also taken as independent of other objects and of the context in which it lives, moves, and takes action. What is most important within this world view is determining the nature of the object, because it is essential properties only that distinguish one object from another. For example, think about two objects, A and non-A. The non-contradiction theorem tells us that A cannot be non-A, and vice versa. Each is discrete, independent, and able to stand by and of itself, as either A with the essential A properties or non-A with all the essential properties that A does not possess. The appearances or even attributes of an object might change, but its nature is non-changeable and its essential properties non-transformable. This leads to the ‘either-or’ logic wherein, as communications theorist Robert Logman makes clear, ‘The Greeks became the slaves to the linear, either-or orientation of their logic.’

The taxonomy-oriented thought process makes categorization the most important means of understanding objects in both the natural and social worlds. As an object behaves according to objective rules and laws, categorization helps to discern the rules and laws that are otherwise invisible. Once the rules and laws are determined, how the object behaves becomes certain and clear. The tenacious search for certainty has strengthened this thought process. The Newtonian object keeps its present position and status unless

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12 Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong uses the analogy of rice-straw bundles to describe the discreteness and individuality of Western society, whereby which each bundle stands alone, separate and unrelated to others in the field. See Fei Xiaotong, Xiangtu Zhongguo (Earthbound China) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2007).
13 David Hall and Roger Ames, Thinking from the Han (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
an external force works upon it. This principle has similar application in the social world. An agent has its own properties—free, impermeable, and independent of contexts and circumstances. If all agents or individuals are thus defined, then there must be laws to restrain their behavior and contracts to bind them together within society. Norms and rules are thus institutionalized to harness actors’ independent behavior, govern instrumental interaction, and facilitate collective action by independent individuals. This is the function of the ‘primary institutions’ Buzan describes.

Taxonomical thinking is moreover associated with the Western tradition of dialectics, powerfully systemized by Hegel. It is a conflictual dialectic. The world is objectively an entity, including categories independent of one another. Each category is independent because it has its own properties that do not change and that define it, thus distinguishing it from other categories. Thesis and antithesis stand opposite one another in a structure, such as slaves and slave-owners in a slave society. The essential relationship between the thesis and antithesis is contradictory, conflictual, and confrontational. A new and higher level of synthesis is reached if, and only if, the inherent and non-reconciliatory contradiction between them is solved through the domination of one thesis and elimination of the other.

The key to this Hegelian dialectic is exclusiveness, because it refuses to recognize that A is inclusive of non-A, and able to move in a process of becoming non-A. It sees the process of evolution as one of reconciliatory struggle and zero-sum gaming. By focusing on the forms and properties of a categorically defined being, therefore, it fails to see and explore the processes of a relationally oriented becoming. Conflict is thus ontologically significant and objectively existent and hence insoluble and non-reconciliatory through human efforts. It is in fact so important that it provides the primary driving force for the evolution of human society—from slavery to feudal, and perhaps from international to global. If we examine mainstream Western international relations theories on power (classic and neo-realism), civilization (clash of civilizations), norms (liberal constructivism), and society (the English School), this conflictual dialectic seems to be omnipresent.

Based upon this logic and thought process, international society is defined naturally as an independent entity; an objective being. This is the first approach, or, as I call it, the ‘entity approach’. It is generally agreed that the English School concept of international society is a big idea.15 It has gained

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importance due to the persistent efforts of both generations of English School scholars and the post-Cold War reality that have revealed the significance of the societal dimension of international relations. Although the concept of international society is highly conducive to the understanding of international relations, the static and stereotyped notion of international society, namely that based on European international society as an independent entity, a categorically defined object, and a discrete being, has not been seriously questioned. This problem becomes growingly conspicuous when European international society meets other non-Western societies. The society–system dualism which contrasts itself with the ‘American school’ focus on the international system, material capabilities, and scientism, is perhaps one of the English School’s most important contributions. But the English School at the same time faces its own dilemma in the form of the numerous dualistic structures that keep on appearing in tandem with the development of theory and reality. They can hardly be solved by the entity approach that characterizes the English School.

Taxonomical thinking creates the English School’s dilemma in the first place. Shaped by this thought process, English School scholars have constructed international society as an entity, a category that has its distinct European birthmark. It is made clear in many of the works of English School scholars that modern international society appeared first in Europe, evolving from the Medieval European system, to the Italian city-state system to the Westphalian system, and then perhaps towards a world society. As European international society became defined as the subjective entity, Chinese, Indian, and Islamic societies became alter, or other, and as European international society is taken as the international society model, other societies are perceived as non-modern ones. As European international society is seen mainly as a self-organizing body, the focus has been naturally on the inner dynamics of what is in fact European international society and its unique, though not universal, features. Category-oriented thinking has hence from the very beginning dominated the discursive construction by English School scholars of international society. That it has been constructed as a unique category with features and properties that define and distinguish it as an independent and distinct being hence follows. As the world becomes free of more and more obstacles—geographical, economic, technological, and ideational—English School scholars now tend to face the question of the expansion of this ego-category,

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which must and has to meet other-categories. This reality is highly relevant
to the most important features and properties of international society.

What, then, are the distinct features and properties of such an interna-
tional society? Hedley Bull’s definition makes this clear:

A society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states,
conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in
the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in
their relations with one another, and share in the working of common
institutions.17

Bull discusses elsewhere the essential features of international society when
trying to distinguish between an international society and an international
system, arguing that ‘two or more political units may constitute a system in
this sense without having a sense of common purpose or identity…’.18 He
further argues that international society involves ‘a sense of common
identity and an awareness of the need to operate common institutions in
the pursuit of common purposes’.19 Buzan takes common identity as a
defining feature of international society.20

Key concepts in the definition of international society include interests,
values, rules, institutions, and identity. As interest is a cliché in International
Relations theory, especially in the rationalistic IRT of America, rather than
a unique concept of the English School, societal factors are more significant.
The English School scholars earlier mentioned tell us that identity is the key
concept to which institutions of international society relate. Identity and
institutions remain those around which Buzan’s argument in ‘China in
International Society’ unfolds.

This has for years created a dilemma for the English School, reflected in
the pluralism-solidarism debate within it. International society tends to
evolve and expand, necessarily meeting with alter-categories. The pluralist
solution is behavior-oriented; to have states accept the basic code of conduct
and institutions such as sovereignty, non-interference, and diplomacy.
To some extent, it is likely that others will accept them. The solidarist
worry, however, is value-oriented, concerned more about shared norms
and culture.21 It is well reflected in Martin Wight’s hypothesis that a
shared culture constitutes the premise for international society, and

17 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchic Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York:
18 Hedley Bull, ‘Notes on the Modern International System’, pp. 1–2, cited in Tim Dunne,
*Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin’s
19 Ibid.
20 Barry Buzan, ‘From International System to International Society: Structural Realism and
International Society*, pp. 100–1.
Vincent’s argument in particular that the concept of human rights is universal in nature and its interpretation should be homogeneous. The implication is that value systems, cultures and civilizations are almost impossible to share, and behind it still is the conflictual dialectic—you are either us or alien—at work. There is no middle course.

Buzan’s three accounts, Vanguardist, Syncretist, and Layered, are in fact similar. The Vanguardist account views the expansion of Western international society as a one-way street, arguing that a global international society should be an enlarged Western international society, together with its norms, values, and institutions. The Syncretist account believes in cultural encounters, arguing that expansion of Western international society must address other cultures and civilizations, their values and institutions. But it also acknowledges that there is an essential consistency between the Vanguardist and Syncretist accounts; both believe in the homogenization model of cultural expansion. Buzan proposes a third model: layered international society. This model focuses on two levels, the global and the regional. Although it is hard to form a more cohesive global international society, it is easier for China to work in a regional international society, because East Asian nations have more shared values, cultures, and institutions. Essentially the layered model reflects too an ‘either-or’ way of thinking, but manifested in the form of an expedient design, which on the one hand recognizes the impossibility of integrating the distinct ego and alter entities, and on the other raises a temporary solution to save the English School core assumption of international society, especially its value-oriented version. The embedded contradiction is hence not solved, only shelved.

Homogenization should move toward the Western ego-category, or the non-Western should be homogenized into the Western one. This is made clear in Buzan’s argument in his article. In common with most English School scholars, he sees international society as an evolving ego-category. As it evolves, its features are also evolving, and as it evolves, it expands, as reflected in the expansion of its defining features. If an alter-category should enter into this ego-category, it must make an either-or choice. Theoretically, a syncretist model seems to mean that encounters between different cultures require adaptation and change, but the essential bias is that the ego changes by itself and the alter should change accordingly. Thus, no matter whether it is Vanguardist, Syncretist, or Layered, it is a synthetic homogeneity that provides the firm foundation for international society. Where such homogeneity is easier to create, it is also easier for an international society to form and exist. But what would happen if layered international societies were

23 Barry Buzan, ‘Culture and International Society’, p. 11.
successfully to be formed? The necessary condition for a global international society seems again to be the homogenization of cultures and identities.

Due to taxonomical thinking, Buzan constructs many dualistic structures of categories in his article. They are: West vs. non-West, China vs. Western-led international society, communist planned economy vs. liberal market economy, global international institutions vs. regional international society, etc. As he argues, ‘To put it bluntly, can a Communist government ever support the market ideationally, or must its support necessarily be not more than calculated?’ Among them, the most relevant are: China and the rest of international society; and China’s institutions and those of international society. This goes back to two essential features; the first is about identities and the second about normative values embodied in institutions. They are interrelated and both fit into the ego-alter framework, categorically different and therefore fundamentally opposite. Moreover, according to the conflictual dialectic, none of the pairs is reconcilable. Once opposites in the dualistic structure are seen as essentially conflictual, a synthesis can be achieved only when one of the opposites is either eliminated or absorbed. Thus, on the one hand, Buzan agrees that China has been (mysteriously) successful in rising peacefully and getting into international society in the first three decades since 1979 to the present, but on the other, argues that the primary institutions of (Western) international society are evolving, changing from the Westphalian ones of sovereignty, non-interference, balance of power, etc. to the post-Westphalian ones of human rights, democracy, and green peace. As China remains a Westphalian non-democracy, it should naturally have much more difficulty rising peacefully and further integrating itself into international society in the next thirty years. China is thus defined as a reformist revisionist, who ‘accepts some of the institutions of international society . . . But it resists, and wants to reform, others, and possibly also wants to change its status’. It may be interpreted (rightly or wrongly) that China will either fully accept the newly established primary institutions of Western international society, or will rise violently by overthrowing the existing international order sustained by the primary institutions. A clash of civilizations again is implied. By definition, the conflictual dialectic provides no room for a middle way, an alternative course, and a genuine synthesis that comes out of communication and dialogue. It continues to persist in searching in a pluralistic world of uncertainty for the imagined certainty by upholding the belief that only one truth, one way, and one model is and should be universal.

25 Ibid., p.18.
International Society as a Process

The second approach to society is to understand human society as a process. It may be called the ‘process approach’ to international society. The Chinese see human society, including international society, differently from the ways discussed above. This is because the Chinese way of thinking, or worldview, is different from that of the West. Society is not a self-enclosed, self-contained entity. Rather, it is a process, an open process of complex social relations in motion. Rules, regimes, and institutions are not established to govern or restrain the behavior of individual actors in society, but to harmonize relations among members of society. This understanding of society is based upon the relational thought process and the complementary dialectic, both of which originate in the Chinese philosophical and intellectual traditions.

The Chinese thought process differs conspicuously because it is less taxonomy-sensitive. Rather, it is relationally oriented and focuses on relations in process, taking objects as related to one another and actors as actors-in-relations. Correlativity, as Hall and Ames have conceptualized, is the fundamental of Chinese thinking. All are correlated. Actors that are not in relations are non-actors and events that are not in process are non-existent. This thinking also sees numerous pairs of opposites interacting in the world, but the two opposites in a pair as interdependent and complementary. One cannot exist without the other, because one creates conditions for the formation, existence, and transformation of the other. As the yin-yang diagram (or the diagram of Taiji, the Supreme Ultimate) shows, they are coexistent in a complementary relationship to form an organic and systemic whole. The nature and form of the self thus depends on its relations with the other to be meaningful.

A relationally oriented thought process lays emphasis more on the context than on the independent individual. Since the context is primarily defined in terms of complex relations, this mind-set sees society as a complexity of relational networks. The constantly moving relations constitute processes which define and transform the form (behavior) and nature (identity) of individual objects or agents. Processes thus defined are therefore the most important feature of society, because it defines and redefines the relational identity of the actor. It stresses constant movement, change, and transformation through interactive relationships and inter-subjective practices. Again we take the two objects, A and non-A. They are interdependently related, complementarily constructive, and mutually inclusive. This is the ‘both-and’ logic. It is inclusive in nature.

David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 235.
Such a way of thinking or worldview makes relations among objects rather than properties of an object the key to understanding the world and human society. As actors are actors-in-relations, they behave in terms of relationships that keep going on in complex processes of society. Rules and institutions are thus designed to govern not individual actors but relations among actors. So-called objective and abstract laws, rules, and institutions applied to an isolated and independent actor are ineffective, useless, and even non-existent. As relations change, identities change. This is why the fundamental change of the relationship between China and international society since China’s reform and opening-up is so significant. Change is what never changes and adjustments, therefore, are always necessary as relations in processes are fluid and subject to change. Such a thought process sees the actor changing as relations between the self and the other, between the self and the environment, change. The nature of the relationship between China and international society, for example, can very much depend on whether China is a member or non-member.

Dialectics is also embedded in the Chinese way of thinking and worldview. The logic of process consisting of complex relations contains the Chinese dialectics of change and inclusiveness, which differs significantly from Hegelian dialectics. The Western way of thinking focuses on an independent entity and tends to assume discreteness. It first requires a clear definition of the nature of an entity, for instance, the properties and features of A, and then decides whether A exists and how it can be classified in taxonomic terms. A can never be non-A, for non-A has different properties. The traditional Chinese dialectics, in contrast, does not seek the certainty. Rather it stresses change and inclusiveness: A includes non-A, and A is in the process of becoming non-A. Obviously, it violates the non-contradiction theorem, which lies in the heart of the Western logical reasoning.

Chinese dialectics do not see the thesis-antithesis contradiction, but argues for co-thesis or inter-thesis complementation. The synthesis is always the combination and inclusion of the two rather than the elimination or destruction of one by the other.27 This is the ‘both-and logic’. The self is inclusive of the other and vice versa, and A is the becoming of non-A. The essence of this inclusiveness is that it is a process which transforms the self and the other

27 See Roland Bleiker, ‘Neorealist Claims in Light of Ancient Chinese Philosophy: the Cultural Dimension of International Theory’, in Dominique Jacquin-Berdal, Andrew Oros, and Marco Verweij, eds., Culture in World Politics (New York: Millennium, 1998), pp. 89–115. Bleiker argues, ‘International theory and Western conceptualizing in general have traditionally been based on the juxtaposition of antagonistic bipolar opposites, such as rational/non-rational, good/evil, just/unjust, war/peace or chaos/order. On side of the paring is considered to be analytically and conceptually separate from the other. The relationship between the bipolar opposites generally expresses the superiority, dominance or normative desirability of one entity (such as peace) over the other (such as war),’ p. 94.
through recreation toward a new unity. As co-theses are by nature non-conflictual, the fundamental relationship between them is harmony rather than conflict. Relations in motion define the process of transformation. When we observe conflict and contradiction in the world, it is the transitional or superficial phenomenon rather than the essential character, for the Way or the nature of the universe that produces all the opposites is ontologically harmonious in the first place. Conflict occurs once the self does not understand the truth, the appropriate relationship between itself and the other, thus deviating from the Way, and once relations are not properly governed. The process of transformation is thus at the same time a process of self-cultivation back toward the Way.

Relational thinking sees change as the nature of things and stresses the transformative process defined in terms of complex relations in motion which are full of dynamics. A is A, but at the same time it is subject to change into non-A, depending on how or in which direction the relations between A and non-A are moving and what conditions such relations create for the actor to live and act in. In fact, A at any tempo-spatial point or moment includes A and non-A. We call it A simply because it shows at that particular point or moment more properties of A while the non-A attributes are less visible. Anything, no matter whether it is an individual or an institution, is in this process of transforming.

This process-nurtured transformation is called tongbian, or continuity through change. Change here basically refers to ‘change through inter-subjectivity’ between the two opposites or poles and ‘change through contextuality’. The poles in Chinese dialectics depend on and correlate with each other, mutually constituting and conditioning. Once one disappears, the other disappears simultaneously. A being continues its life through becoming. The poles in it are in a process of transforming into one another, thus producing continual and continuous dynamics for life and existence. The social context, which can be defined as processes of interactive practices and complex relations, is also extremely important in the Chinese

28 Chung-ying Cheng argues that the Chinese dialectics is dialectics of harmony, for there is a common metaphysical ground among Confucianism and Daoism that the nature of the universe is harmony or a process of harmonization. Conflict is not ontologically true and its existence and occurrence are merely for the achievement of harmony in life. Conflict is by nature resolvable through the self-adjustment by the individual of itself and of the relations between itself and the context. See Chung-ying Chung, Lun Zhongxi zhexue jingshen (On the Essence of Chinese and Western Philosophies) (Shanghai: Dongfang chuban zhongxin, 1995), pp. 182–4.

29 The Chinese classic Yi Jing, or the Book of Change, expresses this idea most effectively.

30 See Chenshan Tian, Chinese Dialectics, trans. Xiao Yanzhong (Beijing: Renmin daxue chubanshe, 2008), pp. 21–41. Tian believes that tongbian (continuity through change) is the essence of Chinese dialectics.


thought process. An agent is constantly related to the context and changes as the context changes. That is why Nisbett argues that the Chinese thought process is context-oriented and the Western one is object-oriented.32 Relations between the agent and the context very often define the agent as well as the context. Continuity through change and change with continuity has become the Chinese understanding of the world, and also a practice in life. China’s success in its peaceful rise in the first three decades is as Buzan observes to a great degree the success of such practice in international relations and such understanding of international society. It is not because it was easier.

In the logic of relational thinking, international society, as any society, is a process rather than an entity, a process of complex, entangled, and ongoing relations. It is a becoming rather than a being, a becoming that involves agents and institutions. If society is seen as a complexity of relations, actors in such a society are actors-in-process or actors-in-relations. In the logic of complementary dialectics, opposites of a pairing interact in a non-conflicting way, leading to a new synthesis that combines rather than homogenizes.

Two Approaches: Identities and Institutions

The two approaches, one based on the idea of international society as an entity and the other on the concept of international society as a process, lead to two different kinds of understanding of identity formation and institution acceptance.

In the logic of the first approach, international society is a being with its primary norms and institutions. As norms and institutions of international society are seen as being of a distinct self-category, expansion of international society or integration into international society necessitates homogenization of the other categories of norms and institutions into the ego ones. The ego category, as earlier discussed, refers to Western international society together with its primary norms and institutions, and homogenization means that the ego category takes over, cultivates, or eliminates the alter categories. This is exactly the logic of the conflictual dialectics that A and non-A can never be mutually inclusive, because the two have essentially different properties just as a stone cannot become gold in the material world. Expansion of A and integration of non-A are hardly possible unless non-A should be completely changed or its essential properties eliminated. It is, however, never possible for non-A to become an identical A. The pessimism of mainstream English School scholars is based to a large extent upon this logic.

32 Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought.*

Let’s turn to identities first. The entity approach assumes that identity is what makes an actor what it is and is therefore defined by the essential properties of the actor. It is first of all individually, independently, and objectively defined. If two actors with different identities meet, it is reasonable to argue according to the conflictual dialectic that identity change means homogenization through the elimination of one by the other. The conflict is thus resolved and a new synthesis is reached by one’s overwhelming victory over the other. In other words, Identity A by nature is not inclusive of Identity Non-A. Either Non-A is completely changed into A to realize homogeneity or the two fail to reach a collective identity, the results being either success of international society’s expansion or the failure of Non-A’s integration.

Expansion of the so-called primary institutions implies the same logic. International society has primary institutions, the most important of which, at different time frames or historical stages, include sovereignty, market economy, democracy, human rights, etc. Most studies of international norms over the last ten years in leading Western international relations journals have discussed how nice Western norms spread to become dominant in the international community.33

Buzan argues that it is relatively easy for China to accept the Westphalian institutions of sovereignty, diplomacy, and balance of power, but extremely difficult, if not impossible, for China to accept the newly established institutions such as human rights and democracy. It can then be understood that it is easier for China to accept behavior-oriented institutions and more difficult for it to accept value-oriented institutions, because the former can be taken by a calculation of interest while the latter goes to the more fundamental question of identity. The key to Buzan’s argument, therefore, is that China’s identity determines that it can hardly accept such institutions.

The second approach, however, takes international society or any society as becoming, or as a process—a process of complicated inter-subjective relations in motion. As we live in a more globalizing world, a geographically confined international society will inevitably meet and interact with other cultures and polities. The first approach emphasizes the encounter of at least

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33 The norm study has become a major topic of international relations and numerous articles have been published in leading international relations journals in recent years as constructivism has gained more influence. The most conspicuous feature of these studies is the mechanisms of norm spreading, or norms of the Western international society spread to other regions or countries. See, for example, Jeffery Checkel, ‘International Institutions and Socialization in Europe: Introduction and Framework’, *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2005), pp. 801–26; Alexander Gitsciu, ‘Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization’, *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2005), pp. 973–1012; and Amitav Acharya, ‘How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter’, *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 239–75.
two opposite societies as distinct categories and the homogenizing of the other by the ego, but the second approach sees the opposites as complementary in the final analysis and understands the new synthesis as the ego-alter transformation through interaction and as mutual complementation through change. The appearance and essence of the ego-alter synthesis will hence be the combination of the two through the work of complex relations in motion rather than homogeneity through the destruction of the other by the ego.

Identity is thus defined and redefined in terms of such relations, experiencing constant changes through social practices, and therefore shows multiple and plural characteristic features. Identity, like society, is a becoming rather than a being. In the process of inter-subjective relations, the identity of an actor in interaction is always in the shaping and experiences constant change. At any tempo-spatial point, therefore, existence and non-existence of a certain property are both present (being both A and non-A or A with some properties of non-A). When two actors with different identities, say A and Non-A again, begin to engage each other in interaction, they can be seen as two poles that are mutually inclusive and complementary. It means, as discussed above, that in the process of interactive practices, A is inclusive of Non-A, and vice versa. It does not mean that the two are naturally in unity without competition, conflict, or struggle, but it does mean that A and Non-A are mutually transferable and the transformation is accomplished through integrating the properties of the two rather than eliminating one by the other. The ego and alter thus coexist and interact in a becoming process that are inclusive and complementary, creating conditions for transformation. The inclusiveness reduces the likelihood of violent merging.

Some scholars in the West have also noticed such simultaneity. For instance, Giddens uses the concept of ‘structuration’, trying to replace dualism with duality. It replaces the traditional thinking of dualism that takes agents and structures as two independently given sets of phenomena. Wendt also argues that there exists a much more intimate conceptual link between individuals and society as they are mutually constitutive. However, since their theories grow out of the Western culture, discreteness and dichotomy structure their understanding of the world, making them unable to imagine such Chinese thinking as ‘A is the becoming of non-A’, which is simply illogical.

and paradoxical by the Enlightenment standard. Nevertheless, process is the very thing that Chinese dialectics tends to explain. All social actors are entirely embedded in process from the very beginning, and there is no given society independent of process. In the process, the behavior of actors transforms, so do their essential properties. A can transform or be transformed into non-A. Co-theses do not meet each other necessarily by conflict; rather, they interpret, define, and complement each other to make a harmonious whole, as shown by the yin-yang diagram. For instance, in international relations, the West often defines a state as a ‘rogue’ state, and takes action against it by diplomatic, economic, and military means. The Chinese dialectics, on the other hand, may hold that states are in the ongoing process of international relations and hence their identities are changeable. Be it good or bad, it can be transformed. Therefore, the key is to let the process play an active role to allow room for positive transformation.

Assume we take any particular tempo-spatial moment and observe the identity of an actor at that point. It is multi-faceted and mixed. Perhaps some properties weigh more and others less, some more visible and others less, and thus we believe the actor is defined by the dominant property or properties. However, these properties co-exist with other properties which are not that dominant and visible at the particular moment. Changes may come from the process in which these properties interact with other co-existing properties. Once conditions are ripe, the lesser properties may become dominant and the actor is hence defined differently. That is what we mean by change. Even though it is the case, the originally dominant properties are not eliminated and continue to exist. This is the logic of complementary or harmonious dialectics.

Primary institutions and norms of a society are closely related to identity therein. The Chinese relational thinking and complementary dialectics see institutions also as becoming. If we use with modification the ‘first encounter analogy’ by Wendt, when two actors meet, their institutions and norms also meet together with them. These institutions and norms may be very

36 The Chinese dialectics maintains that A and non-A are mutually inclusive and transformable. This idea negates the Western view on interaction, which contends that interaction between A and non-A can change their behavior and the auxiliary attributes, but not the essential properties. On the contrary, Chinese dialectics asserts that A and non-A can engage each other in mutual transformation, including their essential properties. The Book of Change and Lao Zi/Dao De Jing, two of the most influential books on Chinese dialectics, express the idea that the opposites co-exist, defining, complimenting, and growing out of each other. For instance, ‘Tangible and intangible create each other; difficult and easy define each other’ (Lao Ti, Chapter 2), ‘Full maturity implies decline’ (Lao Zi, Chapter 55) and ‘Good fortune lies within bad; bad fortune lurks within good.’ (Lao Tsu, Chapter 58), etc.

37 Wendt assumes that the two have no social identities prior to their first meeting. I modify this assumption and entitle the two actors with social identities expressed in the institutions and norms from their respective cultures and societies. See Alexander Wendt, Social Theory of International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 326–35.
different, but they are involved in a process of becoming and transforming. They may appear conflictual, but can come together, for their nature of being transformable decides that they are not conflictual in essence. They are two complementary poles in the whole. When the two sets of institutions meet, attention is often drawn to their conflict and struggle. But the Chinese belief is that transformation is possible because from the beginning, Chinese see the seemingly conflictual norms and institutions may be inclusive and create conditions for transformation. Norms and institutions, by the same logic, are becoming rather than being. A particular institution is inclusive of its opposite at any particular point of time and space. This explains, to a certain degree, why the Chinese initiated its post-Cultural Revolution reform in a way different from Yugoslavia in the 1950s, the Soviet Union in the 1960s, and Hungary in the 1960s.

It is sometimes difficult to define clearly an actor’s identity exactly because of this mixed characteristic. For example, Buzan’s ‘reformist revisionist’, who accepts some of the institutions and wants to change some others, is applicable to any actor in international society. European states, for example, were criticized by Stephen Krasner for habitually violating the sovereignty institution which had been established by themselves.38 The American unilateralism and neo-conservatism during the Bush administration showed strong revisionist behavior. The United States is again criticized as a revisionist because it violated the norm that prohibits the torture of prisoners of war and caused the regress of the torture norm.39 Another example is that China defines itself as a socialist, developing, market-oriented, and major power in the international system, and a responsible member of international society. The many modifiers illustrate the complexity and multiplicity of its identity. The ‘Western vs. non-Western’ divide is a too simplistic dichotomy, a typical example of the taxonomical thinking. It is also true of some other countries, such as Japan, who has been trying to identify itself with either the East or the West or both. When I argued elsewhere that China has a fundamental identity change since the adoption of the reform and opening-up strategy, I referred mainly to one important aspect of it—from an outsider to a member of international society.40 I believe that is a fundamental change, for the first real positive encounter between China and international society in 1979 allowed China to gain the membership identity and thus started the intensive interaction and involved her in the process of becoming.

40 Qin Yaqing, ‘National Identity, Strategic Culture, and Security Interest’. 
In sum, the two approaches differ in some fundamental ways in their respective understanding of the encounter of identities and institutions of two societies. The entity approach believes that successful integration is based upon homogeneity, while the process approach argues that they depend upon change through complementation and unity in heterogeneity. The former stresses change, but change on the alter side to become the ego. The latter also stresses change, but change on both sides to maintain appropriate relations, achieve harmony, and create a new synthesis.

Identity is non-negotiable for the ‘entity approach’ because it is a distinct category. Each identity has its essential properties. When two different identities meet, especially two seemingly opposite identities meet, the integration succeeds only when the ego conquers the alter to achieve homogeneity. Following such logic, global international society is indeed impossible. Even the alter’s acceptance level is high, many other essential features of the alter differ from those of the ego. Then the logic tells us that it is best to develop a regional international society because of the originally homogeneous nature of nations in the geographical proximity. The process approach understands such encounter from a different perspective. It sees the two different identities are mutually conditioned and transformation starts from the very moment when the encounter begins. It sees the two different identities are mutually conditioned and transformation starts from the very moment when the encounter begins. It would never think of the concept of ‘expansion’ of the ego to the alter. Rather it understands that from the first encounter the ego and alter are mutually inclusive and correlated, thus creating conditions for each other to transform. The complex relational process that defines society provides the context for such encounter, practice, and transformation.

Institutions are similar. Two institutions meet and thus provide the initial conditions for them to engage each other, starting the process of transforming and becoming. The two seemingly opposite institutions, by nature, are mutually inclusive. While the entity approach argues that only by a complete acceptance of the ego’s institutions can the alter integrate itself successfully into the ego’s world, the process approach holds that the complementary combination of the two is possible through constant change and adjustment without resorting to violence. The new synthesis may have more of one institution and less of the other, but includes necessarily both and brews constant changes in the ongoing process.

The Process Approach and China’s Peaceful Rise

The above discussion demonstrates that any two theses or two poles, including two societies together with their respective identities and institutions, even though seemingly different and distinct, are transformable in a complementary way if they interact in a process of change. Their encounter as well as their mutual transformation is not necessarily violent and
confrontational, unless we make it so. In this section, I will first discuss three features to construct an analytical frame and then use the market institution as an example, which was the first breakthrough in China’s integration into international society, to illustrate the possibility and desirability of its peaceful rise.

Theoretically speaking, a process may take any direction as in a complex system. The role identities of two actors, for example, may change toward amity or enmity. In the process approach, three things are thus particularly important concerning the key concepts of international society, i.e. identity and institutions, especially when two opposites meet in an open and ongoing process. They indicate how an actor assumes and behaves in such a process. The first is he (和), or the essential harmony or non-conflict assumption. It assumes that any two opposites in a process are fundamentally non-conflicting and that contradiction can be solved through complementary interaction before a new synthesis is born. John Fairbank believes that China’s most successful foreign policy has been non-violence: The use of diplomatic maneuvering and other non-coercive means is often preferred over coercion. China’s diplomacy in the past three decades has shown an important feature: sticking to the ‘no-enemy assumption’ and navigating along the ‘middle course’, even if a crisis occurs.

The bilateral relations mentioned by Buzan in his article, including China–US and China–Japan relations, are examples. Even a cursory look into the relations between China and the United States in the past three decades will show that there have been many crises. The Taiwan Strait crisis in 1995–1996 because of the US permission of Li Denghui’s visit to the United States led to missile testing on the part of the mainland and dispatch of aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait on the part of the United States. It was a conspicuous employment of threat of force on both sides. The bombing by US missiles of the Chinese embassy in former Yugoslavia in 1999 was considered as the most serious crisis in the bilateral relations. The EP-3

incident in 2001 was another such crisis at hand.44 Despite all these ups and downs and even serious crises, there has been no cold war between China and the United States. In fact, the bilateral relations have become more stable. The tension in the Sino–Japanese bilateral relations at the turn of the century and the relaxation in 2007 show a similar pattern of behavior on the part of China. It is also true of China–ASEAN relations and cross-Taiwan Strait relations. The no-enemy assumption leads to the belief that contradictions are able to be solved and compromised solutions to be found. And the foundation of this assumption is the complementary dialectics.

The second is shi (shi), or the direction/tendency of the process of change in which an actor acts and interacts. The Chinese like to discuss the overall situation or the general tendency, for this is the Chinese way of thinking, i.e. contextually minded and processually oriented. Put it simply, they lay more emphasis on understanding the overall orientation of the on-going social and relational process, or the direction of the process of change, which is shaped by multiple factors and can be, for example, power-pushed, interest-induced, and morality-guided.

The Chinese understanding and interpretation of the overall tendency of today’s world includes three judgments. The first is that peace has replaced war as the most significant characteristic. When Deng Xiaoping expressed his understanding that the main theme of today’s world is ‘peace and development’, he in fact described the direction or the general tendency of change in the world, especially since the end of the Cold War. Based upon such understanding, he advised that China should open up to the rest of the world and concentrate on economic development, changing the policy of ‘Be prepared for war’ during the Cultural Revolution. Opening-up placed China well in the process of international society and intensive interaction has ever followed. The second is that cooperation has become the main behavioral pattern among major powers. By the logic of complementary dialectics, cooperation and conflict are two opposites interacting with each other. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has been increasingly becoming a place where the likelihood of war among major powers has decreased and where common threat and global issues increased by a large margin. No single actor, no matter how strong it is, can solve the problems we face. Major powers therefore have more room for cooperation than conflict. The third is economic development. Because the Cold War type of confrontation is no longer the main feature of our times, economic development should and does constitute the primary task for most of the nations in general and for China in particular. Thus, shi, the general tendency, is interpreted as

44 For all the crises, see Zhang Tuosheng and Michael Swaine, eds., Zhong Mei anquan weiji guanli anli fenxi (Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2007).
overwhelmingly dominated by peace, cooperation, and development. Members of international society, including China, must follow this tendency if they want to succeed.

The third is "bian (变), or becoming, meaning that actors transform and are transformed in the process of change. Change is related to the general tendency and actors change with rather against the overall direction of the process in which they live. Accordingly, identity is always identity in process. It is historical and path-dependent. At the same time, it goes with the direction of the process.

Identity in process means that an actor’s identity is constructed and re-constructed by processual forces which come from relations in motion. If we follow Buzan’s categorization, any state could be called a revisionist, including the United States, the UK, or France, for in their identity revisionist elements can be easily detected. This is essentially the concept of ‘identity in fixity’, static and non-transformable. The reality is that any identity is identity in process. In the past three decades, China’s success in peaceful rise has been mainly due to its own change, which comes from interaction with and practices in international society.45 We did not have another cold war because, to a large extent, China changed and brought the change as well as itself into international society. It is often argued over the question that such change is tactical or fundamental, or as a result of calculation or of ideational reshaping.46 It is a false question, for the two again are inseparable.47 Change includes behavior change and identity change, which are inter- and correlated. Action starting from interest calculation leads an actor into a process and once inside the process mere interest calculation will not work, for the process has its own dynamics and the complex relations may entangle the actor in endless intersubjective practices. The intensive interaction among the actor and other actors and between the actor and the process is powerfully transformative.48 Bian thus is the key to understanding such processes. Continuity through change and change through intersubjective practices is the key to the process-oriented interpretation of society as well as of identity.

Buzan argues that it will be extremely difficult for China to accept the primary institutions of international society. We may use one example to

46 Qin Yaqing, ‘International Factors and China’s External Behavior’.
47 An interesting argument in recent studies of norm spreading and selection reflects that scholars have understood the mistake in separating the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences, for in reality they are inseparable and work on each other. See, for example, Markus Kornprobst, ‘Argumentation and Compromise: Ireland’s Selection of the Territorial Status Quo Norm’, International Organization, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2007), pp. 69–98.
48 Qin Yaqing, ‘Relationality and Processual Construction’.
illustrate the opposite. Even if we take a brief look at the case of the market institution, we may see how the process approach works. The story tells us how China has accepted the institution of market economy and together with it how China has gradually changed its identity from a most rigidly planned economy to largely a market economy. The process is a difficult, gradual, and through all the ups and downs, but it is not necessarily violent.

Market economy has been long a primary institution of the Western international society. China’s acceptance of the institution of market economy was extremely difficult and painful at the beginning. For thirty years since 1949, China adopted the planned economy model and practiced it to the extreme during the Cultural Revolution. Market was not a mere economic issue. Rather it was related to China’s identity as a socialist state and to the Chinese Communist Party’s identity as a revolutionary party. The first serious test for China’s reform and opening up was therefore whether China would accept the market institution. Using the three steps in the process approach we argue that the key to this test was how to look at the two opposites: market and planning.

If we should use the either-or logic, market and planning are two incompatible opposites. The destruction of the one provides the condition for the establishment of the other. Furthermore, market has been long associated by Western scholars as the twin brother of democracy. By the non-conflict assumption, on the contrary, market economy and central planning are seen as inclusive of each other rather than locked in an either-or logic. This provides the first necessary condition for change. Deng Xiaoping’s well-known argument that there are elements of market economy in socialism and elements of planned economy in capitalism reflects exactly the mutually inclusive nature of opposites. When Chen Yun, the then head of the financial and economic committees of the State Council, said, ‘During the whole period of socialism, there are two economic elements, one being planning and the other market,’ he reflected a similar thought. Gradually, the responsibility system (a quasi-private economic form in the rural areas of China) and special economic zones were adopted. China began to practice market economy within the framework of a planned economy.

The understanding of the overall tendency has enabled China to expand the market elements in its economy and to stay on the market track. The generally accepted understanding of the world tendency is that peace and development has replaced war and revolution as the most important and irresistible tendency of our times and that China’s most important work was to develop its economy. At the end of the 1980s, market economy was

50 Chen Yun, Chen Yun wenxuan (Selected Works of Chen Yun), Vol. III (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), p. 245.
practiced in China still on a very small scale and the idea was just beginning to be accepted. As the market expansion was gaining momentum, the Tiananmen incident occurred. There emerged strong voices against market economy in China. Practices of market economy were blamed as the primary cause of social unrest and the policy of reform and opening up was attacked on the ground that it made China ‘change colors’, i.e. from a socialist identity to a capitalist identity. China was indeed on the verge of returning to the old central planning economy. Deng Xiaoping’s talks during his tour in South China confirmed peace and development as the overall tendency and economic development as the most important work of the nation. Market economy as an institution in the shaping moved on and ahead.

Following the overall tendency, change means the change from planning toward market. In 1992, the role of market in the nation’s economy was re-confirmed and the strategy of building socialist market economy was put forward. Private ownership was legalized, stock market opened, and a division of labor between the government and the economic sector worked out. In 2001, China was accepted as member of the World Trade Organization, marking a successful integration of China into the world economic system as well as a key moment of transformation from a government-led to a market-led, from a limited to an overall opening of the country.

There are therefore three steps embodied in this process approach: First, you need to understand the non-conflictual nature of the two poles or forces in a process of change; second, you need to judge soundly the direction of this process of change; third, you need to go with rather than against this direction, or follow rather than challenge the overall tendency of the dynamic process. Theoretically and essentially, therefore, such a process is complementary rather than confrontational, peaceful rather than violent, and incremental rather than radical.

Conclusions

It is three decades already since China took the policy of reform and opening up. It is generally acknowledged that it has so far taken a peaceful path in its rise. While there has been a lot of discussion on whether or not China would continue to rise peacefully, little has been done to examine the Chinese worldview or philosophical tradition to answer why it has been rising peacefully in the last three decades. Instrumental calculation and relative weakness in China capabilities are often cited as the main reason why China did not resort to violence. However, the Soviet Union was weaker than the United States at the end of the Second World War and none would admit that the Soviets were irrational and did not know how to calculate. But the Soviet Union defied the Western-dominated international society, challenged the order therein, and established a Soviet-centered domain,
militarily, politically, and economically. More examples include Iraq in 2003 and Iran now. They are weaker not only than the United States; they are weaker than China. But they have chosen defiance and conflict.

I therefore put forward the process approach by employing the Chinese way of thinking and philosophical tradition. It differs from the mainstream English School’s construction of international society first in that it does not assume the discreteness of independent entities and opposite categories. Rather, it sees societies and actors in society as related to one another in an ongoing process. The argument that international society is a process interprets it as a network of dynamic and transformative relationships, constructing and reconstructing identities of actors within, and producing new syntheses through inter-subjective and inter-contextual practices. In such a process, not only the features of society are changing, but also are the identities of actors. The assumption that a static actor chases the changing institutions does not stand.

The process approach also differs in that it does not assume the irreconcilability of two opposites. The English School constructs international society primarily as an entity and puts identities into different categories. It assumes the competitiveness of the opposite categories by the conflictual dialectics. The process approach understands international society as a process and sees identities transforming along a continuum. Furthermore, the complementary dialectics assumes more harmony of the two opposites. While the irreconcilability assumption tends to conclude that expansion of international society can only be based upon homogenization of the two poles through one replacing the other, the harmony assumption sees a more genuine synthesis of the two through complementary transformation and communicative dialogue. It is natural that violence is much less likely in the process approach than in the entity approach.

As a result, there are two different interpretations of China’s rise. While Buzan sees it as extremely difficult, I predict that it will be possible and realizable, perhaps step by step, even though by no means easy. Buzan maps international actors into four discrete categories: status quo, revolutionary revisionist, orthodox revisionist and reformist revisionist. China is essentially a revisionist, a revisionist cannot be a status quo power, and it therefore will challenge international society, with violence if feasibly and possible. Furthermore, this ‘reformist revisionist’ identity decides that China would not accept the primary institutions or basic rules in the changed game. In Buzan’s categorization, there is no dynamic for evolution from one identity to another.

My analysis is based more on the process approach, taking China’s identity as moving along a processual complexity. The complementary dialectics enables one to understand that two opposites, two societies, and two identities are not necessarily confrontational and can be mutually transformable.
in the process of interaction. The overall tendency of the process pushes forward such transformation. The reform and opening up initiated thirty years ago enabled China to re-estimate this overall tendency of the political and socio-economic process as one of peace, development, and cooperation. China struggled over the threshold of membership of international society and has evolved in the last three decades from a revisionist to a detached and then to a status quo power. The identity shift, the institution selection, and the norm acceptance have all been peaceful, so has China’s dealing with other actors in international society, bilateral or multilateral. It seems therefore that there is no adequate reason to believe that China will violently defy international society in terms of newly emerging institutions.

The process approach, however, assumes a new synthesis that come out of a complementary and transformative process, a new synthesis that blends elements of the two opposites rather than destroys one in favor of the other. The market institution, for example, is accepted and in fact deeply internalized in China, but it is not the identical copy of the Western model. Market economy with Chinese characteristics thus is not mere rhetoric. China’s acceptance and selection of other institutions, primary or secondary, will be similar. Furthermore, the world tends to be increasingly plural and pluralistic. Norms, rules, and institutions, including those accepted and shared by most of the nations, will in practice have variable versions with local characteristics. Intersubjectivity and complementarity will increasingly be a distinct feature of this increasingly diverse world. The one-way traffic mind-set will not work.