
Role theory in International Relations

Talk given at Tsinghua University, Beijing
Department of International Relations

Outline

1. The theoretical argument
2. Role theory: between IR + Foreign Policy Analysis
 - Social constructivism as meta-theoretical foundation
 - Defining element 1: the Self
 - Defining element 2: the other
 - Defining element 3: the historical self
 - Defining element 4: the institutional structure of the Self
3. Role theory and the Foreign policy of the PR China
4. Conclusion

The argument

1. International Roles are social positions in a group which are formed by ego and alter expectations of the functional tasks of the role for the group.
2. International roles are not „national identities“. Identities are
 1. Self descriptions
 2. They are not formed by alter expectations
 3. They have no functional connotation for a social group
3. International roles belong to the group of immaterial social constructions which give meaning to international interaction and structures. As such, roles do not only cause behavior but they also constitute actors (Master –Slave). Roles are „emergent social phenomena“ which constitute international actors (role bearer) and international structures (roles establish institutions).

YAN XUETONG ON CHINESE REALISM, THE TSINGHUA SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF HARMONY

- By 2005 I was already tired of Wendt's ideas, so I decided to pursue new theoretical studies. I am, first of all, a realist, so I find many faults in Wendt's theory, including two major problems: first, his theory cannot explain clearly the mechanism of mutual interaction, a core concept for his theory. He argues that the change of international norms is based on mutual interaction between states, but he cannot explain what changes what. Is it the people's concepts that change behavior or people's behavior that changes their concepts? Readers cannot really understand what mutual interaction is in essence. According to scientific standards, each step of mutual interaction should be clear: what happens first and what result does it lead to. The second problem is that his concept of the evolution of international norms is unilinear. I believe that is historically inaccurate.



YAN XUETONG

Role theory

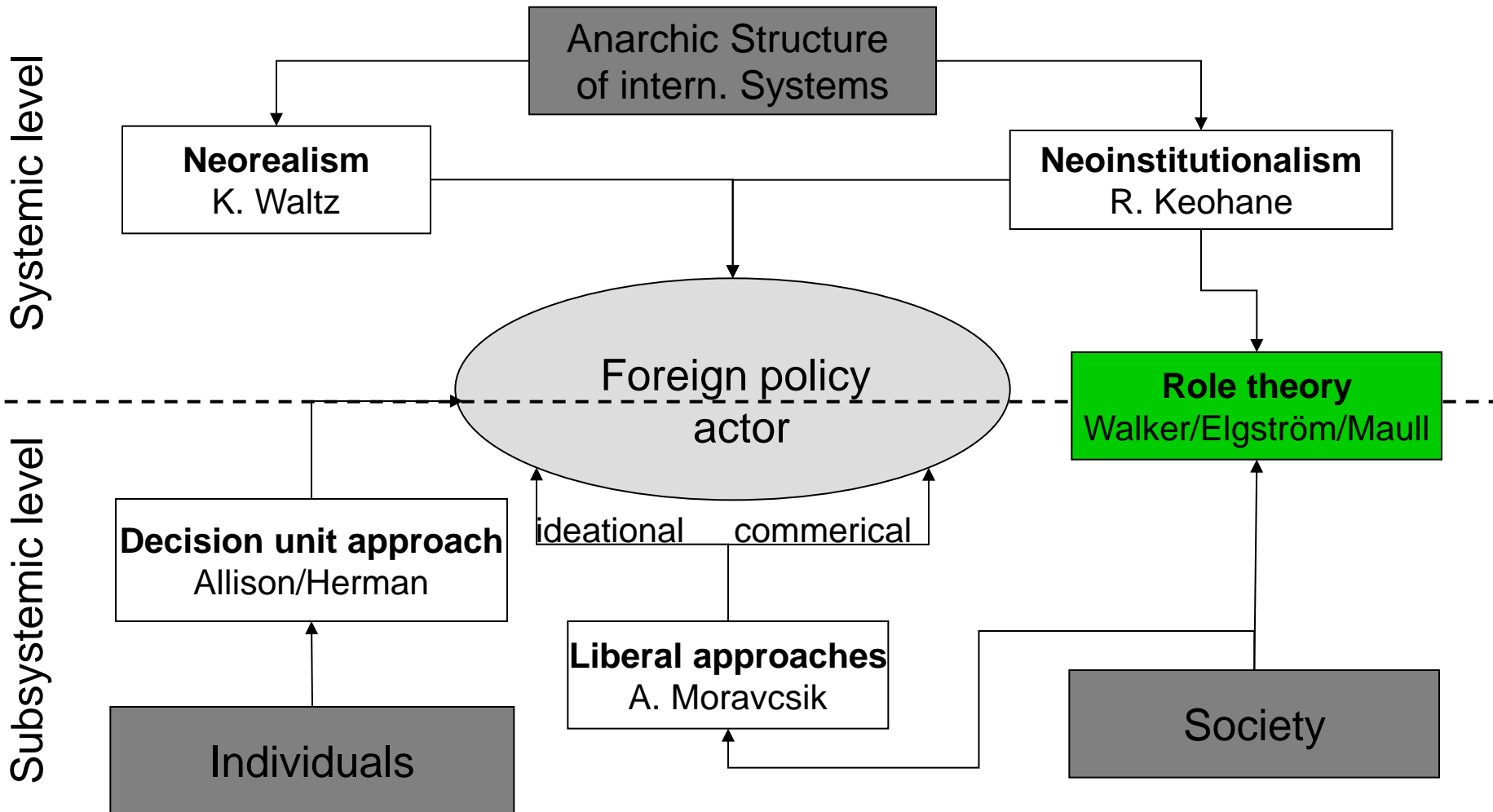
In-between International Relations and Foreign Policy Analysis

International Roles: definition and explanation

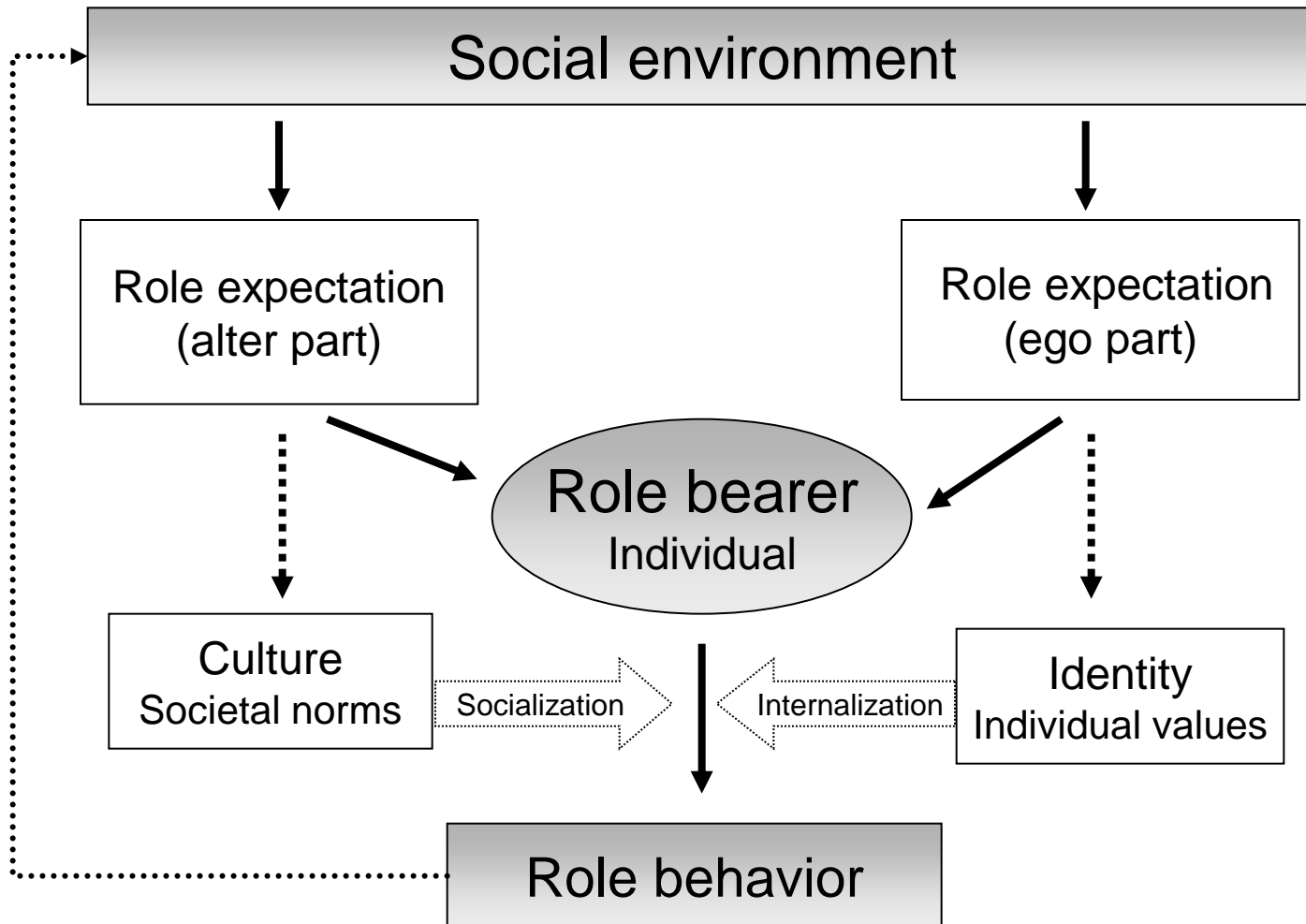
- In role theory, roles are typically defined as social positions which are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group
(cf. Thies 2010: 3-4; Andrews 1975: 529).

The position's function in the group is limited in time and scope and it is dependent upon the group's structure and purpose. Whereas some roles are constitutive to the group as such, e.g. a recognized member of the international community, other roles or role sets are functionally specific, e.g. balancer, initiator etc.

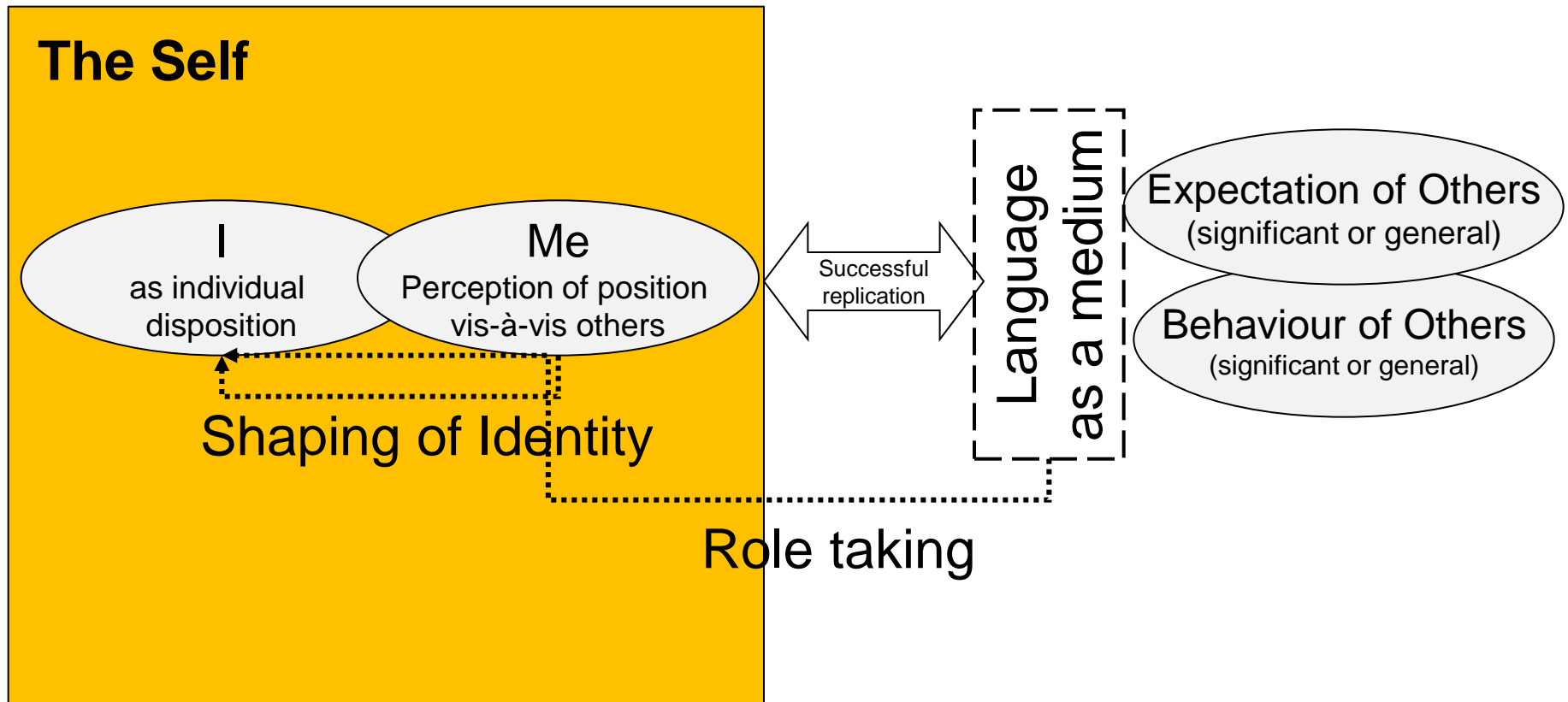
In-Between IR research + Foreign Policy Analysis



“Roles” in International Relations



The Self: the process of self-identification



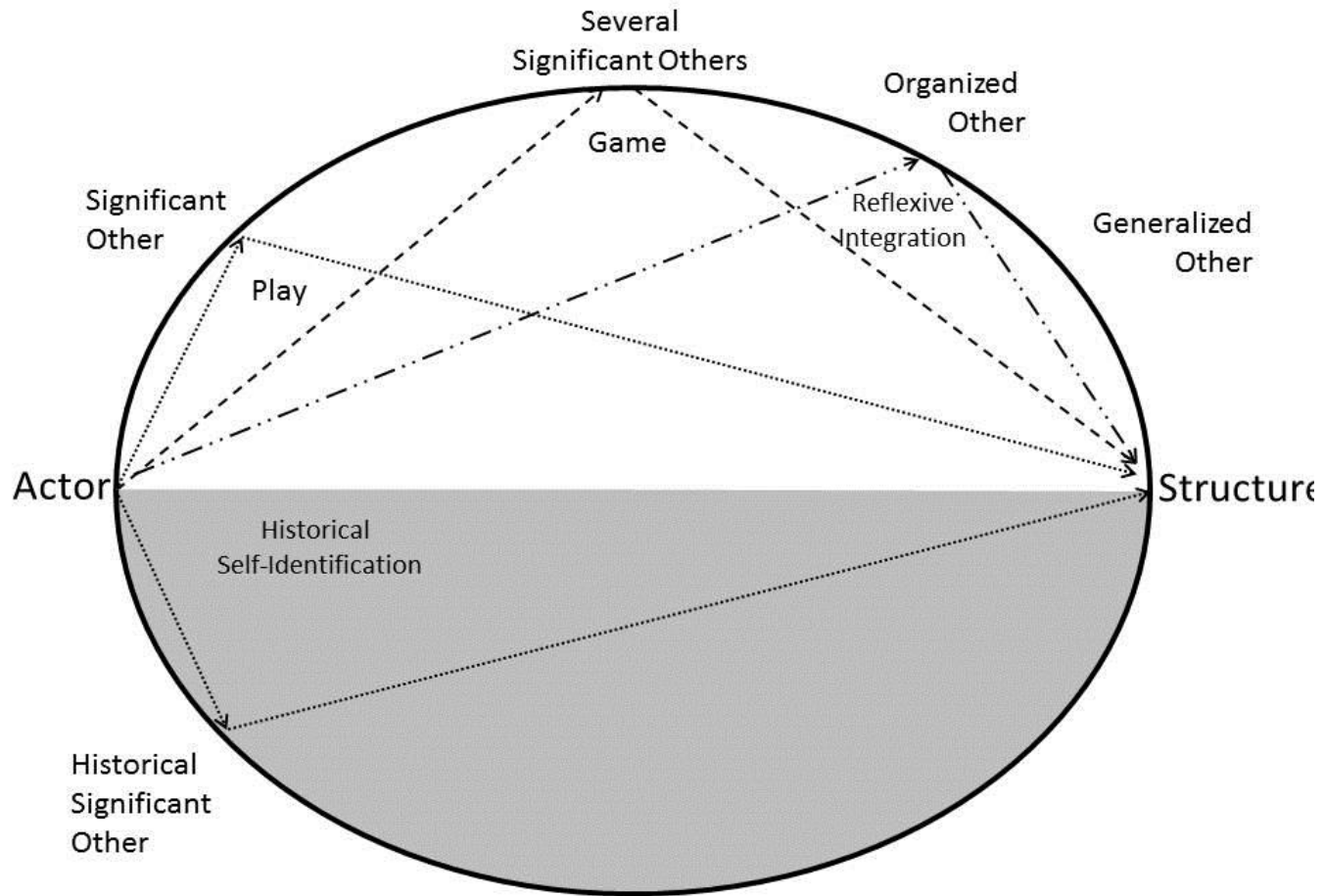
There is no “I” without a “Me” and there is
no ‘Me’ without an ‘Other’.

(Mead 1925: 268).

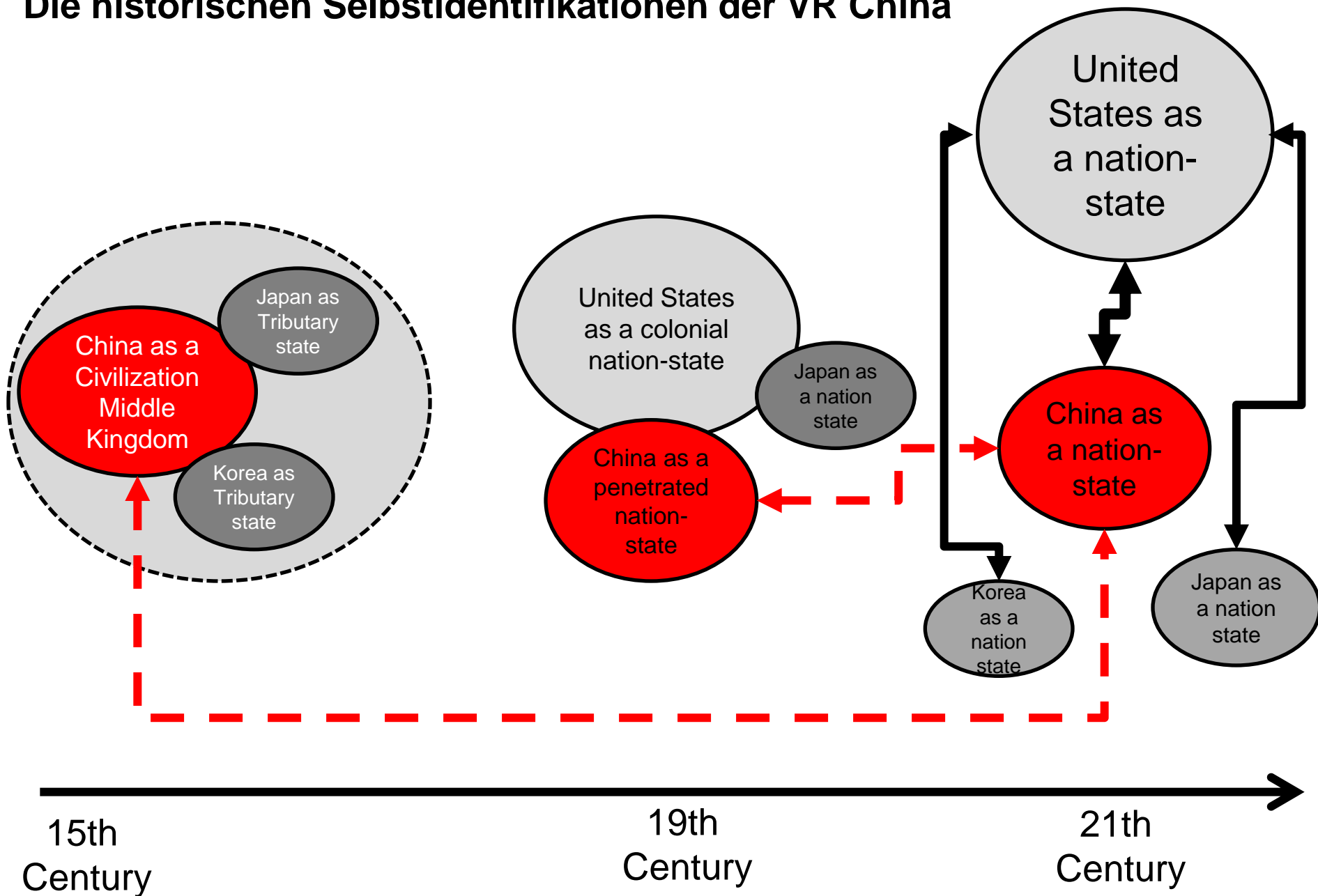
The Other: constitutive for the „Self“

- the generalized “other”: An imagined “other” which serves the “I” as a reference point to identify with a special identity (Chinese) or a social category (human being).
- The significant “other”: A concrete “other” in the process of “primary socialization” (in the family), i.e. parents or siblings. Attributes: small number, high degree of role casting by the “Other” (“ascribed role”).
- The organized “other”: is an institutionalized other, the functional specification of which demands a high degree of role expectations which are regulated and based on division of labor.

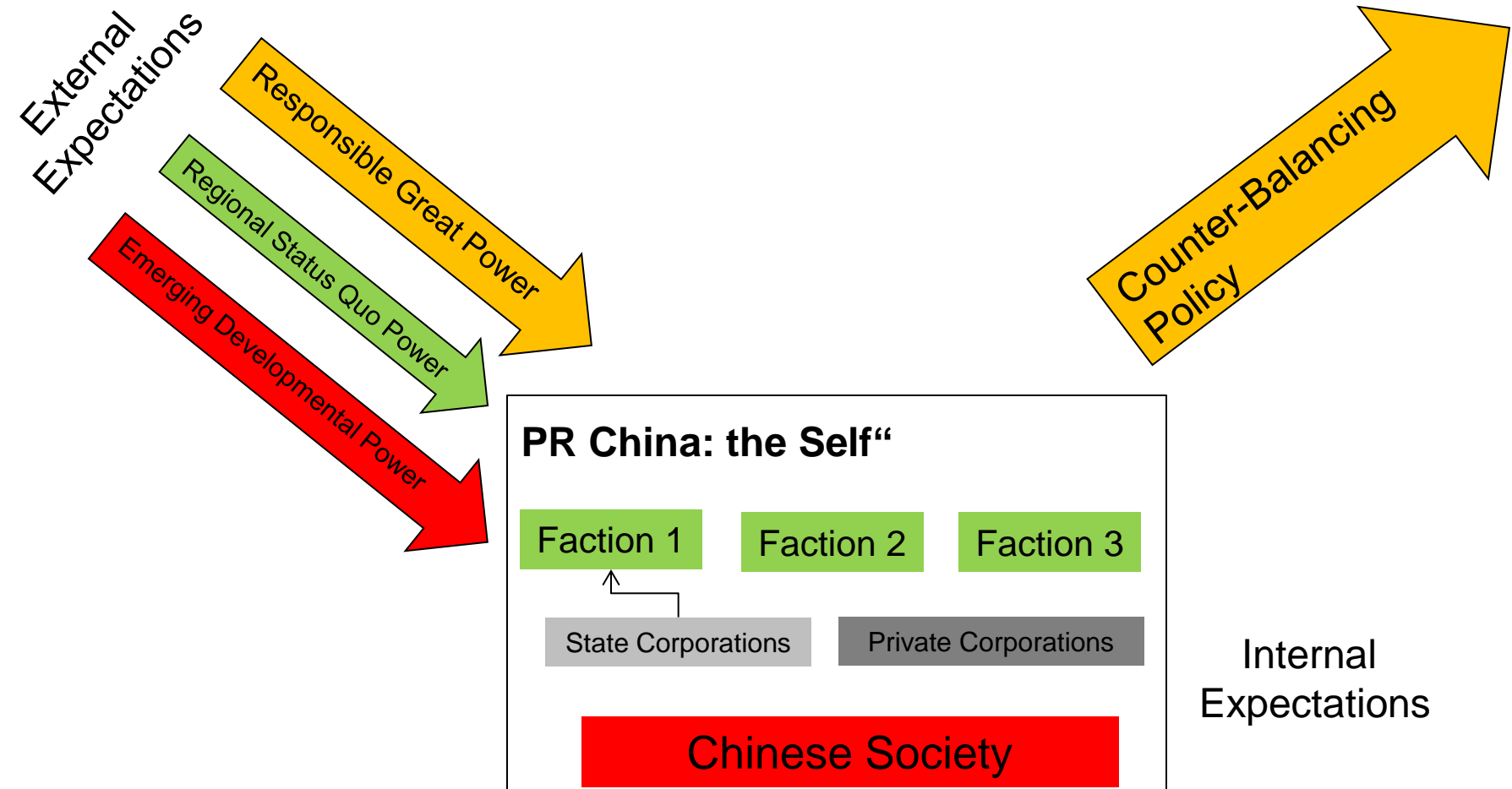
The historical „Self“: reference point of the „Self“ to establish „ontological security“



Die historischen Selbstidentifikationen der VR China



The institutional structure of the „Self“: Integrating Comparative Politics and Role theory



Role theory and the Foreign Policy of the PR China

Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

The „Other“	Soviet Union Primary Socializer	Bandung Group (77) Primary Socializers	Soviet Union Primary negative Socializer	Soviet Union / USA Primary negative Socializers
Post WW II Period	1949-1954	1954-1957	1958-1965	1966-1970
The Historical „Self“	China as a Victim (of capitalist domination)	China as a Victim (of capitalist domination)	China as a Victim (of colonial domination)	China as a Victim (of colonial domination)

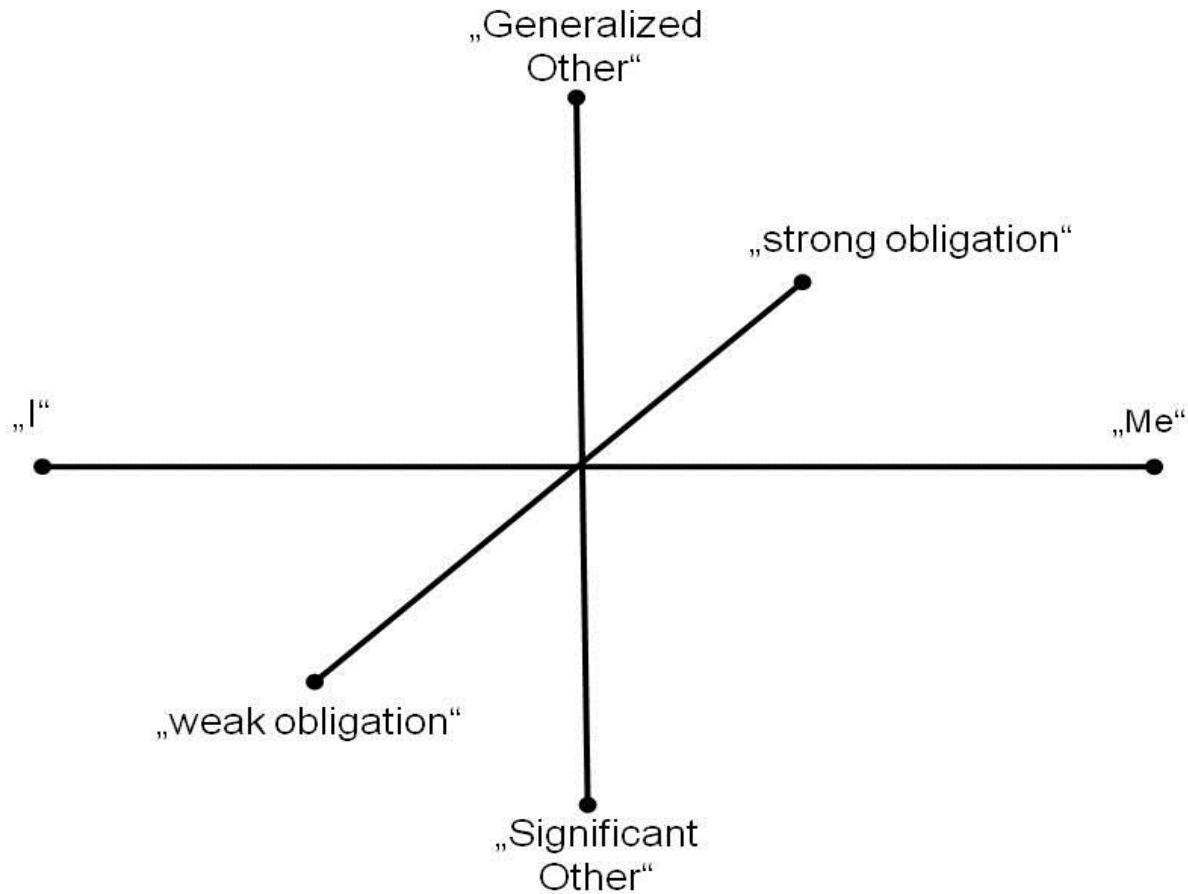
Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

The „Other“	United Nations Primary „Organized Other“	USA / Soviet Union	USA / Soviet Union	ASEAN USA / EU / Japan
Post WW II Period	1971-1978	1979-1982	1983-1989	1989-1997
The Historical „Self“	??	??	??	China as a „Self-made“ nation

Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

The „Other“	UN / Arab League / African Union USA / EU	ASEAN / USA / EU		
Post WW II Period	1998-2008	2009-		
The Historical „Self“	China as Victim and China As Middle Kingdom	China as Victim and China As Middle Kingdom		

Dimensions of role change and learning



International Leadership: definition and explanation

- International leadership may be defined as a social role consisting of expectations of a group of states towards one or more group members to enhance the group's goals by means at the leaders disposal and compliance by following states. This regularly includes the partial transfer of national policy competences and power resources to the group leader (Harnisch 2013).

Leadership thus requires both hard and soft power, that is leadership through representing the interests of the group (input legitimacy of leadership) and effectively achieving the goals of the group (output legitimacy).

To pursue leadership functions, the role holder needs social capital among which trust is the most important one.

YAN XUETONG ON CHINESE REALISM, THE TSINGHUA SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP

- China should behave differently from the US, by providing a different type of international leadership for the world. I am advocating for China to be a humane authority. Humane authority is based on both material power and political power. Humane authority needs to have an efficient political system to mobilize both domestic and international resources. Humane means a superpower has more friends and receives more international support than others. China should have more allies than the US, but unfortunately at this moment, we fall far short. Being humane not only requires having an ample number of allies but also being moral and having strong leadership, or as people nowadays like to say, undertaking more international responsibility.

Conclusion

1. „Roles“ are invoked by many IR scholars but very few understand the „term as an analytical tool“.
2. Role theoretical analysis is still in its infancy in all definition elements.
3. Internationally, there is a fast growing group of role theoreticians and some of them will focus on China's role.
4. China's role in the world – if understood scientifically – will not be determined by China alone, because other states will have to take the respective counter-roles. If China aspires to be a leader, there need to be followers.
5. At this time, there are few countries that consider China to be an international leader. But this may change over time and if China acts responsibly.

<http://www.uni-hd.de/harnisch>