

The Limitations of Hao Yeh's Theory of Narrative Community?

An Investigation from Contemporary Theories and Practices of Self-Determination

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Abstract

This article engages with the ongoing debates over Professor Hao Yeh's new book, *Shicha Zhengzhi, Zhengzhi Shicha (A Politics of Différance)*, by discussing the international challenges to his theory of narrative community. From a theoretical perspective, the article argues that political theories of self-determination cannot possibly contribute to the formation of a community's story despite Yeh seemingly endorsing their potential to do so. From an international legal perspective, Yeh seems to fail to explain how his theory of narrative synchronicity can deal with the *différance* between the story of a community and the existing story of international society. Although the article attempts to anticipate a response by exploring Iris Young's thoughts on self-determination, this response turns out to be unsatisfactory. Overall, Yeh must respond to these international challenges to his theory of narrative community on both the theoretical and practical levels.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt – narrative synchronicity – the people – recognition – secession – self-determination

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The more I think about the President's declaration as to the right of 'self-determination', the more convinced I am of the danger of putting such ideas into the minds of certain races. It is bound to be the basis of impossible demands on the Peace Congress and create trouble in many lands ... The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives.

ROBERT LANSING, former U.S. Secretary of State¹

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1 Introduction

Professor Hao Yeh's new book *Shicha Zhengzhi, Zhengzhi Shicha (A Politics of Différance)* has recently stirred up discourse among a wide range of Taiwanese people, from scholars to general readers. In this work, he not only works to understand the problem of political polarisation on the small island of Taiwan (along the edges of the so-called to-unify-or-not-to-unify-with-China problem) but also to provide a theory that could, more or less, serve as a potential 'way out' of the problem.

The theory he outlines is certainly not an ideal theory in the Rawlsian sense of the term. On the one hand, it reflects the historical background of Taiwan, aligning with Isaiah Berlin's idea of the sense of reality. In fact, Yeh refers to his book as a 'contextualised normative political theory' (Yeh 2024, 40). On the other hand, he aligns his work with Hannah Arendt's concept of politics, incorporating it into a political theory of narrative synchronicity. That is, he contends that every member of a political community must play a role in its story by which the ontological base of the community is constituted (Yeh 2024, 86–87). Such an Arendtian reading of politics, in Yeh's eyes, is how a political theorist may legitimately intervene in public affairs without dictating what citizens should or should not do (Yeh 2024, 516). He contends that 'the meaning of politics lies in freedom, and freedom hereby refers to begin and realise a new storyline, which sometimes implies a cooperation with others and protection

¹ Quoted from Müllerson (1994, 59).

of the existing community [and other times implies] a complete deviation from the existing framework of narrative or causal chain by which the participants have begun a new story that belongs to them' (Yeh 2024, 517, my translation). In short, through his theory of narrative synchronicity, or to be precise, narrative community, Yeh not only engages with the contentious problem of political polarisation of Taiwan but also aims to offer a potential 'prescription' for it: the kind of story that Taiwanese people want to tell, who they want to be, and whether they want to be and act as an independent state are all dependent on the readers, namely, the Taiwanese people themselves (Yeh 2024, 523, 545).

I appreciate most of Yeh's argumentation pertaining to Berlin's methodology and Arendt's idea of political ontology. Moreover, I agree that, as the Republic of China or not, the role that we Taiwanese people want to play is dependent on our collective judgement and determination. However, let us suppose that, as Yeh expects, Taiwanese people somehow come up with a single narrative community; is that a happy ending for this story? I think not. The closer I read his theory of narrative community, the more I am concerned by the difficulties presented by his theory in regard to international, rather than domestic, politics. In terms of theory, there is a tension between Yeh's Arendtian theory of narrative community and political theories of self-determination. Yeh seems to owe us an explanation of how and why his theory can (or cannot) apply to the international 'story' that is told mainly by existing sovereign states. *Theoretically speaking, could there be a narrative community on the international level?* Was Yeh expecting something beyond states or nations? In terms of practice, Yeh's theory of narrative community seems to be incompatible with, if not inapplicable to, the existing international law on self-determination. To effectively realise a narrative community, Taiwanese people have no choice but to play along with the existing 'script', which is corrosive, if not devastating, to the story of the community. *Practically speaking, could there be a manner of narration capable of escaping from the way that existing sovereign states narrate, that is, through international law?*

1.1 *Research Questions*

I should clarify that the article is not intended to argue against Yeh's theory of narrative synchronicity or narrative community. Rather, I work to adopt his position and defend the theory. The issue covered here is the fact that there are challenges from the international realm on both the theoretical and practical levels that Yeh's theory does not satisfactorily tackle. Therefore, I delineate these challenges and propose potential responses to them with the expectation that Professor Yeh will craft his own response.

The article's two research questions are as follows. (1) What are the points of tension between Yeh's theory and existing political theories of self-determination? (2) What are the challenges for his theory stemming from international law pertaining to self-determination? The article answers these questions by both defending Yeh's theory and outlining the difficulties that the theory could face. Overall, it intends not to challenge his stance but to discuss potential limitations of and challenges to it from the perspective of the existing international 'story' of self-determination. In this way, the article contributes to the ongoing discourse over Yeh's theory. This is also my way of paying tribute to his strenuous work theorising Arendt's thought for the Taiwanese people.

1.2 *Limitations and Arrangement of This Article*

Since the scope of this article is limited to the discussion of Professor Yeh's theory, it neither argues for (or against) existing political theories of self-determination nor introduces a new theory of self-determination. Rather, I use these existing theories to challenge Yeh and point out the limitations of his theory on the international level. To do so, the article treats the literature of self-determination fairly so that it can stand on Yeh's ground and investigate which elements of the theories of self-determination might be beneficial or detrimental to Yeh's theory.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 elaborates the content of Yeh's theory of narrative community. Section 3 presents the three main theories of self-determination and the advantages that they could offer to the narrative community. Section 4 examines those theories' limitations and explains why there is a tension between them and Yeh's theory. Section 5 investigates the limitations of self-determination in terms of its current practice in international law. It argues that without an international narrative community, the domestic counterpart is inevitably unstable. Section 6 critically discusses Iris Young's theory of self-determination, expressing uncertainty regarding whether it can facilitate Young's theory. Section 7 concludes the article.

2 Hao Yeh's Theory of Narrative Community

Yeh forms the theory of narrative community mainly from Arendt's concept of plurality and political action. Firstly, Yeh argues in alignment with Arendt that plurality is the human condition that constitutes the basic condition of politics (Yeh 2024, 150–151). It is in the public sphere, or to be precise, the *res publica*, that each person's uniqueness, which is based on their speech and action, can be presented to others (and vice versa). That is to say, when they get together

through speech and action, a space will appear between them through which their respective uniqueness of speech and action is performed and presented publicly. Uniqueness as such equals plurality in the sense that each of them is unique in their presentation of interaction, of living together, and of the way they speech-act with others.² According to Yeh, this concept of plurality reveals two meanings of the term *res publica*, namely, as the public that opens to all persons and as the common thing that is shared by them (Yeh 2024, 151). Hence, *res publica* is a space of appearance or a public realm from which each of the individual persons can perform, reveal, and present their speech and action in their unique way respectively (Yeh 2024, 151; see also Arendt 1998, 199–200). In other words, without such a realm of appearance, plurality cannot exist. It is from this point that Yeh contends that ‘plurality, to Arendt, is first and foremost the epitome of the most rudimentary condition of the human being, then it is the precondition for politics’ (Yeh 2024, 154, my translation).

However, secondly, Yeh insists that what Arendt meant by the idea *res publica* is more than reference to the *material* thing that is commonly shared among persons (Yeh 2024, 153). What is commonly shared among them can be something not material but performative, that is, action. Yeh reads in line with Arendt’s concept of political action that:

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men **without the intermediary of things or matter**, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that **men**, not Man, live on the earth and **inhabit the world**. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the condition*—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life.

YEH 2024, 153, bold is YEH’s emphasis; see also ARENDT 1998, 7

From this citation, Yeh further argues that the ontology of the common thing, namely, the public realm or *res publica*, is potentially there if and only if the individual persons gather together and (speech-)act in concert, from which each person’s plurality can *transfer* from potentiality to reality (Yeh 2024, 156,

² In my discussion with the reviewer, I found that although Yeh discusses the concept of plurality in both the Berlinian and the Arendtian sense of the term, he seems to not elaborate on the differences between the two. That is, he seems not to distinguish Arendt’s concept of plurality from that of Berlin. Instead, Yeh uses the concept interchangeably between the two thinkers. Whether Yeh has combined their thought on the concept of plurality and forms his own understanding of it is a question that seems unclear throughout his book. I thank the reviewer for providing me a chance to reflect on this point, which had not occurred to me.

157). Hence, such a transferring process depends not necessarily on the ‘intermediary of things or matter’ but on the ‘in-betweenness’ of human interaction and relationship (Yeh 2024, 157). In short, to Yeh, the ontology of the public realm can rely on pure human interaction.

Yeh’s readings of Arendt’s concept of plurality and political action forms his theory of narrative synchronicity and narrative community. Synchronicity is *narrative* in that the human interactive network constitutes a theatre, namely, the space of appearance in-between the persons, which allows each individual person to play his or her role or ‘character’ according to their concerted action (Yeh 2024, 164). Such an action leads to a performative rather than a material space in-between them. Moreover, that action can also be seen as a story of their collective narration, that is, their collective *speech-act*, in which each individual person plays a unique role according to the storyline. Hence, the collective narration is a *synchronicity* because they share not only the same storyline but also the unique *moment* of the plot, for example, a specific day for a memorial of their history (Yeh 2024, 172). In the end, their collective speech-act, that is, narration, becomes the common thing (performative, not material) that gathers them together and a platform in which each of them reveals their plurality in accordance with the narration respectively. This togetherness via a collective narration constitutes what Yeh calls a *narrative community*, which is based on an Arendtian understanding of the political ontology (Yeh 2024, 86–87). In sum, it is a story-community formed by the individual persons who speech-act together ‘without the intermediary of things or matter’.

How Yeh’s theory of narrative community can respond to the existing theories and international legal practices of self-determination are questions that remain to be discussed. I shall begin with a discussion from the theoretical point of view.

3 What Advantages Can Theories of Self-Determination Provide to Yeh’s Theory of Narrative Community?

I must clarify one point before getting into the full discussion of this section. When the article mentions *self-determination*, it refers to the self-determination to be independent, meaning that it directly corresponds to the idea of secession.³ In other words, it refers to the right to independence rather than

³ Some readers may take issue with my approach of conflating the right to self-determination with the right to secession. They may say that the former is meant to tackle the problem of a

just the right to self-government or autonomy within a country. The reason I specify this concept to one of independence rather than one that encompasses self-government and autonomy is to avoid distorting the concept's core spirit: to perform political actions *par excellence* (see the discussion in Section 6). Having established this definition, I will now discuss three main political theorists of self-determination—Allen Buchanan, Alan Patten and Anna Stilz—and examine how their theories can advantage Yeh's theory of narrative community.

I refer to Allen Buchanan's theory of self-determination as an injustice-oriented version of self-determination. It asserts that a people has the right to independence *if and only if* that people is being subjected to a serious human rights violation by its host country, unjust annexation by another state, or a violation of an autonomy agreement (Buchanan 2004, 350–359; Chen 2019, 138; Patten 2014, 233). The right to self-determination is a 'right to a remedy of last resort against serious and persistent injustices'; in other words, it is a remedial right (Buchanan 2004, 337–338; Lister 2016, 159–160). If there is no injustice, a people is not morally justified in pursuing independence (or secession) from its host country. Buchanan rejects the idea that self-determination is a primary right (namely, the right to seek independence regardless of injustice) (Chen 2019, 137; Morss 2016, 188–190; Wellman 1995, 170). He worries that such a right being primary would trivialise the existing international order and lead to an intolerable degree of instability and fragmentation (Buchanan 1991, 102). In this sense, his theory provides a moral justification for as well as a limitation on the political actions of both sovereign states and potential seceding peoples (Buchanan 1997). Regarding the seceding peoples, he attempts, on a theoretical level, to keep arbitrary self-determination at bay in order to maintain international peace and stability. Regarding sovereign states, his remedial reading of self-determination corresponds to the concept of the responsibility to protect

de facto state, that is, the international recognition of its statehood, while the latter is meant to deal with the problem of injustice, that is, secession from the host country becomes the only justice by which a suffering people can strive for its survival. I disagree with their critique because from the perspective of the *phenomenon*, the action of self-determination and the action of secession can be regarded as the same event. My point is that whether the people's action is self-determination or secession, the action itself makes no difference. That is to say, it is a political action of the people which seeks interaction with other peoples *autonomously*. In my following discussion I will also show, for example, that when people A considers its own action as self-determination, people B may consider that action as secession. Thus, from the phenomenal perspective, the political action of the people is the same, with no difference between self-determination and secession. They are the people's political action *per se*.

(R2P). In other words, a sovereign state that forfeits its responsibility to protect its citizens' rights forfeits the legitimacy of its domestic governance; therefore, a group of citizens is justified in claiming the remedial right to secede (Brown 2020, 87; ICISS 2001, XI, 12, 13, 17).

The advantage that this theory of the remedial right to self-determination presents for Yeh's theory is its provision of a moral justification for states' responsibility to protect the human rights of their citizens (Hilpold 2015, 11; ICISS 2001, 53–55; Serrano and Weiss 2014, 13). Buchanan's theory offers a potential storyline for Yeh's narrative community: if a people faces flagrant human rights violations from its host country, then it is morally justified in seceding from the country and pursuing independence. Buchanan agrees that under such injustice, the people can claim and act on the right to self-determination to be independent, that is, can pursue a remedy to the injustice.

Alan Patten argues against Buchanan, proposing a revised version of the right to self-determination to independence. He generally agrees with Buchanan's remedial account of the right but claims that it overlooks the importance of both nation and culture (Patten 2014, 234). Patten argues that a people is a sociocultural group with a distinct sense of national identity; thus, it is not merely a group suffering from serious human rights violations (Chen 2019, 139; Patten 2016, 123; 2011). Moreover, he revises Buchanan's definition of injustice, emphasising that the failure to recognise the people's national identity counts as an injustice in and of itself (Patten 2014, 235; 2016, 123). Patten argues that national recognition by the host country is good for a person because they 'can be governed by political decisions and outcomes that fit with their own values and traditions [which offer] individuals an essential tool with which to preserve their culture, and an opportunity to participate in collective self-government alongside members of the group with which they identify' (Patten 2014, 244, 247). In other words, self-determination becomes a remedial right to tackle the injustice of derecognition (Patten 2014, 235) while protecting the culture and national identity that the people cherish (Patten 2014, 241). Nevertheless, Patten also emphasises that this reading of self-determination is not without limitation; it is not a primary right (Patten 2014, 251). He shares Buchanan's understanding that the right to self-determination is purely a remedial one, insisting that 'there is no right to secede from a perfect state: The state must be either violating the conditions of minimal justice or guilty of a failure of recognition' (Patten 2014, 239). A people is not morally justified in pursuing independence under a legitimate state that recognises its distinct culture (Patten 2014, 235, 236). In short, Patten proposes a moderately nationalist view of the remedial right to self-determination. It is moderate because it underscores the cultural and national aspects of peoples and the importance of recognition

but sets conditions on such peoples' right to self-determination (Patten 2016, 124–125). If the host country derecognises their cultural identity, then the people is justified in pursuing self-determination.

Patten's theory is also applicable to the international sphere. According to his theory, he agrees that if a people that lives its own culture is derecognised by other peoples around the globe, then it is morally justified in seeking self-determination to be independent insofar as it preserves their culture and remediates the injustice of derecognition. The advantage presented by Patten's theory is that it provides a storyline for Yeh's narrative community to seek self-determination to be independent if its cultural identity is seriously derecognised by other peoples around the world. Another advantage is that his theory seemingly fits Yeh's Arendtian understanding of the people; that is, the theory seems to take the idea of a people on its own merit. In contrast to Buchanan, who emphasises the importance of sovereign states, Patten underscores the importance of the people *per se*.

Anna Stilz constructs a theory of the right to self-determination that lies between those of Buchanan and Patten. On the one hand, she argues that the collective political autonomy of a people matters to individuals' good 'because it can afford individuals an important form of autonomy within the coercive institution that rules them' (Stilz 2019, 23). Without this collective autonomy, individuals cannot reasonably affirm their political cooperation within which their actions and interests are meaningful; in other words, the lack of collective autonomy impairs their individual autonomy (Stilz 2016, 113–117). On this point, Stilz shares some common ground with Patten. They agree that what constitutes a good to an individual is the ability to be a builder of or participant in the institutions that reflects their interest. On the other hand, in contrast to Patten, Stilz does not consider the cultural aspect; rather, she argues for an endogenous account of the people (Stilz 2019, 24, 123–127). She explains that if 'a member willingly participates when, upon reflection, she *endorses* her intention to "play her part" in a political institution', then 'a people is constituted when a state is upheld through the willing participation of its members' (Stilz 2019, 125, 126, original emphasis). In this sense, there is no 'Archimedean point for delineating peoples outside our existing structure of political institutions', for example, culture or national identity in Patten's sense of the term (Stilz 2019, 24). Therefore, Stilz provides a political autonomy-focused account of self-determination that stands in stark contrast to Patten's account. Her theory is based on individual interests (i.e. an individual's political agency) rather than the culture of the people (Stilz 2019, 94, 117, 118).

Stilz also aligns with Buchanan on the rejection of primary rights. However, in contrast to Buchanan, Stilz asserts that injustices that morally justify the

right to independence include not only human rights violations but also persistent alienation between individuals and their political institutions. She emphasises the importance of an individual's participation in the government's institutions, which enables him to 'affirm his involvement in the cooperative political enterprise ... [and see himself] as a co-author of the institutions that govern [his] life' (Stilz 2016, 118). Furthermore, in contrast to Patten, who addresses injustice in terms of the derecognition of national identity, Stilz focuses on alienation between individuals and their institutions, which can hinder individuals' autonomy and interests (Stilz 2019, 23). Stilz stresses that alienation morally justifies the individuals, as a group, pursuing self-determination to be independent (Stilz 2016, 124).

The advantage of Stilz's account of self-determination is that it unpacks the intimate relationship between individual interests and collective action. To be clear, for Stilz it is not the people *per se* but the individuals' interests that matter to self-determination. If persons are barred from meaningful engagement with the political institutions that rule them, then they are morally justified in claiming self-determination to be independent. Stilz's theory can facilitate the storyline of Yeh's narrative community in the sense that if the individuals are alienated from the *international* political institutions (e.g. the United Nations) that deeply impact their interests, then they are morally justified in pursuing self-determination and, in turn, independence. However, Stilz clarifies that these individuals do not *collectively* have a primary right to independence. The only right they have is that to equal participation in the institutions that govern them; hence, if international governmental organisations (e.g. the World Health Organization) allow *each* individual to take part in them, then the individuals' human rights (which are derived from the institutions, for example, universal healthcare coverage) can be protected, meaning that they are no longer alienated.

It appears that the three major theories of self-determination might facilitate Yeh's narrative community: if the Taiwanese people wants to tell and present its story to the international public, then these theories provide not merely the roles that the people can play (Buchanan's victimhood, Patten's cultural identity and Stilz's non-alienation) but also the storylines that fit the existing 'story' of the international order. In the next section, however, I contend that this is not the case—that there is tension between Yeh's Arendtian theory of narrative community and these theories of self-determination.

4 Limitations of Self-Determination in Terms of Theory

This section examines the limitations of existing theories of self-determination and explains how and why these theories cannot fully account for Yeh's Arendtian theory of narrative community and its political action. Firstly, Buchanan's theory suggests that, without experiencing the deprivation of human rights, a group of individuals cannot constitute a people that is qualified for self-determination. More precisely, *victimisation* under injustice is what morally justifies the right to self-determination. The problem comes from the fact that there is no such right for those that have not been victimised. This significantly contradicts Arendt's concept of politics. Secondly, Patten's theory suggests that recognition, that is, the treatment of a people's culture and national identity as what they are in essence, can offer a storyline for the narrative community. Nevertheless, according to Yeh's Arendtian reading of the people or community (2024, 87, 532), what matters to a people is not the recognition of its essence (be it cultural or national). What matters, according to my understanding of Yeh's theory, is the *acknowledgement* of the people's existence and its political engagement as being equal with that of other peoples around the world. Patten overlooks Arendt's distinction between who and what; hence, his theory provides an unsuitable storyline for the narrative community. Thirdly, Stilz's theory is not able to treat peoples on their own merit. As her theory centres on the realisation of *individuals'* political autonomy, protecting this autonomy is defined as the primary interest among individuals. Self-determination matters because of individuals' interests, rather than the people's actions *per se*. In Richard Bellamy's words, Stilz's theory overlooks the collective elements of rights (Bellamy 2008, 14–15). Nonetheless, since what suits the storyline of the narrative community is a common story that is collectively shared among the individuals, reducing the collective aspect of self-determination to individual interests seems myopic. What follows is a more detailed discussion.

4.1 The Limitation of Victimhood

The main limitation in Buchanan's theory is that violations of human rights constitute the only moral justification for the right to independence. For Buchanan, 'only after a people suffers grave and persistent injustice' can it justifiably pursue independence (Chen 2019, 39). In this way, the right to self-determination is reduced to nothing but a remedy for injustice. In Chia-Ming Chen's words, this 'fails to comprehend the logic of formation of political community, which requires the people's arduous and persistent civil efforts' (Chen 2019, 139); the storytelling of Yeh's narrative community represents one such

effort. Self-determination, under this theory, is seen not as the people's political action but as a mere *reaction* to maltreatment. This dynamic is incompatible with Arendt's understanding of politics, which centres on beginning something new rather than reacting to injustice.

For the narrative community, Buchanan's remedial right to self-determination has two problems. Firstly, given that there is no international supreme authority to define (a) which peoples qualify as victims of injustice and (b) which situations constitute conspicuous violations of human rights, limiting self-determination to a remedial right is functionally arbitrary if not wholly contradictory to the spirit of democracy and equality between peoples around the globe (Rodríguez-Santiago 2016, 237). Secondly, reading self-determination as a right to remediate injustice implies that it is also a right to punish those who perpetrate the injustice. As Jörg Fisch points out, the concept of self-determination 'is founded negatively on the suffering of tyranny, not positively on the characteristic of being a people' (Fisch 2015, 49). For example, Taiwanese people can regard a Chinese invasion of the island as an injustice, while Chinese people can deem the independence of Taiwan to be an injustice.

It is important to address why Buchanan insists on setting restrictions on the right to self-determination. He is reluctant to read this right as a primary right and a pure performance of the people's actions due to a perceived slippery slope (Müllerson 1994, 71; Wellman 1995, 161). In Buchanan's words, 'If large groups are allowed to secede, why not small groups ... why not individuals? Even if the process of fragmentation does not reach this far, recognition of a right to secede is very likely to produce more fragmentation than is tolerable' (Buchanan 1991, 102). However, this logic of infinite tribalisation is not necessarily accurate for two reasons: (a) a group of persons exhibiting willingness to leave or enter another people is not an arbitrary action but a serious mutual promise among them (despite Buchanan's apparent suggestion that entering or leaving a group is as easy as entering or leaving a public park); (b) to maintain the unity of a people is as difficult as seceding from another people, despite the fact that Buchanan seemingly suggests that secession is far easier than maintenance.⁴ Nevertheless, there should be a criterion that prevents people's

⁴ Although questionable, theorists of secession frequently analyse secession to divorce; in other words, they frame secession as a political divorce (refer to Huntington 1972). If we take this analogy seriously, Buchanan appears to suggest that individuals can marry and divorce as easily as they can get into/out of a park without difficulties. However, it is difficult to imagine that Buchanan would say something like 'recognition of a right to divorce is very likely to produce more fragmentation than is tolerable' to a general audience. Rather, as a liberal,

political actions from appearing arbitrary. What could this criterion be if not Buchanan's remedial one?

Standing on Professor Yeh's ground and reading in line with Hannah Arendt's arguments, I contend that a group of persons that acts collectively and promises one another that they will stay together is a *people* (Arendt 1970, 44, 52; see also Canovan 1996; 2005; Yeh 2024, 532–542). I share Christopher H. Wellman's opinion that Buchanan seemingly views the collective action itself as worrisome (Wellman 1995, 161). However, if there is a criterion that inherently restricts action from being arbitrary, then Buchanan's worry is not a problem. I hereby refer to Stilz's Kantian criterion of action, that is, action itself has an inherent restriction that can prevent arbitrariness. She points out that collective action is 'bounded by a duty to respect others' equivalent claims ... [and] therefore be coercively restricted in order to protect the rightful freedoms of others' (Stilz 2016, 120).⁵ In other words, there is a mutual or relational constraint *inherent* to any collective action itself; the action of a group of individuals is equally compatible with the action of another group of individuals, and vice versa, limiting the arbitrariness of action. Nonetheless, although I propose Stilz's Kantian reading of the relationally inherent constraint of action, I argue against her idea that this constraint could lead to the rejection of a people's actions towards independence.

For Stilz, when there is *no* alienation between the ruling institution and the ruled persons, there is no room for the people to *unilaterally* claim the right to self-determination (Simmons 2015, 170; Stilz 2016, 124; 2019, 135–136). Nevertheless, if it is the case that, as Stilz puts it, a people's action is inherently and relationally constrained, why would one worry that an action is unilaterally performed? Since there is no 'unilateral' (but inherently relational) action in

he would likely respect one's right to a divorce regardless of whether they intend to act on that right—yet he clearly does not possess the same respect for an individual seeking a *political divorce* from other people despite doing so contributing an individual right in his view. If Buchanan stands by the individual right to divorce (political or otherwise), he should do the same by the right to *political* divorce without requiring the divorcing party to make a justification more burdensome than the non-divorcing party. In short, on an individual level (or taking such individuals as a collective), the right to divorce *per se* should be treated without any prejudice to its political form by liberal theorists, as it may still be considered an individual (human) right. Nonetheless, most liberal theorists do not appear to respect this right. There appears to be a 'bias' in liberals' theoretical application against those seeking a political divorce. This bias is seemingly shared by Anna Stilz, a point that I back up in the coming paragraphs (see also Miller 2020).

⁵ This inherent criterion of collective action is something that I too propose. However, where I disagree with Stilz is in her apparent conflation of collective action with individual interests. To me, they constitute separate issues. See my discussion of this matter below.

Stilz's framework, rejecting a people's action towards independence constitutes a relatively unjust act. Such a rejection alienates the people from international institutions in which it seeks independent participation. This *international alienation* is what Stilz does not explain or clarify in her theory. Moreover, if the relational constraint of action is something that is equally applied to all peoples, then requiring peoples that seek independence to fulfil Stilz's criteria (namely, no alienation and no unilateral action) is questionable. Since Stilz focuses more on the question of 'how serious should we take the complaints of *alienated dissenters*' in comparison with the complaints of those who are *not* dissenters (Stilz 2016, 125, emphases added), her theory ends up discriminating against alienated dissenters. For example, when the C people performs an action to reject the T people's action towards independence, such a rejection should fit Stilz's relational constraint. The C people's action (rejecting independence) should be equally compatible with the T people's action (seeking independence), and the relational criterion should constrain *all* peoples' actions equally instead of constraining only those that seek unilateral actions towards independence.

In sum, to an extent, I prefer Stilz's Kantian reading of the relational constraint as the criterion of a justified action over Buchanan's remedial reading of the constraint (Stilz 2019, 135–136). Nonetheless, I disagree with her placement of more burdens on peoples seeking independence. If there is no unilaterality in Stilz's sense of action *qua* relationality, then such an unequal burden is *a fortiori* unacceptable. The right to self-determination to be independent is inherently conditioned by the relational constraint. Therefore, requesting extra justification from those pursuing independence constitutes an injustice. Stilz's theory seems incapable of responding to such an accusation. All in all, the constraint that limits the arbitrariness of the people's action must be relational, rather than remedial. *To act*, in the Arendtian sense of the term, means that there is no need to act victimised to claim the right to self-determination (Fisch 2015, 48–50; Mégret 2016). If the people claims the right to independence by acting victimised, we can predict that any further action in pursuit of independence represents a *reaction* to the injustice. It is certainly not an *action* in Yeh's reading of Arendt: the narrative community acts; it does not react. Hence, Buchanan's (and eventually Stilz's) theory goes against the story that the community wants to tell.⁶

⁶ See Section 4.3 for my further critiques of Stilz.

4.2 *The Limitation of Seeking Recognition*

As signified by Alan Patten, the right to self-determination serves to remediate derecognition as an injustice (Patten 2014, 235). For Patten, recognising the people as a *sui generis* cultural and national entity is a means of protection (Patten 2014, 241). Nevertheless, I question Patten's nationalist account of the right to self-determination, as it focuses on the *recognition* of peoples' cultural or national essence rather than the *acknowledgement* of coexistence among peoples around the world. In this sense, Patten's theory contradicts Yeh's Arendtian reading of the people. To properly make this point, I must clarify the distinction between acknowledgement and recognition before unpacking what acknowledgement means to the narrative community.

In politics, recognising a person's essential identities (e.g. colour, ethnicity, race, culture, sex) and recognising their identity as a whole is what Charles Taylor calls *identity politics*, through which 'the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people' is the main drive that 'unifies much of what is going on in world politics today', from the global decolonisation movement in the 1960s to the US Black Lives Matter movement in the 2020s (Taylor 1994, 25–73; see also Fukuyama 2019, xiii, xv; Lilla 2018). As James Tully observes, modern liberal constitutionalism, which attempts to include diverse groups and treat them in legally equal terms, could not develop without a response to the demands and struggles for this recognition (Tully 2004, 15–17). Such demands and struggles are also the case when it comes to the development of international 'constitutions' (i.e. international law). Without demands and struggles for equal recognition from non-European peoples around the world, imperial and colonial dominance would still be in place today, and inequality among peoples would never disappear (Manela 2007). In short, recognition matters not only for domestic justice but also for international justice (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Nevertheless, it is what kind of recognition occurs that matters when it comes to identity politics on the international level. It is unclear whether the struggles are for the recognition of *identity in essence* (e.g. a cultural entity *sui generis* as Patten puts it) or for the *equal treatment* of peoples (e.g. equal status in international law). Hence, there is ambiguity when it comes to recognition on the international level of identity politics. To clarify this ambiguity, I argue against Axel Honneth's thought on international recognition and assert that identity politics in the international sphere refers to acknowledgement rather than recognition among peoples. In short, I contend that the story that Yeh's narrative community can tell is a story about acknowledgement.

According to Honneth's reading of Hans Kelsen, there are two main aspects of international recognition—a state 'takes note of, or cognises, an empirical reality [of another state]' and 'convey[s] its respect for the state'—though

Kelsen admits that it is difficult to distinguish between these two aspects (Honneth 2012, 28, 31). Honneth claims that international recognition can refer to one of two distinct notions: (1) the A people's recognition of the B people's existence; or (2) the A people's recognition of whether the B people is worthy of further interaction (Honneth 2012, 28–29). While the first question is about an ontological matter (i.e. taking a people into cognition as an existing entity), the second question is about a normative matter (i.e. treating a people with equal respect) (Honneth 2012, 31). Honneth argues that recognition in international 'identity politics' pertains to the latter—that it is a normative manner. For him, since the people as 'the "we" of the population ... is not an empirical but a hypothetical quantity', international recognition is not about whether the people really exists or not but about whether the people receives due respect from other peoples (Honneth 2012, 33). International recognition is a matter of normativity rather than one of ontology. For Honneth, the matter of international identity politics is one of equal recognition with respect rather than intersubjective recognition of existence (Honneth 2005, xii–xix; 2012, 33).

However, in defence of Yeh's position, I argue against Honneth. International recognition is (more or less) an ontological matter for one main reason. The ontological problem is significant to all peoples around the world because they are ontologies, or in Yeh's words, because they are political ontologies: members of the people tell a common story about themselves, arousing a sense of 'who we are' and resulting in them constituting a common entity (Yeh 2024, Chapter 3). In contrast to Honneth's claim, to be or not to be is indeed a serious question for peoples. Moreover, it is also a matter of normativity. It is problematic to ignore one people's existence, to view it without due treatment and to exclude it from participation in global affairs. In this sense, the derecognition of the people is a normative problem.

Notably, it is acknowledgement rather than recognition that corresponds to the story that Yeh's narrative community tells. To argue against Honneth's understanding of international recognition, I approach Patchen Markell's theory of the politics of acknowledgement. As Markell puts it, 'our identities are shaped in part through the unpredictable responses of other people'; thus, he rightly argues that 'the politics of recognition responds to this fact by demanding that others recognise us as who we already really are' (Markell 2003, 14). The politics of recognition seems to force others to see people as what they *already* are instead of what they can possibly be: if you are a Black woman, then you are a Black woman—nothing else. What identity politics proposes is a politics of recognition in the essential sense of identity, contradicting Yeh's Arendtian reading of the concept of the people as well as his theory of narrative community. I hereby summarise three points that correspond to Yeh's theory.

Firstly, Markell stresses that 'the direct object of acknowledgement is ... something about the self'; it is 'not fundamentally the acknowledgement of one's own identity ... but [that of] one's own ontological situation' (Markell 2003, 35). But what is the ontological situation? Markell clarifies that 'what's acknowledged ... is directed at the basic conditions of one's own existence and activity, including, crucially, the *limits* of "identity" as a ground of action, limits which arise out of our constitutive vulnerability to the unpredictable reactions and responses of others' (Markell 2003, 35–36, original emphases). In other words, it is the *limits of one's existential condition* that are acknowledged. These limits show not only that human beings are vulnerable when they interact with one another (i.e. they could be harmed, either emotionally or physically) but also that others' reactions and responses are unpredictable (i.e. the possibility of surprise, happiness or hospitality is ever-present). What we acknowledge, in Arendt's words, is the human condition: the existential or living limits and the possibilities of humankind.

Secondly, Markell asserts that the limits come from the 'finitude' of our practical knowledge (Markell 2003, 36). He clarifies that 'finitude as I conceived it is not epistemological but practical: it is not a matter of knowledge *per se*, but of what we can expect our knowledge of others to do for us, that is, of whether knowledge of others (or of ourselves, for that matter) can be expected to serve as the ground of sovereign agency' (Markell 2003, 36).⁷ In other words, our knowledge about *how* to properly interact with others is finite. Still, we try our best in interactions with the unknown others despite having limited knowledge of them. Acknowledging the finitude of our practical knowledge (i.e. the vulnerability, unknown-ness and unpredictability of human interactions) is the very foundation of our agency of action, by which we judge and decide how we could and should interact with the unknown others. Consequently, the human condition as human finitude constitutes a matter of practice more than one of knowledge. To encounter a stranger, or those we are familiar with, 'the people we know best', and attempt to interact with them 'can remind us of the unpredictability and contingency of social interactions' (Markell 2003, 36). In this sense, to acknowledge human finitude is to acknowledge our vulnerability with regard to others.

Thirdly, this finitude 'is not only a permanent feature of social life but also one worthy of affirming' (Markell 2003, 37). This means that finitude is not

⁷ What both Arendt and Yeh would take issue with here is the concept of sovereignty. Arendt's critique of sovereignty is a topic that is too broad to be tackled here. Thus, I shall leave this matter for my future work.

always negative. In fact, it can be a positive condition of our interactions. The modesty of the politics of acknowledgement lies not in 'replac[ing] hostility with love or alienation with connection' but in encouraging us to face the reality of the human condition—that is, the inevitability of coexistence, interaction and association between persons and peoples.

Markell's politics of acknowledgement not only supports my argument against Honneth but also corresponds to Yeh's theory of narrative community in two ways. Firstly, there is no essential identity within a people to be recognised by other peoples around the world. The matter is not, as Arendt addressed, *what* is recognised but rather *who* is acknowledged between peoples (Arendt 1998, 179–180). The narrative community strives for other people's acknowledgement as (a) a people that, here and now, exists equally among peoples; (b) a people that is inevitably involved in common affairs among other peoples; and (c) a people with autonomy to act and play a due role. Secondly, the narrative community does not want to simply acknowledge its own vulnerability in human interactions. They also expect that other peoples can acknowledge the *reality* of the human condition, namely, the inevitability of coexistence between peoples. As a result, in contrast to Patten's theory that the right to self-determination is meant to seek others' recognition of the people's cultural or national identity, for Yeh's narrative community the right is meant to acknowledge our human condition (i.e. the inevitability of coexistence and association between peoples). In this sense, self-determination is nothing but the people's pure political action *into* the international public: we are *who* we are here and now—a reality that one cannot, and should not, ignore.

4.3 *The Limitation of Individual Interests*

Anna Stilz connects the right to self-determination with individual interests. She emphasises that self-determination matters because it prevents the persistent alienation of individuals from their political institutions. Such alienation constitutes injustice because it excludes an individual from his 'cooperative political enterprise ... [because] he sees himself as a co-author of the institutions that governs his life' (Stilz 2016, 118). Such exclusion impairs the individual's political autonomy, which constitutes an individual's interest (Stilz 2019, 23). It is under this condition that such individuals taken collectively (i.e. the people) are morally justified in performing their right to self-determination (Stilz 2016, 124). What makes the right to self-determination meaningful lies in a people's ability to protect its members' interests. Nonetheless, I consider Stilz's understanding of the right to self-determination to be problematic for Yeh's theory of narrative community for two reasons: (a) the subject of self-

determination is reduced to individual persons rather than peoples, and (b) the meaning of self-determination is reduced to interests rather than political actions *par excellence*.

Regarding the first problem, I contend that the subject of self-determination is peoples rather than individuals. The people, in Yeh's sense, is an ontology that is commonly narrated by a group's members. However, Stilz makes her doubts clear: 'I think peoplehood theorists have not clearly explained why the self-determination of people is of moral importance'; hence, she 'ground[s] this account in the significance, for individuals, of enjoying political autonomy under coercive governing institutions' (Stilz 2019, 29). In other words, she does not believe that peoplehood theorists offer a satisfactory account of why peoples are morally important. Thus, she stresses the moral importance of individuals. In her view, Yeh's Arendtian theory of the people, as a political ontology, is *pro tanto* a peoplehood theory. Here I attempt to defend Yeh's position and respond to her critique.

A people is not an arbitrarily formed aggregation of individuals; rather, it is a voluntary group within which each member promises to live together 'as who they are' via telling a common story that is distinct from those of other peoples. The moral importance of peoples consists of their aspiration to be who they are, which can be understood analogically as follows: 'we want to be who we are and tell our own story' vs 'I want to be who I am and tell my own story'.⁸ However hard Stilz works to deny this moral importance, her denial is swiftly refuted whenever the importance of a people becomes evident. If there is always a moment in which the people *qua* people may potentially emerge (as Arendt repeatedly noted)—however momentary or transient—denying the reality of peoples' importance is equivalent to denying reality; or, in Yeh's terms, it is equivalent to losing a sense of reality (Yeh 2024, 14).⁹

Furthermore, the meaning of self-determination must not be reduced to interests over political actions. The importance of a people lies more with its political sense than its moral sense. In contrast to Stilz, who builds her theory by justifying the idea that individuals' political autonomy is important to their

8 Although I bring in an analogy here to facilitate my explanation, it is used in a rather limited sense. That is, it is merely used to clarify that the people is *as morally important as* the individual person. Therefore, it *does not* imply that the people is, in its essence, analogous to the individual: as an entity with emotion, will or a thinking mindset.

9 I do not mean to assert that her negligence of the moral importance of the people is a theoretical flaw, as the difference between her and Yeh's theories lies in the fact that they start argumentation from a different perspective. However, her theory seems *insufficient*, as Yeh's account could take both the individual and the collective into account.

interests, Yeh builds his theory by justifying the idea that the peoples' political autonomy is important to the people's actions. Stilz suggests that, without incorporating individual interests into collective concerns, the collective realisation of such interests could be meaningless, as persons are alienated from the collective (Stilz 2016, 113–117). However, Yeh's theory of the people can take the people as it is and avoid her worry of alienation at the same time. To Yeh, the people's collective action, for example, telling a story about it, defines, contextualises and realises the underlying individuals' interests. In other words, it is not individual interests that define the importance of collective action, as Stilz puts it—it is the other way around. As Arendt points out, it is the people's actions that constitute 'something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together' (Arendt 1998, 182). Hence, it is the action that creates 'the web of human relationship' that signifies that which is meaningful in-between individuals; therefore, action is important to the peoples (Arendt 1998, 183).

Regarding the second problem, Yeh's theory starts from the political position of the people's actions. He does not start from the moral position (namely, assuming that human beings, either a person or a people, should be taken as human beings in and of themselves) and simply define the people using values of moral good. Instead, he places importance on the *justifying process* through which peoples perform (i.e. telling their own story) as though they are worthy of being treated equally among other peoples. This collective acting and performing (or subjectifying) process contextualises the 'individual interests' rather than the other way around. As a result, peoples are of greater political than moral importance. As Yeh also emphasises, the right to self-determination is something that the people must fight for; thus, the right is not a free gift (Yeh 2024, 539). In short, the right to self-determination is politically important to the narrative community—not to the individual's interests.

5 Limitations of Self-Determination in Terms of Practice

The previous section discussed the tension between mainstream political theories of the right to self-determination and Yeh's Arendtian theory of narrative community. The point here is that the 'storylines' that these theories provide seem unhelpful to the formation of a community's story. From an Arendtian perspective, these storylines are either too tragic (e.g. playing the victim), diminishing possibilities of a new beginning; too exclusive (e.g. limited to a cultural or national identity), harming community openness; or too idiotic (e.g. focused on persons' interests), forgetting the common story that makes our

lives flourish.¹⁰ In my view, Yeh's problem is that he appears to endorse these storylines for the formation of a community's story (Yeh 2024, 532–542). In other words, he can potentially argue that existing theories of the right to self-determination can facilitate the storytelling process of the community, which, I contend, conflicts with Arendt's concept of politics. Yeh owes us an answer to the following question: from a theoretical perspective, how can you deal with the *différence* between mainstream stories of self-determination and the story of (his Arendtian) narrative community?

From the perspective of contemporary practices of the right to self-determination, I contend that Yeh's theory may face more difficulties than he recognises. Supposing that the Taiwanese people has come to tell a new, distinct story for itself, how can Yeh's theory deal with the *différence* between that story and the existing one conveyed by international law? Hereafter, I discuss the challenges that Yeh's theory may face in terms of international legal practices.

Since the emergence of the concept of self-determination during the First World War,¹¹ the recognition of identity in essence (e.g. cultural or national identity) and the recognition of equal treatment have been incessantly conflated or in conflict with each other. For example, Wilson was eager to support self-determination for Eastern European peoples on the basis of their essential identities but was hesitant to do the same for the Japanese, Vietnamese, Egyptian and Chinese peoples on the basis of equal treatment (Manela 2007, Chapter 2). Not until the 1960s did international law formally separate the two kinds of recognition—the recognition of identity in essence and the recognition of equal treatment—removing the ambiguity but at the same time restricting and narrowing the right to self-determination. Of course, the world underwent a wave of decolonisation in the 1960s. Essential identities were recognised among indigenous peoples and those who had previously been subjected to colonisation. But the recognition of equal treatment was applied differently. Former colonies could seek recognition by declaring independence, but indigenous peoples were only able to pursue an autonomous status within a state.

¹⁰ The term 'idiot' refers not to its current English meaning but to its original Latin meaning, that is, as Bellamy explains, *idiotes*, which describes a person as too busy in their own private affairs to care about public affairs (see Bellamy 2008, 97).

¹¹ Here, the 'emergence of the concept' refers to the fact that—before Lenin created the concept and presented it to the public as a political instrument with which communists should struggle against capitalism, and before Wilson borrowed Lenin's creation and brought it onto the international stage—the term and concept of 'self-determination' had not appeared, though its substantial content had been discussed for centuries among political and legal theorists in the form of the idea of consent of the ruled or the idea of self-government (see Manela 2007, Chapter 1).

Hence, there has been a two-way narrowness surrounding the right to self-determination since the 1960s: as nearly all former European colonies have already become independent, the subject of self-determination has been limited to *indigenous peoples*, and their means of self-determination has been limited to *autonomy*. In short, self-determination has been and continues to be confined to autonomy for indigenous peoples.

Contemporary developments in international law have continued this narrowing of the right to self-determination. Though self-determination is listed in the UN Charter as a fundamental element of efforts to maintain international peace, it is absent from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA 1948). During the 1960s, the former European colonies insisted on the decolonisation movement based on 'the principle of self-determination ... to buttress their argument that all forms of colonialism were contrary to the Charter and inherently dangerous to the world peace' (Finger and Singh 1980, 336). Due to their political efforts at the UN, decolonisation gradually became an international consensus, with self-determination as one of its main legal instruments (Macklem 2016, 99). The Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960 asserted that an alien government ruling a people contradicts the UN Charter; thus, the UN called upon host countries to transfer ruling power to the dependent territories (Johnson and Singh 1980, 352; Rodríguez-Santiago 2016, 224). In 1966, the UN General Assembly further endorsed 'the right of oppressed peoples to use force in their struggle for independence', and this endorsement particularly applied to formerly colonised peoples (Johnson and Singh 1980, 352). In Buchanan's framework, this constituted a remedial right to self-determination in opposition to the injustice of colonialism, though this right was exclusive to the former European colonies (Rodríguez-Santiago 2016, 235–236). In the 1960s, actions from the formerly colonised peoples were recognised as independence rather than secession.

At this stage, the right to self-determination was limited to *overseas* colonial peoples. Known as the salt-water test, this limitation filtered out peoples that were not under colonial domination (Cassese 1995, 122–124; Finger and Singh 1980, 338–339; Müllerson 1994, 64). Thus, if a people has never been a colony, it can never be justified in its pursuit of independence (Caspersen 2012, 18–22; Cassese 1995, 119–120; Finger and Singh 1980, 342; Macklem 2016, 100).¹² As established by the 1970 UN Declaration on Friendly Relations, the subject of

¹² Instead, these peoples are denigrated as troublemakers, secessionists or separatists, as disruptors of international peace. In this sense, the original spirit of the right to self-determination, that is, the pursuit of international peace, is contradicting itself.

justifiable self-determination is circumscribed to colonies and peoples under alien subjugation; beyond such cases, independence movements constitute unjustifiable actions (Cassese 1995, 90, 99, 117).

Here, I must convey the challenges to Yeh's narrative community. Supposing that the Taiwanese people, in its storyline, claims that it is colonised by the Kuomintang Chinese government and seeks the right to self-determination, the People's Republic of China (PRC) will not endorse such a claim. It will instead argue that Taiwan was once a colony but has since returned to China and that it enjoys autonomy under the Chinese government—though it is well known that 'Chinese government' here would refer to the PRC rather than the Republic of China, in line with the PRC's One China principle. The point here is that the PRC can justify its rejection of the independence of Taiwan by either denying the colony status or affirming the autonomous status of Taiwan. Such justification is never mere showboating; it is an effective claim rooted in international law. On the one hand, it fits the main 'storyline' of international law regarding the right to self-determination since the 1960s. On the other hand, it fits another 'storyline' of international law, that being the one framing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council as the keepers of the international order since 1945—China being one of them. There is a clear *differance* between the Taiwanese story and the existing story of international law. Yeh must tell us how to deal with this *differance* in the international sphere.

Moreover, although Yeh praises and emphasises the importance of the two 1966 UN conventions on human rights, he seemingly neglects the fact that they actually narrowed and limited the right to self-determination in opposition to his Arendtian understanding of the people and political action. The two 1966 conventions on human rights address the right to self-determination *qua* people along the lines of their common clause in Article 1: 'All peoples have the right of self-determination ... by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development' (UNGA 1966a; 1966b, my emphases). However, if we look closely at the common preamble clause in the conventions, which conveys the purpose and spirit of the two documents, it features a limitation of the right to self-determination by 'recognising that these rights derive from the *inherent dignity of the human person*; recognising that, in accordance with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the ideal of free human beings enjoying freedom from fear and want can only be achieved if conditions are created whereby *everyone* may enjoy *his* economic, social and cultural rights, as well as *his* civil and political rights' (UNGA 1966a; 1966b, my emphases). In Stilz's framework, the two conventions indicate that such rights are of moral importance and that the right to self-determination matters for individual freedom *qua* individual interests rather

than the interests of the people. Therefore, the two conventions narrowed the right to self-determination, deviating from the very subject they were meant to address: peoples. Notably, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples further narrowed the definition of self-determination. Firstly, the scope of the subject was circumscribed to indigenous peoples (as cultural entities in essence). Secondly, the scope of self-determination was limited to autonomy, excluding independence (Fisch 2015, 250; Patten 2016, 127; UNGA 2007).

To conclude, there is great tension, if not just a mere *différence*, between Yeh's story and the existing story told by *inter-national* (not people) society, that is, the story of the current international rule of law. In contemporary practice, there appears to no longer be such a thing as people *qua* people or action *qua* action in terms of the pure performance of the right to self-determination. There is no genuine freedom or political action in Arendt's sense of the term as the people's action is limited to autonomy, with the possibility of independence excluded. It is difficult to claim that a limited action is a free action at all. Yeh's theory of narrative community must respond to this conundrum in the international sphere. To me, the core of the problem stems from the fact that the original *spirit* of self-determination—performing political actions *qua* people—has been lost.

6 The Spirit of Self-Determining Action?

The primary problem that we face directly with regard to people's self-determination stems from the territorial logic of the state, which is implicit in contemporary theories and practices of self-determination. The logic, according to international law, is that the state has exclusive jurisdiction over its territory, through which it performs sovereign actions. The validity, legitimacy and justification of a state's sovereignty relies on whether it effectively imposes and enforces laws in the territory it claims. Therefore, without effective control over its territory, the justification of a state's sovereignty may be questioned by other states. Today, territorialised sovereignty is still recognised among sovereign states. If a people lacks it, it is not recognised as a sovereign state or even a legitimate actor on the international stage. Furthermore, this means that a people claiming self-determination in the territory that it inhabits triggers enormous concern among other peoples under the existing territorial practices of international law.

Regardless of whether a people claims autonomy or independence, the claim itself implies not just the necessity of negotiations but also potential territorial conflicts. Typically, independence is what causes the most concerns,

as it implies total territorial separation—it is a political divorce. The territorial logic of sovereign states suggests that there can be no divorce without territorial separation, resulting in a zero-sum game and an inevitable conflict between land-claimers. This is why self-determination is frequently denigrated as separatism or secessionism in the eyes of most politicians and why political theorists of secessionism are inclined to begin their theories with territorial concerns (Young 2008, 42). It seems as though that there is no sovereign action of self-determination without territorial concerns. However, this is not necessarily the case—but what would self-determination mean without territorial logic? For the rest of this discussion, I refer to Iris Young's understanding of self-determination to defend Yeh's theory. I argue that since the *concept* of self-determination has been 'contaminated' by political theorists and the practices of international law, it should be abandoned. Still, I contend that the *spirit* of self-determination is something that we should recover and cherish. My intention here is to elaborate, from an Arendtian perspective, on the original meaning of action *qua* people by reading Young's theory and comparing it with Yeh's.

As Young puts it, 'peoples can be self-determining only if the relations in which they stand to others are *non-dominating*' (Young 2008, 40, my emphases). Here, Young draws on Philip Pettit's concept of non-domination: liberty means that no one is under the arbitrary power of others, and vice versa; hence, one is not only *free from* arbitrary violations of their liberty but also *free to* act towards the maintenance of a non-dominating power relationship through their participation in it (Pettit 1997). Young's self-determining action means to uphold people's liberty to act *freely among* other peoples, that is, autonomy in relation to other peoples around the globe. Without such action, people's autonomy and the non-dominating power relationship are lost (Young 2000, 255–260; 2008, 49–53). Young stresses the importance of relational autonomy among peoples, meaning that self-determining actions are inevitably relational and that such actions are meant to prevent arbitrary domination over them.¹³ Such domination is an injustice, as it results in people suffering a 'lack of participation in determining one's actions and the conditions of one's actions' (Young 2011, 258).¹⁴ The spirit of self-determination lies

¹³ This point, I think, corresponds to Stilz's Kantian criterion of action, which I addressed previously.

¹⁴ As noted earlier, Stilz is aware of the problem of excluding persons from the political institution that rules them. She refers to it as the problem of alienation—as an injustice that diminishes an individual's political autonomy. However, in contrast to Stilz, Young seems to stand more on the side of the people rather than the individual person when justifying

in the people's action by which the people preserves its autonomy and prevents injustice as domination.

Nevertheless, Young's reading of the spirit of self-determination still seems to be limited or narrow in a sense. As with the problem that Buchanan's theory brings to Yeh, it is unsatisfactory to say that people's actions primarily serve to prevent or diminish domination as injustice (Young 2000, 265; 2008, 56–57). If the preceding dynamic is unsatisfactory, then the right to self-determination is, again, nothing more than a remedy to injustice. In addition to this negative sense of the spirit, however, there is supposed to be a positive sense—one that acknowledges the inevitable relationality among peoples around the world. If peoples, in Young's idea of relationality, are always in relation with one another and condition their actions within this dynamic, then Young seems to overlook this positive aspect of relationality. Moreover, even if Young has not neglected this aspect of relationality, her idea of the spirit of self-determination is still insufficient from an Arendtian perspective. In Yeh's Arendtian reading of the people, to act means to create or bring something new into the world, which is something that Young (arguably) overlooks. Therefore, for Yeh's narrative community, the full spirit of (or more precisely, the genuine right to) self-determination means acting *à la* people and creating relations with other peoples around the world. It is in this sense that Young's idea of self-determination *à la* relationality is complete.

However, the international challenges persists: how much room is there in the international public space for Yeh's narrative community *to act freely par excellence* without acting on the existing territorial logic of sovereignty? The challenge here is that the community must either act on the role and the storyline that has already been assigned by the existing storytellers, that is, the permanent members of the UN Security Council, to make its action effective while diminishing its own story, or act on the Arendtian principle of storytelling and hold to its own story, sacrificing the effectiveness of its action. Effectiveness here means the extent to which other peoples can understand the Taiwanese people's story. Yeh's dilemma, if there is one, comes from the fact that he must consider the existing international storylines when developing the persuasiveness of the community's story; otherwise, the international public will not understand the story without significant cuts to its openness, plurality and creativity for the sake of persuasiveness.

the notion that exclusion is injustice. Moreover, Young seems to underscore the *political* importance of non-dominant liberty rather than the *moral* significance of an individual's autonomy as an interest. For these reasons, Yeh's theory aligns more closely with Young than Stilz, though not without tension with Young.

7 Conclusion: Limitations of the Narrative Community?

The article sought to defend Professor Hao Yeh's Arendtian theory of the narrative community by challenging his theory with political theories of self-determination and existing practices of international law. It argued that these challenges constitute the international limitations of the narrative community and that Yeh must offer a response to them. On the theoretical level, the limitations lie in the fact that theories of self-determination appear to be unhelpful when it comes to the formation of the community's story. The limitations are threefold. Firstly, self-determination is circumscribed not as a right but as restitution for peoples that claim victimhood. Secondly, it is confined to the demand for recognition by a people's essential identity. Thirdly, it is reduced to individual interests with moral importance rather than people's actions with political significance. Notably, Yeh is unable to provide a satisfactory alternative to these theories. In fact, he seems to endorse them on account of their ability to provide potential storylines for the narrative community. I contend that this cannot be the case from an Arendtian perspective of politics rooted in Arendt's idea of the people. On the practical level in the sphere of international law, Yeh faces even more challenges than he recognises. Here, the limitations are twofold. Firstly, China (or to be precise, the PRC), as one of the main 'storytellers' of the existing international story, which is one story about international peace, order and stability among sovereign states since 1945, will suffocate any storyteller that tells a story that goes against its plot (e.g. the Chinese dream). The second limitation comes from the existing international law on the right to self-determination. On the one hand, the scope of the subjects of self-determination is confined to the past European colonies, only later being extended to indigenous peoples. On the other hand, the means of self-determination are restricted to those with claims to an autonomous status within a state. Self-determination to be independent is solely reserved for the former colonies and territories under alien control, indicating that the right to independence will be questioned by international society unless those seeking it play the role of a victim. However, as there is no supreme authority that can decide and judge the extent to which any given situation has come to constitute injustice against the people, the threshold of the right to independence is too high to pass, if not impossible. *Pace* Yeh, he still owes us a response explaining how his theory of narrative synchronicity can deal with the *différence* between the story of a community and the existing one of international society. I attempted to craft such a response for him by exploring Iris Young's political thought and arguing that the spirit of self-determination may be the answer for Yeh. However, I am uncertain in this argument due to the limitations set forth by international law. Ulti-

mately, what this article can contribute is the delineation of challenges posed to Professor Yeh—and I expect that he can respond to them better than I can.

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