

ON RELATIONS AND RELATIONALITY:  
A Conversation with Friends

L.H.M. Ling  
The New School

SYNOPSIS

Two professors engage in deep conversation about deep thoughts – un-bordered thinking, epistemic compassion, interbeing, democratic learning, intellectual freedom, and culinary cosmologies – until they encounter a third. He verifies yet upturns their worlds with an absurdist joke. The professors then realize that humor is sometimes more divine than love. Laughter, after all, affirms the humanity behind all relations and relationality.<sup>1</sup>

CAST

LEE.....A female professor of East Asian background

RAO.....A male professor of South Asian background

O'BRIEN.....A male professor of Celtic background

WAITER.....A male server of any background

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank Astrid Nordin for organizing the workshop at which this paper was first presented. Comments from workshop members also strengthened this paper tremendously. I am especially grateful to Marysia Zalewski for performing Act III with me in Lancaster, UK. In addition, I thank Juliana Mendes De Sa Beckert, Sneha George, and Patricia J. Robertson [in the US](#) for their contributions to this paper. Any errors or confusions, of course, belong to the author.

ACT I:<sup>2</sup>  
UN-BORDERINGS

SCENE: Professors Rao and Lee are sitting in the latter's office. A screen overhead shows a typical, academic office full of books. Rao, a slender, bald man in his fifties, is in his usual natty attire even on a Friday when no classes take place. He sports a custom-tailored, navy-blue blazer and a red, silk cravat tucked inside an immaculate white shirt under a navy-blue cashmere, V-neck sweater atop tan trousers. Crossing his legs, we see thin, brown dress socks elegantly slipped into dark brown, leather loafers. Rao knows he looks good and acts accordingly. Lee strikes an interesting contrast. Slightly overweight, she seems drowned in an over-sized, faded grey, cowl-neck sweater hanging over loose, grey corduroys. *Well-worn, slightly-muddy rain boots peep from below.* A hairpin tries to contain unruly, black hair but a strand or two still manages to escape. Occasionally, whether needed or not, she pushes large, black-framed glasses up her face. Still, she exudes a sweetness that lends her a prettiness that she clearly does not see. An old friend and foil, Rao often drops in on Lee on Friday afternoons for a sparring chat. They both enjoy the intellectual stimulation. But today, Rao seems especially reactionary. Perhaps it's Lee's opening gambit.

LEE: We need to overcome bordered thinking.<sup>3</sup>

RAO: What's that?

LEE: Binaries like X vs. Y, as if there's an inviolable wall between them: that is, one has nothing to do with the other.<sup>4</sup> [The screen overhead shows "X vs. Y."]

RAO: Why?

LEE: Un-bordered thinking could prevent problems from turning into crises. For example, we wouldn't treat contagious diseases like Ebola as something that happens "out there" in Africa until, one day, one of us "in here" gets infected. Then we'd scramble like crazy to find an antidote. The same would apply to racial violence in communities like Ferguson, Missouri or the threat of an Islamic state like ISIS.

---

<sup>2</sup> A portion of this dialogue was previously published in L.H.M. Ling, "Learning from the Silk Roads: Spices and the Demos," *Huffington Post* 21 October 2014 ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lhm-ling/learning-from-the-silk-ro\\_1\\_b\\_6204164.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lhm-ling/learning-from-the-silk-ro_1_b_6204164.html)).

<sup>3</sup> Mignolo first introduced the notion of "border thinking," as geography and *episteme*, with a hybridizing impact: *gnosis*. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> For a classic example of bordered thinking in International Relations (IR), see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996). For an elaboration on how to overcome binaries in IR, see L.H.M. Ling, *A Worldly World Order: Decolonizing International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

These crises don't just happen to "Others" only, never affecting the "Self." Self and Other *together* make the problem. By the same logic, Self and Other together can – and must – fix it. Only then could a solution last.

RAO: And where do you find such un-bordered thinking?

LEE: If you define it – as I do – as learning to learn from Others, then everywhere. I call it *epistemic compassion*.<sup>5</sup>

RAO: Um, yes, very nice... What evidence do you have that it even exists?

LEE: Feminists and postcolonial scholars have long documented this kind of intersubjectivity and intersectionality, especially for subalterns like women and colonized peoples...<sup>6</sup>

RAO: That's due to modernity! Say what you will about colonialism, it was an early globalizer.<sup>7</sup> It forcibly connected peoples and lands, cultures and societies. Colonialism brought us modern inventions like the rule of law [screen overhead shows a statue of the Blindfolded Lady of Justice], electricity [screen: light bulbs switching on], and – not least – the continent-spanning, continent-connecting choo-choo [screen: a train zooming by]. (Lee can't help but smile. Rao can be difficult – but not without charm.)

Don't you think we're better off for it, despite colonialism's many negative legacies? After all, would you rather that we lived in isolation, one never knowing about the other?

LEE: Of course not. But *how* does colonialism allow us to know about one another?<sup>8</sup> Did not colonialism and imperialism set up your ancestors to not only serve but also mimic the British *raj*? [Screen overhead shows a photo of a British officer reclining in a rattan chair while an Indian servant fans him while another rubs his feet.] And didn't this reflect *and* perpetuate how the British empire treated its own women and compatriots like the Scots, Welsh, Irish, and Jews?<sup>9</sup>

Is this what you mean by "getting to know one another"?!

---

<sup>5</sup> Ling, *A Worldly World Order*.

<sup>6</sup> For an updated review of this literature, see Sara Shroff, "Whose Lives Matter? Valuefacturing Capital(ism) Within/Through Terrorisms, Femininities, and Transsexualities," PhD dissertation, Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy, The New School, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> L.H.M. Ling, "Don't Flatter Yourself: World Politics As We Know It Is Changing and So Must Disciplinary IR," in Synne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson (eds), *What Is the Point of IR?*, pp. 135-146 (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> For British colonialism's psychological impact on Indian *and* British society, see Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Psychology of Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988).

- RAO: Now, now. No need to get hot under the collar.
- LEE: Moreover, there was plenty of circulation among non-Western peoples *before* colonialism came along.<sup>10</sup> The imperialist West likes to depict Others as passive, stagnant, and supine, just waiting for its virile thrusts of industrialization, militarization, and modernization.<sup>11</sup> [Screen overhead shows Gaugin’s famous portrait of semi-naked, tropical women.]
- RAO: Don’t get all purple on me!
- LEE: The point is: *global* circuits encompassed non-Western peoples. [Screen overhead shows a picture of an elegant dinner party in Song dynasty China.] How else do you think all this wealth was generated, especially in Asia<sup>12</sup> – so much so that the green-eyed monster started to swallow Europe’s mighty kings and queens?<sup>13</sup> [Screen overhead shows Columbus’ three ships.]
- RAO: Hm, you’ve got a point there...
- LEE: Moreover, all this mixing over the millennia compels what Buddhists call interbeing: that is, the recognition that “you are in me just as I am in you” [screen overhead shows these words].<sup>14</sup>
- RAO: That’s all fine and dandy for the incense-burning, *mantra*-chanting crowd. But where do you find interbeing – or what you call uh, uh – (he snaps his fingers impatiently) –
- LEE: Epistemic compassion.
- RAO: Yes. Where do you find it in the *real* world among *real* people and over a sustained period, not just a passing fancy like postmodernism?

---

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stewart Gordon, *When Asia Was the World: Traveling Merchants, Scholars, Warriors, and Monks Who Created the “Riches of the East”* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008); Takashi Shogimen and Cary J. Nederman (eds), *Western Political Thought in Dialogue with Asia* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Paul Freedman, *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Haneda Masashi (ed.), *Asian Port Cities, 1600-1800: Local and Foreign Cultural Interactions* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2009); Freedman, *Out of the East*.

<sup>14</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Books, 1987).

LEE: The ancient Silk Roads.<sup>15</sup> [Screen overhead shows a painting of a Silk-Road caravan.]

ACT II:  
KITCHEN & PALACE

SCENE: A shadow falls on Rao and Lee as the light outside dims through the office window, slightly ajar. Lee turns around to shut it, peering briefly at what's outside. The screen overhead shows Fall leaves swirling and twirling. A voice-over tells the audience of Lee's inner thought: *Change is in the air*. She turns on a desk lamp. It brings a warm glow to the book-lined office. Rao continues unabated.

RAO: Ha! What's this? The Silk Roads?<sup>16</sup> That dusty, bygone era with doleful camels and their equally doleful drivers? How could *that* serve as a model for today's crises like pandemics and shootings and terrorism...? Ridiculous! (He throws up his elegant hands.)

LEE: Why make fun of what you don't know?

RAO: I know enough. The Roads petered out in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century when Europe's merchant ships accessed the lucrative spice trade through alternative routes. Visionary men with superior technology led this forward march of history.<sup>17</sup> [Screen overhead shows Columbus and his men at San Salvador.] Not only did they discover a New World along the way but they also established what we call "modernity" or "international society" today.

LEE: They didn't "discover" a New World...

RAO: Alright, alright, if you want to be politically correct.

My point is: aren't you indulging in simplistic, wishful thinking by dusting off the Silk Roads as some feel-good panacea for contemporary times?

---

<sup>15</sup> The Silk Roads lasted approximately from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE-15<sup>th</sup> century CE. But traders charted these routes, by both land and sea, in segments and episodes long before. See, E.E. Kuzmina (edited by Victor Mair), *The Prehistory of the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Susan Whitfield, *Life Along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Frances Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Luce Boulnois, *Silk Road: Monks, Warriors & Merchants* (New York: W.W. Norton 2008); Xinru Liu, *The Silk Road in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History with Documents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992); Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

- LEE: Far from it. To assume that anything of duration and consequence, like the Roads, could end just like that, because a New World came along, indicates “simplistic” and “wishful” thinking of the highest order! You may think of yourself as a “realist” but is your rendition of modernity any *less* of an interpretation than mine of the Silk Roads?
- RAO: What do you mean? And why does that matter anyhow?
- LEE: *Everything* you take for granted about world politics today – the state, society, Westphalia, “social science” – was *made up* by some guy named Hobbes four centuries ago!<sup>18</sup> He conjured up the State of Nature, for instance, out of racist missionary reports from North America.<sup>19</sup>
- This means that *my* story about the Silk Roads has as much validity as *his* about the State of Nature and all that crap.<sup>20</sup>
- RAO: Even so, why should I believe *your* story over his? What’s in it for me?<sup>21</sup>
- LEE: Plenty! The Roads offer a sense of “abundance” – a “richness of being”<sup>22</sup> – that conventional IR cannot.<sup>23</sup> And isn’t that wonderfully freeing?<sup>24</sup>
- RAO: How so?
- LEE: Take, for example, food! (Rao rolls his eyes.) Now hear me out.

---

<sup>18</sup> B. d. Carvalho, H. Leira and J.M. Hobson, “The Big Bangs of IR: The Myths That Your Teachers Still Tell You About 1648 and 1919,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39 (3) 2011: 735–758.

<sup>19</sup> A.B. Sampson, “Tropical Anarchy: Waltz, Wendt, and the Way We Imagine International Politics,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27 (4) 2002: 429-457.

<sup>20</sup> Duncan S.A. Bell, “Writing the World: Disciplinary History and Beyond,” *International Affairs* 85 (1) 2009: 3-22; Aoileann Ni Mhurchu and Reiko Shindo, “Introduction: Being Critical and Imaginative in International Relations,” in Aoileann Ni Mhurchu and Reiko Shindo (eds), *Critical Imaginations in International Relations*, pp. 1-10 (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Here, Rao is referring to career costs and benefits. See, for example, Ido Oren, *Our Enemies and US: America’s Rivalries and the Making of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Jonas Hagmann and Thomas J. Biersteker, “Beyond the Published Discipline: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of International Studies,” *European Journal of International Relations* (2012): 1-40.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Feyerabend, *Conquest of Abundance: A Tale of Abstraction Versus the Richness of Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> Westphalian IR sees the world as a “tragedy” or a “problem” to overcome; it also disregards any consideration of the Other. See, for example, Stephen Chan, *Plural International Relations in a Divided World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26 (7-8) 2009: 1-23.

My students and I have looked at food as an entry into the multiple worlds of the Silk Roads.<sup>25</sup> We traced who ate what, where, how, and why to understand how food reflected, sustained, and created worlds.

One student researched rules of hospitality along the Silk Roads.<sup>26</sup> He focused on al-Ghazali,<sup>27</sup> one of Islam's great thinkers from the 12<sup>th</sup>-century. [Screen overhead shows a portrait of al-Ghazali.] Theologian, logician, jurist, and mystic, al-Ghazali lectured mostly in Baghdad or led the life of a wandering, whirling dervish. Still, he managed to write a celebrated work: *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. In it, al-Ghazali devoted an entire chapter on manners related to eating.<sup>28</sup>

RAO: Like what?

LEE: For example:

- A host should not impose. Invitations should go only to those who can accept and with happiness.
- To prevent feelings of resentment, the host should reserve portions of the dinner for his household before the guest arrives.
- A guest should not focus exclusively on gratifying the stomach. The guest should also “gladden” the host’s heart by not making extra demands. Conversely, the guest could make a suggestion but only if it would please the host.
- For both host and guest, being comfortable at the table is more important than increasing the meal by two dishes.

RAO: Very nice for a dinner party but what’s it to do with world politics?

LEE: World politics could benefit from such general principles. (Rao arches a brow. Lee seizes the moment.)

For example [the screen overhead flashes each word in bold below]:

---

<sup>25</sup> See the Silk Road Research Initiative (SRRI): <http://newschoolsilkroad.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>26</sup> L.H.M. Ling with Badrul Hisham Ismail, “On Al-Ghazali and Global Governance: A 12<sup>th</sup>-Century Mystic for Today’s Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP),” paper delivered at a conference on “The Dialogue of Civilizations and Cultures,” Tafila Technical University, Jordan, 5-7 May 2015.

<sup>27</sup> 450-505 AH/1058-1111 AD.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Ghazali, “On the Manners Relating to Eating” (Book XI), *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* (The Islamic texts Society, 2000). See also, David Waines, “Tales of Food and Hospitality” (Chapter 3), *The Odyssey of Ibn Battuta: Uncommon Tales of a Medieval Traveler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

• **On Imposition.** Too often, a powerful state would impose its agenda onto Others, supposedly for their benefit but causing great distress in the process. And it's because these Others may be unwilling or ill-prepared, thereby producing outcomes like insurgency, corruption, and alienation.

• **On Resentment.** Leaders need to consider the welfare of their own people before inviting strangers or guests into the national household.<sup>29</sup> Otherwise, a sense of injustice will simply swell until, one day, it implodes the state.

• **On Benefits.** Neither power nor profits can decide everything. One has a responsibility to ask: how *else* would a community benefit? If there is none, then the plan or project or investment needs to be reconceived.

• **On Ease.** Adding incentives (an extra “dish” or two) cannot substitute for a feeling of ease between Self and Other, regardless of who is host or guest. Incentives may entice the present but ease assures the future.

(Lee stops to catch her breath.)

RAO: *And?*

LEE: (With determination) If each Self seeks to “gladden the heart” of the Other, then there would be no conditions ripe for the picking by groups like al Qaeda, Taliban, ISIS, Boko Haram, etc.

RAO: You mean –

LEE: Wait, there's more!

Domestic politics would benefit, also. Community tensions — whether stoked by classism, racism, religiosity, ideology, or lifestyle — could lessen and perhaps reconcile with mutual consideration and respect as constant reminders. (Lee looks at Rao excitedly.)

RAO: If I recall correctly (Rao looks up at the ceiling), didn't al-Ghazali follow his chapter on manners with one on marriage? And he discussed the latter, I believe, exclusively from the man's perspective. One of the advantages of marriage, he stated, is liberation from “household duties” — like cooking! Are you not cherry-picking your sources here?

---

<sup>29</sup> This line of reasoning may resemble current charges by alt-right groups that “*they* will take *our* jobs!” However, al-Ghazali sought to protect and prioritize local integrity; whereas, alt-right groups, in their incarnation from generations ago, were happy to support imperialist invasions and occupations of *other* peoples' lands and countries. Rudyard Kipling characterized this “obligation” as “the white man's burden” (1899). In brief, al-Ghazali's principle applies as much then as it does now.



LEE: Not at all! I read al-Ghazali in light of the present. That is, I ask: how do his rules for proper dining help us retain the best of modernity — like the innovations you mentioned earlier — while overcoming its pitfalls?

RAO: Such as?

LEE: Defining universality as what the Liberal World Order wants, security as what the State wants, and equality as what Corporate Elites want.<sup>30</sup>

Where do *people* fit in?

Consequently, we repeat, endlessly and numbingly but with better technology, all the tragedies that bedevil us today.

The Silk Roads can help to redress such mindlessness.

RAO: High expectations for a hazy concept!

LEE: Still not convinced? Then let me tell you a story of spices and democracy...

### ACT III: TEA & BISCUITS

SCENE: Lee's suggestion of a link between spices and democracy sends old Rao into paroxysms of laughter.

RAO: What?? (He can barely contain himself.) What on earth do spices have in common with democracy? We all know spices on the Silk Road were luxury items enjoyed by aristocrats only. A smidgeon of nutmeg cost its weight in gold!<sup>31</sup> Why do you think the kings and queens of Europe were willing to empty their coffers for all those ships seeking new routes to the spice trade?

LEE: Let me explain. A focus on spices – or food, more generally – changes our perspective on politics, especially *world* politics. Rather than centering all our attention on the palace, let's shift to the kitchen! [Screen overhead shows a picture of a Mughal palace, then Mughal cuisine.] After all, isn't that where the spices

---

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, Co-Directors, *Forging A World of Liberty Under Law: US National Security in the 21st Century*, Final Report of the Princeton Project on National Security (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2006) (<http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report.html>) (Downloaded: 13 September 2009); G. John Ikenberry, "The Rise of China and the Future of the West: Can the Liberal System Survive?" *Foreign Affairs* January/February 2008 (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>) (Downloaded: 30 December 2015).

<sup>31</sup> Freedman, *Out of the East*.

turn into objects of desire? Without cooks and their artistry, how would we know the value, not just the cost, of nutmeg? It would remain an ingredient only.

RAO: Still, isn't the kitchen subject to the palace? Without a palace, where would the kitchen be?

LEE: By the same token, where would the palace be *without* the kitchen and all its workers?

RAO: I see what you're doing! You're turning to old man Marx: "Workers of the world unite!" and all that jazz. Sorry but world history has moved on. Even Communist China has turned to American-style capitalism! Not to mention Russia, Tanzania, Cuba, and so on. All the former strongholds of Marx and Lenin have given up.

LEE: You misunderstand. I'm not talking about class struggle. I'm speaking of something quite different.

RAO: Could we have some tea? This discussion is parching me. And biscuits, too! One can't drink tea all by itself.

LEE: Alright...(Lee sighs while taking out a bottle of water from a bottom drawer inside her desk. She pours the whole bottle into an electric kettle on a side table and plugs it in. She turns it on. Lee opens a tin box of biscuits on the table and offers it to Rao. She also hands him a sheaf of paper napkins. Clearly, she's performed this ritual many times before.)

RAO: Well, what do we have here? (Rao peers delightedly over the biscuits. His left hand takes a napkin while his right hovers over the box. A few seconds later, Rao swoops in and extracts two biscuits. He places them on his napkin, expertly balanced on one thigh. He bites into one biscuit happily. The kettle boils, clicking itself off. Lee pours the steaming water into an exquisite ceramic teapot taken from her bookshelf. It was a gift from Rao from a few years back. She dips two bags of refreshing fragrance into the teapot. Lee returns to the discussion at hand.)

LEE: There's another way to understand politics and power. (She fills a mug with tea and hands it to Rao. He takes it appreciatively. She pours a cup for herself but turns away from the biscuits. *Better not*, she decides.)

RAO: Milk? (Lee hands him a tiny, silver spoon and a carton of pre-mixed powdered creamer with white sugar. Rao stirs his *chai* absent-mindedly.)

Now, where were we? Ah yes! What do you *mean*? (He drinks tea in the Asian way, with a loud, long slurp.)

Oh, sorry! Didn't mean to overdo it.

LEE: Not at all! You know I don't mind. I like it when men drink tea the Asian way. Reminds me of my father (Lee's voice fades briefly)... Anyway (she rouses herself), when we focus on the kitchen, we move away from – finally! – Machiavelli: that is, defining power as the exclusive domain of the Prince.

Instead, food enables us to understand power as something larger, more creative, and inclusive. To paraphrase an African saying, it takes a village to make power.

For this reason, it's not enough to kill a dictator and expect his people to suddenly embrace "democracy."<sup>32</sup>

More positively, an inclusive understanding of power recognizes the contributions of women and femininity, not just men and masculinity; local knowledges and practices, not just outside "experts" flown in for the moment; and the role of *aesthetics* – dare we say, sensuality? – in decision-making, and not just costs and benefits.

RAO: What's sensuality got to do with public policy?! (Rao waves his now half-empty mug indignantly. Lee fills it as he speaks.) Shouldn't it proceed on the basis of hard facts, rational reasoning, and objective implementation? How *else* could we expect orderly governance?

LEE: I used to think the same. In my early years, I also taught the absolute value of empirical analysis.<sup>33</sup> One could do no less, I felt, in a field as messy as politics.

RAO: So what happened? (He smiles wryly.)

LEE: I started to question the difference between value and cost. They are not the same, especially when operating in different cultural contexts.

RAO: Yes, I know.

I've read research that shows, for example, that villagers in China would rather forego a government subsidy to individual entrepreneurs than risk a loss of "harmony" due to competition.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> For example, democratic institutions and practices in post-Taliban Afghanistan and post-Saddam Hussein Iraq remain underdeveloped despite the US removing their respective dictators. Zalmay Khalilzad, "Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq," *Journal of Democracy* 21 (3) July 2010: 41-49.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994)

<sup>34</sup> Heike Hennig-Schmidt, Zhu-Yu Li, Chaoliang Yang, "Why People Reject Advantageous Offers – Non-Monotonic Strategies in Ultimatum Bargaining, Evaluating a Video Run in PR China," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 65 (2008): 373-384; Nidhi Srinivas, "Politics of Innovation: Cases from India and China," paper delivered at the conference on "The Environment in India and China:

LEE: Everybody wants a happy, prosperous life. But it doesn't mean the *same* kind of life across the board.

RAO: Still, people need to be educated about what's in their best interest!

LEE: But who's educating *whom* about what *kind* of interest?

RAO: Of course, *we* are! We who live and work in the advanced, industrialized societies have the knowledge, expertise, technology, capital, and power to do so. In fact, we are obliged to educate the world so everyone can become more like *us!*<sup>35</sup>

LEE: Don't you think the people of the Amazon also have their kind of knowledge, expertise, technology, capital, and power? [Screen overhead shows a picture of a Yanomani woman and her child.]

RAO: Now you're getting silly!

LEE: *Why?* Don't *they* have anything to offer?

RAO: They live in another century, another world! You want to live like them?

LEE: No, but that doesn't mean they don't have their own dignity. After all, don't we each have ancient worlds swirling and twirling within us?

RAO: Not if we want flushing toilets. (He eyes Lee bullishly.) [Screen overhead shows a toilet with a flushing sound.]

LEE: You've often told me of the Lodhi Gardens in New Delhi. [The screen overhead shows a picture of one building in the Lodhi Gardens.] You used to go there every morning before school with your grandma for her daily constitutional. When there, you'd pretend you were a Mughal prince because the buildings in the gardens were so ancient and grand.

RAO: Yes...(his eyes take on a distant look.) But those days are long gone...Besides (he

---

Histories and Innovations," India China Institute, The New School, 30 November-1 December 2012 (<http://www.newschool.edu/ici/events.aspx?id=86532>).

<sup>35</sup> Research shows, however, just the opposite. A comparative study of behavioral sciences across the globe demonstrates that societies labeled as WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) represent "frequent outliers" when measured in terms of "visual perception, fairness, cooperation, spatial reasoning, categorization and inferential induction, moral reasoning, reasoning styles, self-concepts and related motivations, and the heritability of IQ" (Heinrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010: 1). The authors conclude that "[t]he findings suggest that members of WEIRD societies, including young children, are among the least representative populations one could find for generalizing about humans" (Ibid.) Joseph Heinrich, Steven J. Heine, Ara Norenzayan, "The Weirdest People in the World?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (2010): 1-75.

stirs himself) what's my boyhood games got to do with epistemology, ontology, and world politics??

LEE: *Everything!* Why must we squelch one world for another just so we can seem “modern” or “legitimate” or even “desirable”? Why can't we treat these multiple worlds with equal respect so they can strengthen us on the inside as we strengthen them on the outside?

RAO: So we return to “un-bordering.”

LEE: Exactly. Just like the palace and the kitchen...

RAO: All this talk of food is making me hungry! Let's continue over dinner.

LEE: OK. But beware, my next subject of discourse might give you indigestion.

RAO: Please! I'm not some hothouse orchid. What's your next challenge?

LEE: Culinary cosmologies.<sup>36</sup>

RAO: Good lord! We'll need drinks. (He rolls his eyes.)

ACT IV:  
ABSOTIVELY, POSOLUTELY, DECITIVELY BONAROO!<sup>37</sup>

SCENE: Rao and Lee are in the faculty club. The screen overhead shows the setting. Its elegant tables topped with small vases of wildflowers on white cloth makes up for the club's standard fare. Rao and Lee are at a two-person table by the front-end window, Rao's favorite spot. He likes to see who's where doing what and with whom. A waiter shows up, handing out large menus with fancy calligraphy.

WAITER: Drink, Madame?

LEE: Just tonic water with lots of lime, thanks.

WAITER: And you, Sir?

---

<sup>36</sup> Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> This phrase comes from Dr. John, an American singer, songwriter, actor, pianist, and guitarist. See his official website: <http://www.nitetripper.com/>.

RAO: A gin-and-tonic, my good man! (The waiter floats off. Rao shakes his head while perusing the menu.)

LEE: I can't help it if I'm allergic to alcohol! Stop making fun of my abstemious lifestyle.

RAO: Abstemious is the word, alright... (he scans the menu) It's Friday, so they'll have kidney pie for a special. Excellent!

LEE: Kidney pie! (She makes a face.) Ugh!

RAO: I suppose you'll have something disgustingly healthy like steamed fish? (Before Lee can answer, the waiter appears again.)

WAITER: Your gin-and-tonic, Sir. (He places it ceremoniously in front of Rao. He turns to Lee with less ceremony.) And your tonic-with-lots-of-lime. Enjoy. (Rao tips his drink like an English gentleman. Nary a sound emits from his lips. He puts the drink down with great satisfaction.)

RAO: Ah, no wonder the Brits liked it so much – especially in the colonies! (He turns to Lee.) Now what's this about *culinary cosmologies*? What kind of nonsense is that?

LEE: There you go again. Culinary cosmologies offer a sophisticated way of understanding world politics. It proposes that a culture's cuisine not only comes from local resources like vegetables and meats, but it also reflects a society's beliefs about health, economy, politics, society and the gods.

RAO: So? (He takes another appreciative [sip](#) of his drink.)

LEE: What this means is a worldview in everyday, tangible terms.

RAO: At the risk of repeating myself: So?

LEE: Remember democracy? (Lee begins to get a little huffy.) It's not all about the voting booth, you know. Democracy applies to how we learn about the world as well! For instance – (Rao interrupts Lee. He leans in conspiratorially and whispers.)

RAO: Guess who's walking this way? O'Brien! The department's latest hire. They say he's a "mad genius"!

(Rao feigns a casual tone and calls out to O'Brien.)

Say, hullo! (Rao waves him over.) Funny running into you here. (O'Brien stops by their table. He's a big, burly fellow with a flush of fly-away hair and full

beard. Yet he is dressed like a typical professor: blue dress shirt with dark-blue sweater vest and jeans. No tie. Very “mad genius,” indeed.)

O'BRIEN: Oh, hi! (His voice is surprisingly light and friendly. He clearly doesn't remember Rao and Lee from the faculty reception a few weeks ago.)

Good to see you – again.

(They re-introduce themselves. Lee can tell Rao is slightly peeved. After all, he's a Full Professor!)

LEE: Same here. Come here often?

O'BRIEN: Never.

LEE: Uh...aren't you here now?

O'BRIEN: I came to use the bathroom.

LEE: Oh, please, don't delay on our account...! (She's slightly flustered.)

O'BRIEN: It's OK. I just went.

LEE: (The screen overhead shows a picture of the Daoist eccentric, Zhuangzi.<sup>38</sup> A voice-over narrates Lee's inner thought: *O'Brien as Zhuangzi? Absurd!* But Lee smiles slightly at the idea.)

Oh! Good. Uh, well! Would you like to join us? (Lee feels a little awkward. She's not sure why. O'Brien pauses then grabs a seat and sits down.)

O'BRIEN: I'll have a drink then go. Don't want to interrupt. (The waiter floats in.) A rum-and-coke, thanks. (The waiter floats out.) You two seem in the middle of a heavy discussion.

RAO: Were we? (Rao laughs falsely. Lee looks at him askance.) Just talking about cosmologies.

O'BRIEN: Oh? What kind? (The waiter re-appears with the drink and places it in front of the new guest.)

WAITER: Ready to order?

---

<sup>38</sup> Besides Laozi, Master Zhuang or Zhuangzi (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) is considered the second pillar of what is now known as Daoism. His sayings/writings, however, were concerned more with “personal realization, and only derivatively concerned about social and political order.” Roger T. Ames (ed.), *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

LEE: Um, not yet. (She smiles apologetically.) A bit more time, thanks.

WAITER: Alrighty. (He floats off. Lee turns to O'Brien.)

LEE: *Culinary cosmologies.*

O'BRIEN: Oh, sure. It's all about worldviews and how they evolve. *What Laudan shows about cuisines-as-civilizations is that they do not "clash," as suggested by Sam Huntington; instead, they selectively borrow, adapt, and integrate while retaining core, distinctive features.*<sup>39</sup> (O'Brien takes a sip of his drink while Lee beams brightly, arching her brows at Rao.)

RAO: Certainly, they crash. We saw it with colonialism!

O'BRIEN: Ah, but that's from the colonialists!

LEE: That's right! The colonialists never recognize anything but themselves. They don't even see that their way of life came about through *both* colonialists and the colonized.

O'BRIEN: Depriving the colonized of agency is another form of colonialism.

RAO: I guess you're right there... *I'm surprised you know all this stuff.*

O'BRIEN: Sure, why not?

RAO: Uh...Just thought it wouldn't be in your bailiwick.

O'BRIEN: What's my bailiwick?

RAO: Well, if I remember correctly from your job talk...(Rao taps his pursed lips with a forefinger)...you focus on Western philosophy of science, inquiry, epistemology, and so on. Is that right? (O'Brien nods.) You talk about conventionalism and falsificationism, relativism and pragmatism.<sup>40</sup> All that good stuff! [Screen overhead shows Lakatos' epistemological typology.]

O'BRIEN: Yup.

RAO: So how would that include an interest in culinary cosmologies?

---

<sup>39</sup> Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire*. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Gavan Duffy, "Justification of Trans-Cultural International Studies," in Pinar Bilgin and L.H.M. Ling (eds), *Asia in International Relations: Unlearning Imperial Power Relations* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 121-134.



- O'BRIEN: Look, the West is seriously flawed with its histories of slavery and genocide, colonialism and imperialism. I know, I'm Irish! But the West also has a deep commitment to what Jürgen Habermas calls "human emancipation" or what Hilary Putnam saw as "human flourishing"<sup>41</sup> –
- LEE: "Wonderfully freeing..." (She half-mumbles from amazement. Again, a voice-over reveals Lee's inner thought: *So many convergences despite the divergences!* O'Brien continues.)
- O'BRIEN: – For this reason, Western philosophy of science has always emphasized an open mind. Discourse and debate must proceed *rationally*. Otherwise, we might as well give in to the tantrums of a tyrant.
- RAO: What about "prediction and control"?<sup>42</sup> Doesn't that help?
- O'BRIEN: "Prediction and control" covers for regime apology. (Rao looks startled. A voice-over for Rao: *So blunt!* O'Brien continues.)
- The method turns us into engineers, manipulating society. A democratic society has to ask: What's all this prediction *for*, anyway? *Who* wants control over *whom* and *why*?
- LEE: Sounds familiar! (She turns to Rao). Remember what I said earlier about "liberal universality," "the national security state," and "elite-corporate equality"?
- O'BRIEN: I read an article recently – I forget the author – it talked about this concept of "trialectics" as a way of getting us out of the either-or corners that binaries box us into.<sup>43</sup> [The screen overhead shows the word "Trialectics."] The author draws on Daoist *yin/yang* theory but – (Lee's eyes almost pop out of her face.) [Screen overhead shows the *yin/yang* symbol.]
- LEE: That's *me*! (Lee points to herself innocently.) *I'm* the author of that article! (O'Brien smiles boyishly. Voice-over for Lee: *What friendly eyes! So different from his outward gruffness!*)
- O'BRIEN: Is that right? Anyway, the argument reminds me of certain elements of the Christian mystical tradition. Like *qi* in *yin/yang* theory, the Holy Spirit also imparts a kind of life-breath or divine love.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>42</sup> A method in contemporary social science, "prediction and control" aims to prefigure events to better deal with them. See, for example, King, Keohane, and Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*.

<sup>43</sup> L.H.M. Ling, "World Politics in Colour," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 45 (3) 2017: 473-491.

<sup>44</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, "In Search of a Pneumatology: Chi and the Spirit," *Feminist Theology* 18 (1) 2009: 117-136. I thank Patricia J. Robertson for this reference. She has long educated me on the

RAO: Well, if we are to talk about mystics and love, then we cannot leave out that great Poet of Rapture from the 13<sup>th</sup>-century, Rumi. [The screen overhead shows a portrait of the Persian mystic-poet.] He saw love as a kind of action, not just state of being.<sup>45</sup>

LEE: “Harmony thus becomes possible, inside and out...” (she speaks as if in a trance. The screen overhead shows Lee on a doleful camel, trudging behind other dolefuls, despite the sand dunes swirling and twirling around them. A voice-over for Lee covers the scene: *The ancient Silk Roads live! The journey continues...*)

Un-bordering, interbeing, epistemic compassion (Lee is sputtering) – all the stuff we’ve been talking about!

RAO: Not to mention kitchen and palace, abundance and richness, memory and sensuality. (He throws her a look. She feels red all over.)

O’BRIEN: But there’s something more divine than love. (Lee’s bubble bursts.)

LEE: More divine than *love*?

RAO: What’s that?

O’BRIEN: Humor. (Rao smiles broadly. This is *his* kind of talk!)

LEE: How is it more *divine*? (There’s a slight crack to her voice.)

RAO: Oh, I know! (Rao interjects enthusiastically.) Humor can speak Truth to Power without offending Power. For instance: Birbal was minister to the great Mughal emperor, Akbar, in 16<sup>th</sup>-century India. [The screen overhead shows a drawing of Birbal with Akbar.] One famous story has him saving the emperor’s life. When the emperor asks how he’d like to be rewarded, Birbal answers: “A hundred lashes.” When Akbar expresses surprise, Birbal answers: “The guard at the gate said he wanted half of whatever I get from Your Majesty.”

O’BRIEN: That’s good! (He chuckles.) Haven’t heard that one before. But I was thinking of something else...

LEE: Ooh, ooh, I know! (Lee waves her hand like an eager fifth-grader.) It’s like the Zen practice of *kōans*.<sup>46</sup> [The screen overhead shows the famous symbol of zen:

---

correspondences between Christian mysticism, Hindu *prana*, and Daoist *qi*. I also thank Patrick Thaddeus Jackson for reinforcing this connection.

<sup>45</sup> Radha D’Souza, “What Can Activist Scholars Learn from Rumi?” *Philosophy East and West* 64 (1) 2014: 1-24.

<sup>46</sup> L.H.M. Ling, “*Kōanizing IR: Flipping the Logic of Epistemic Violence*,” keynote address, 1<sup>st</sup> Afrasian International Symposium, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, 27 February 2016.

one brush-stroke of an incomplete circle.] These startle novices from conventional thinking with nonsensical stories, paradoxes, or riddles.

O'BRIEN: Like what?

LEE: One of my favorites is, "A Cup of Tea."<sup>47</sup> [The screen overhead shows a teapot pouring tea into a cup.] And it involves a professor. (Lee eyes her two companions mischievously.) It goes like this (she recites from memory):

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era [on the screen over the stage, the years 1868-1912 flash in neon lights], received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?" (The other two members of the table laughed.)

O'BRIEN: Nice. But I was thinking of something else that makes humor divine.

RAO/ME: What? (Rao and Lee lean in, all ears.)

O'BRIEN: The absotively, posolutely, decitively bonaroo of joy.<sup>48</sup> And *that* leads to respect which often turns into love. (Lee's cheeks burn anew.)

RAO: Like?

O'BRIEN: How's this? (Their three heads are inches apart. O'Brien says in measured tones.)

What's the difference between a dog?<sup>49</sup> [The screen overhead repeats the line.]

(Lee begins to gurgle with mirth. Poor Rao doesn't see what's coming.)

RAO: What?

---

<sup>47</sup> "Zen Koans" (<http://www.ashidakim.com/zenkoans/zenindex.html>) (Downloaded: 19 July 2015).

<sup>48</sup> For joy in IR, see Elina Penttinen, *Joy and International Relations: A New Methodology* (War, Politics, Experience) (London: Routledge, 2013); Saara Särnä, PhD dissertation 'Junk Feminism and Nuclear Wannabes - Collaging Parodies of Iran and North Korea', Department of International Relations, Tampere University, 2014 (<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-44-9535-9>) (Downloaded: 9 March 2017).

<sup>49</sup> This is an absurdist joke, not a typo. It has no meaning.

O'BRIEN: *They both have two legs each!* [Again, the screen overhead repeats the line.]

(Rao and Lee roar back with laughter. The other diners look at them curiously. What are *they* drinking?)

RAO: That's excellent, my good man! (He slaps O'Brien on the back.) Your drink's on us! (A cell phone pings. O'Brien checks his and turns it off.)

O'BRIEN: Well, thanks, and I've had loads. But I've gotta run. My get-away car is here. (He finishes his drink and stands up.) Next time's on me. See ya! (He takes off. The waiter shows up and smiles stiffly.)

WAITER: Are we ready?

LEE: Yes! (She answers perkily.) I'll have one *kōan*, please.

RAO: And I'll raise you three!<sup>50</sup> (Rao and Lee look at each other and dissolve into giggles.)

WAITER: I'll come back. (He smiles outwardly but sighs inwardly. A voice-over reveals his thoughts: *Academics! What nutty characters...!* Suddenly, his face lights up. The screen overhead shows a light bulb switching on. The Waiter smiles while rubbing his chin as he walks away. A voice-over comes on: *They'll make good leads in my next play!*)

THE END

---

<sup>50</sup> This term comes from poker. It means "I'll bet three times what you just bet."