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).
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.
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

Systemic level

Anarchic Structure of intern. Systems

Neorealism
K. Waltz

Neoinstitutionalism
R. Keohane

Foreign policy actor

Role theory
Walker/Elgström/Maull

Subsystemic level

Decision unit approach
Allison/Herman

Liberal approaches
A. Moravcsik

Individuals

Society

Liberal approaches
A. Moravcsik

Anarchic Structure
of intern. Systems

Systemic level
“Roles” in International Relations

Social environment

Role expectation (alter part)
Role expectation (ego part)

Role bearer
Individual

Culture
Societal norms

Socialization

Identity
Individual values

Role behavior

Role behavior

Socialization
Internalization

Culture
Societal norms
The Self: the process of self-identification

The Self

I as individual disposition

Me
Perception of position vis-à-vis others

Shaping of Identity

Role taking

Language as a medium

Expectation of Others (significant or general)

Behaviour of Others (significant or general)

Successful replication
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

China as a Civilization Middle Kingdom

Korea as Tributary state

Japan as Tributary state

China as a colonial nation-state

United States as a nation-state

Japan as a nation state

Korea as a nation state

China as a penetrated nation-state

United States as a colonial nation-state

15th Century

19th Century

21th Century
The institutional structure of the „Self“: Integrating Comparative Politics and Role theory

PR China: the Self“

Faction 1  Faction 2  Faction 3

State Corporations  Private Corporations

Chinese Society

External Expectations

Responsible Great Power

Regional Status Quo Power

Emerging Developmental Power

Counter-Balancing Policy

Internal Expectations
Role theory and the Foreign Policy of the PR China
### Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The „Other“</th>
<th>Soviet Union Primary Socializer</th>
<th>Bandung Group (77) Primary Socializers</th>
<th>Soviet Union Primary negative Socializer</th>
<th>Soviet Union / USA Primary negative Socializers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Historical „Self“</strong></td>
<td>China as a Victim (of capitalist domination)</td>
<td>China as a Victim (of capitalist domination)</td>
<td>China as a Victim (of colonial domination)</td>
<td>China as a Victim (of colonial domination)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The „Other“</th>
<th>United Nations Primary „Organized Other“</th>
<th>USA / Soviet Union</th>
<th>USA / Soviet Union</th>
<th>ASEAN USA / EU / Japan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Historical „Self“</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>China as a „Self-made“ nation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prof. Dr. Sebastian Harnisch
Institute of Political Science, Heidelberg University
18.03.2013 #17
## Post World War II Role taking process by PR China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The „Other“</th>
<th>UN / Arab League / African Union USA / EU</th>
<th>ASEAN / USA / EU</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post WW II Period</strong></td>
<td><strong>1998-2008</strong></td>
<td><strong>2009-</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Historical „Self“</td>
<td>China as Victim and China As Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>China as Victim and China As Middle Kingdom</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dimensions of role change and learning

"Generalized Other"

"strong obligation"

"weak obligation"

"Significant Other"

"Me"

"I"
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 view understand the „term as an analytical tool“.
2. Role theoretical analysis is still in its infancy in all definition elements.
3. Internationally, there is fast growing group or 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 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