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The Spirit of Heqin: The Traditional Cultural Foundation of China's "Closeness-Sincerity" Diplomatic Philosophy

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Abstract: At a time when unilateralism is spreading and global challenges are intensifying, China's traditional spirit of Heqin, refined through the "Two Integrations," has evolved into the new-era diplomatic philosophy of "Closeness-Sincerity" infusing international relations with Eastern wisdom. From ancient inter-ethnic kinship-based political practices—such as the Han-Xiongnu "Fraternal Heqin" and the Tang-Tibetan "nephew-uncle Heqin"—to contemporary diplomatic frameworks like "Genuine commitment, Real results, Closeness and Sincerity" and "Closeness, Sincerity, Mutual benefit, and Inclusiveness" a civilizational path of engagement characterized by emotional bonds, peaceful foundations, and win-win outcomes has endured for millennia. Core values embedded in the Heqin spirit—including "harmony as the highest good," "inclusive coexistence," "emotionally empowered relations," and "one global family"—have undergone creative transformation to become the intellectual bedrock of Closeness-Sincerity diplomacy. General Secretary Xi Jinping's advocacy—"treat each other like relatives, visiting often"—transcends traditional limitations and firmly embeds the ancient maxim "state-to-state relations thrive on people-to-people affinity" into diplomatic practice. Promoting the Heqin spirit and advancing "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomacy is pivotal for China to enhance its international discourse power, bridge civilizational divides, foster consensus on global governance, and provide enduring momentum toward building a community with a shared future for humanity—thereby highlighting the timeless value of peace and development.

Keywords: Heqin; Heqin spirit; Closeness-Sincerity diplomatic philosophy ; Major-country diplomacy

1. Introduction

The world today is undergoing unprecedented transformations unseen in a century, and human society faces challenges of historic proportions. In the political sphere, differences among nations in political systems, ideologies, and governance models—once regarded as manifestations of global diversity—are now being exploited by certain countries as pretexts for confrontation. Unilateralism and hegemonism are on the rise; some nations routinely disregard multilateral mechanisms and

international cooperation, frequently resorting to sanctions and coercive measures to interfere in the internal affairs of others, thereby severely undermining the coordination and stability of international relations. Economically, global development imbalances remain pronounced. Persistent disagreements continue between developed and developing countries over resource allocation, trade rule-making, and related issues. Protectionist sentiments are spreading, with ever-increasing tariff and non-tariff barriers not only obstructing the liberalization of global trade but also placing immense strain on global industrial and supply chains, thereby weakening the momentum for global economic recovery. In the cultural domain, the specter of the "clash of civilizations" lingers. Insufficient ²mutual understanding and respect among different civilizations often give rise to prejudice and misunderstanding, triggering friction between nations and eroding the popular foundations of international relations. Regarding environmental and resource issues, ⁴⁵global challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity urgently demand collective action. However, divergent national development stages and conflicting interests make ²it difficult to reach consensus on burden-sharing and financial commitments, further complicating the landscape of international relations.

In the face of these challenges, the limitations of traditional international relations (IR) theories have become increasingly evident. For a long time, Western IR theories—centered on logics such as "zero-sum games" and "hegemonic stability"—have adhered to a binary, oppositional mindset, making them ill-equipped to explain today's reality of deep interdependence and even less capable of reflecting the interests and aspirations ²³of China and the broader community of developing countries. Meanwhile, through its active participation in global governance, ³⁸promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, and facilitation of regional cooperation, China ³⁸has accumulated rich practical experience and developed distinctive diplomatic wisdom. These achievements urgently call for theoretical innovation to systematize and elevate them into coherent frameworks.

⁴⁴Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars—drawing upon China's fine traditional culture—have undertaken fruitful explorations in IR theory, producing a series of theoretical contributions with distinct Chinese characteristics: Qin Yaqing's (2012) relational theory transcends the Western ontological framework centered on "political entities," advocating instead a relational ontology; Yan Xuetong's (2014) moral realism emphasizes the role of ethical considerations in great-power competition; Zhao Tingyang's (2011) tianxia (All-Under-Heaven) system revives the traditional ideal of "the world as public good"; Jin Yingzhong's (2011) theory of international symbiosis and Yu Xiaofeng's (2019) harmony-with-difference approach both highlight the civilizational wisdom embedded in the principle of "harmony in diversity." Collectively, these theoretical endeavors constitute the Chinese School of international relations, enriching the global IR knowledge system and providing vital theoretical support for China's major-country diplomacy with distinctive characteristics.

At the same time, these theories still have room for further improvement. Most of the existing achievements focus on the ultimate vision of an ideal state of international relations, belonging to

macro theories; however, in terms of middle-range theories, there needs to be deeper development in specific institutional designs and detailed practical paths. For example, how can the inclusive international order advocated by the Tianxia system theory be transformed into operational international mechanisms? How can the "relation-centric" and "relation governance" emphasized by relational theory connect with the interaction patterns in modern international relations? In the complex and ever-changing international environment, how can the goal of "harmony" pursued by coexistentialism be achieved? And how can effective safeguard mechanisms be constructed for the "pluralistic coexistence" advocated by symbiosis theory?

Answering these questions requires us to further delve into China's excellent traditional culture, especially the contemporary value of China's traditional ways of interaction. Historically, various Chinese ethnic groups frequently formed and maintained long-term Heqin, achieving a unified multi-ethnic pattern through the connection and cohesion of kinship networks, with all ethnic groups living in peace and friendship, united as one. Despite periods of ethnic conflict and even war, each group strived to resolve disputes and alleviate conflicts through Heqin, turning swords into ploughshares. This is a core expression of China's traditional way of interaction, a historical practice of the Chinese nation pursuing peace, and a concentrated embodiment of the peaceful nature of Chinese civilization. It was within this historical practice that a strong tradition of Heqin was formed, giving birth to a profound spirit of Heqin.

This traditional spirit can offer historical insights and unique enlightenment for building a new type of international relations, infuse human warmth into the reform of the global governance system, and steer it toward greater fairness, rationality, inclusiveness and mutual benefit. The concepts of "governing the world through empathy (以情治世)" and "fostering harmony via kinship (以親致和)" embodied in the peace-making alliance spirit provide a flexible approach to addressing prevalent challenges in the international community, such as the trust deficit, stagnant cooperation and governance failures. Fundamental shifts are underway in contemporary research on world politics and international relations, marked by an emotional turn (Emma Hutchison & Roland Bleiker, 2014). Emotion is increasingly regarded as a core element of global politics: it underpins political processes and constitutes politics in its own right. Furthermore, scholars recognize that the political nature of emotion and its significance to international relations lie in its communal dimension — the emotional bonds between individuals and their communities (Simon Koschut, 2020). Some scholars even explicitly argue that "international relations are essentially emotional relations" (Jean-Michel Roy, 2016). This emotional perspective aligns closely with the philosophies and logic of "governing through empathy" and "achieving harmony via kinship" inherent in ancient China's peace-making alliance practices. It reveals that a truly stable international order relies not only on institutional constraints and power balance, but also on emotional bonds, relationship cultivation and value consensus. Only international relations imbued with human warmth can achieve enduring stability. The creative transformation of the peace-making alliance spirit into diplomatic practice will facilitate the development of a new model of major-country relations rooted in respect, understanding and

responsibility, and drive the global governance system to evolve from a rule-dominated model toward relational coexistence.

¹⁰ Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the CPC Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi Jinping at its core, has creatively put forward the diplomatic principles of "Genuine commitment, Real results, Closeness and Sincerity" and "Closeness, Sincerity, Mutual benefit, and Inclusiveness." These principles constitute a crucial component of China's major-country diplomacy with distinctive characteristics in the new era. The Central Committee has actively implemented these principles and achieved notable results—representing a key practice in China's participation in global governance and its efforts to build a community with a shared future for humanity.

The "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomatic concept embodies a creative transformation and innovative development of China's traditional spirit of Heqin. It represents a theoretical synthesis that integrates Marxist theories of international relations with China's fine traditional culture. Furthermore, this concept incorporates diverse perspectives from the Chinese school of contemporary international relations theory, serving as an integrative framework that unifies various China-specific theories of international relations.

⁹ The Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as the 15th Five-Year Plan), issued in mid-March 2026, clearly stipulates that we shall implement the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative and the Global Governance Initiative, actively advance major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, and contribute China's efforts to building a community with a shared future for mankind (Outline of the 15th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China, 2026). To this end, we will continue to uphold the principle of "Two Combinations" and vigorously pursue theoretical innovation and practical exploration in diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Focusing on the internal connection between the diplomatic philosophy of amity, sincerity and goodwill and the traditional spirit of peaceful reconciliation through amicable relations, this paper analyzes the main forms of their transformation and evolution. On this basis, it further explores feasible approaches to advancing diplomacy featuring amity, sincerity and goodwill. It aims to enrich, expand and improve the theories of international relations with Chinese characteristics, refine and develop the corresponding knowledge system, and offer Chinese wisdom and solutions for global governance and the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

2.The Profound Connotations of the Traditional Spirit of Heqin

Throughout Chinese history, not only has there been a rich body of thought concerning Heqin ,

but also a continuous tradition of Heqin spanning ³²thousands of years. From the pre-Qin period through the Ming and Qing dynasties, Heqin served as a crucial means for ancient China to coordinate relations among different political entities, improve inter-ethnic relations, and foster a more harmonious international order. As this tradition evolved, it gave rise to the "Spirit of Heqin," which embodies profound connotations. This spirit can be explored from the following perspectives:

2.1 Core Essence: The Peace-Oriented Principle of Valuing "Harmony"

Heqin is, in essence, a political strategy whereby different political entities establish one or more forms of kinship—or kinship-like—relationships to transform their political ties into familial ones, thereby easing tensions or fostering mutual relations (Liu Xingcheng, 2017). Clearly, Heqin reconstructs political relationships through kinship-based mechanisms, resolving conflicts and maintaining inter-state peace without resorting to warfare. It represents a creative and concentrated embodiment of traditional Chinese values such as "harmony is most precious (以和為貴)," "true martial prowess lie in stopping war (止戈為武)," "harmonizing all nations (協和萬邦)," and "cherishing benevolence and treating neighbors with kindness (親仁善鄰)."

Unlike the confrontational logic of military conquest or coercive domination, Heqin follows a path of gentle communication and trust-building: by forging and sustaining kinship or kinship-like bonds among core members—including family members—of different political entities, it transforms originally antagonistic, distant, or even hostile political relationships into emotional and interest-based communities imbued with familial attributes. This approach is further reinforced by complementary measures such as mutual trade, tribute exchanges, and cultural interactions, which together establish comprehensive, institutionalized channels of trust between diverse ethnic groups and regimes, ultimately achieving stable, peaceful, and friendly relations.

For example, after Emperor Gaozu of Han and Modu Chanyu of the Xiongnu "swore brotherhood to seal their Heqin" (Ban Gu, 1964, p. 3754), both sides ceased hostilities and achieved peace, eventually reaching a state where "the peoples of the two states became like one family" (Ban Gu, 1964, p. 3763)—a peaceful relationship that lasted for over half a century. Similarly, in 1005 CE, ¹²the Song and Liao dynasties concluded the Treaty of Chanyuan, under which Emperor Zhenzong of Song and Emperor Shengzong of Liao pledged fraternal Heqin ties, leading to nearly a century of sustained peace and amity. Sima Guang once remarked: "Ever since our state entered into a sworn brotherhood with the Khitan... for fifty-six years since the Heqin agreement, the common people have enjoyed peace and prosperity" (Li Tao, 1995, p. 4796).

Clearly, the core essence of the Heqin spirit lies in "valuing harmony above all," adhering to the principle of prioritizing peace, and utilizing the construction and maintenance of kinship-based political ties to halt warfare, eliminate the risk of conflict, and realize enduring peace and friendship among distinct political entities.

2.2 Value Orientation: Inclusive Coexistence of Diversity in Unity

The pattern of diversity in unity and inclusive coexistence among the Chinese ethnic groups is an inevitable outcome of continuous interactions and integrations throughout history, bound by a network of kinship political relationships. This kinship political bond encompasses not only inter-ethnic marriages during tribal alliance periods but also measures such as ethnic Heqin within the governance of dynasties, closely tying the interests and emotions of different political entities or ethnic groups. It lays a solid foundation of kinship sentiment for the formation of a diverse yet unified pattern of the Chinese nation. Looking back at history, despite wars and disputes among various ethnic groups within China, these conflicts never aimed at enslaving or annihilating other nations. Fundamentally, they were processes exploring more suitable models of coexistence. Unlike conquests characterized by plundering, the outcomes of ethnic conflicts on Chinese soil often reconstructed a multi-ethnic coexistence order modeled after family or clan structures - either becoming sworn brothers, father-son analogies, establishing political marriages, or confirming lord-minister statuses, gradually achieving a harmonious situation akin to "one global family". From the diplomatic interactions between Han and Xiongnu, agreeing to be like brothers, to the Tang-Tubo era's close relations described as "being one family" (Liu Xu et al., 1975, p. 5231), all exemplify the wisdom of governance that incorporates ethnic relations into a "large family" framework. Such governance logic views different ethnic groups as family members connected by blood, maintaining a symbiotic order through a hierarchical governance system, vividly practicing the spirit of Heqin in the field of ethnic governance. The Heqin is far from being merely a political tool of kinship; it carries a cultural core of "cherishing benevolence and being good neighbors". By means of kinship connections and cultural mutual learning, it resolves ethnic estrangements and consolidates consensus for coexistence. From the Han-Xiongnu Heqin promoting the mixed habitation of the two peoples to Princess Wencheng's entry into Tibet promoting Han-Tibetan cultural exchanges and mutual learning, the concepts of inclusiveness, consultation, and coexistence embodied in the spirit of Heqin have profoundly shaped the practices and wisdom of ethnic governance across Chinese dynasties. It is precisely because of this that Chinese ethnic groups, over thousands of years of historical changes, have always maintained an overall pattern of "diversity in unity", which is the key code for the continuous growth and prosperity of the Chinese nation.

2.3 Emotional Dimensions: Endowing Social Relationships with Emotional Connotations

One of the most central and unique connotations of the Heqin spirit lies in endowing interactions among ethnic groups, inter-state relations, and various other social relationships with a sincere emotional core. This emotional connection strengthens the foundation of political alliances and interest ties, making social relations among diverse actors more stable and sustainably vibrant. Within the framework of traditional societal interactions, relationships between ethnic groups and states often leaned towards utilitarian gamesmanship, sometimes even harboring adversarial tensions. However,

the kinship-based political relationships constructed through Heqin precisely inject warmth into these cold political interactions by using familial affection, warmth, and responsibility as bonds, ultimately achieving governance effects of "uniting hearts with emotion" and "cultivating good neighborliness with emotion". Through establishing concrete kinship identities such as "brothers," "father-son," "father-in-law and son-in-law," and "maternal uncle and nephew," both sides of the Heqin break down long-standing psychological barriers and inherent suspicions among different ethnic groups. Beyond mere political interests, they build an emotional recognition and psychological resonance that transcends utilitarian levels. This emotional connotation is far from superficial courtesy or fictitious ritual adornment; it is indeed a core force driving the reconstruction of social relationships. The establishment of Heqin is not merely a simple ceremonial statement; both parties must formally establish kinship relations according to prescribed rituals, clearly defining each party's kinship status and corresponding responsibilities. Moreover, these agreements are strictly adhered to during subsequent long-term interactions. For instance, after the establishment of brotherly Heqin relations between Song and Liao, not only were communications referred to in terms of brotherhood, but gifts, condolences, and celebrations were exchanged on important holidays, significant events, and even birthdays. Under this stable kinship-based political framework, both sides gradually develop a strong sense of family and kinship emotions, which is one of ⁴⁶the core significances of the consciousness of the Chinese nation community. Essentially, Heqin transforms originally utilitarian social relationships into kinship and emotionally bonded communities by actively constructing and continuously maintaining emotional connections. It not only resolves oppositional tensions among diverse actors but also provides a solid and genuine emotional foundation for coordinating and optimizing social relationships, serving as an important spiritual link for maintaining a diversified yet unified pattern in traditional societies.

2.4 The Ideal of Order: A Community Consciousness of the World as a Common Public Good

The profound ultimate pursuit of the traditional spirit of Heqin was to construct a unified order of "one world family" and "all seas return to one," a pursuit that deeply aligns with ancient China's view of the world, which states "under the whole sky there is ⁴³no land that is not the king's territory; within ²¹the borders, none are not the king's subjects" (Wang Xiumei, 2015, p. 219). In this worldview, the "Son of Heaven" was not only the ruler of the Central Plains but also the common sovereign of all ethnic groups under the heavens. Heqin was not simply a policy of appeasement; its ultimate goal was to transcend ethnic and political boundaries through dual ties of kinship politicization and emotional connection, achieving the ultimate political ideal of "all barbarians submitting, peace in the world," and "prosperity within the sea, tranquility for all beings." This unified order did not rely on an oppressive order formed by military might but was based on three foundations: moral transformation and gentleness, mutual benefit and reciprocity, and emotional identification—an inclusive order. The Central Plains dynasty displayed a benevolent posture of winning people over with virtue through Heqin, extending goodwill to bordering nations; these nations, through kinship connections with the

Central Plains dynasty, gained political recognition and developmental resources, thus willingly integrating into the unified system. Ultimately, it formed a prototype of the "Chinese nation community," centered around cultural and emotional identification, supported by common interests.

For instance, during the Tang Dynasty, marriages with Tubo (Tibet) involving Princess Wencheng and Princess Jincheng established not just a political kinship relationship of "uncle-nephew alliance" but also deepened cultural and emotional identifications. Tubo voluntarily learned Central Plains culture and recognized the latter's position as the "common sovereign of the world"; over time, both sides gradually integrated into the same civilization system. The order concept pursued by Heqin transcends modern notions of national sovereignty, embodying a consciousness of "a shared destiny" connected by common interests, emotional bonds, and cultural identification, providing strong spiritual support for consolidating and developing the unified pattern of ancient China.

It is important to objectively note that as a product of the feudal era, the traditional spirit of Heqin inevitably has historical limitations: first, it often depended on the centralized system of feudal dynasties, serving the political interests of the ruling class, with the main participants being upper-class rulers, offering fewer opportunities for ordinary people to engage in Heqin; second, some practices of Heqin had tendencies to reinforce hierarchical orders of "Han superiority and barbarian inferiority" through "kinship relations," viewing Heqin as a "benevolence" bestowed by the Central Plains dynasty upon bordering nations, weakening equality between both sides; third, the maintenance of peaceful conditions through Heqin was somewhat fragile, easily disrupted when conflicts arose or power changed hands among the ruling classes. However, stripping away its feudal exterior, the innovative thinking of "kinship politicization" contained within the spirit of Heqin, along with core connotations of prioritizing peace, inclusivity and coexistence, emotional empowerment, and mutual benefit, possess universal values that transcend eras. These connotations are not only significant components of China's excellent traditional culture but also provide crucial traditional cultural resources and historical insights for constructing trust systems in contemporary international relations, advancing cross-cultural exchanges, fostering coexistence and development of diverse civilizations, and maintaining unity and stability in ethnic regions.

3.The "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomatic philosophy represents a ⁷creative transformation and innovative development of the traditional Heqin concept.

3.1 Creative Transformation of the Traditional Heqin Spirit in the "Closeness-Sincerity" Diplomatic Philosophy

The contemporary Chinese diplomatic philosophy of "Closeness-Sincerity" is by no means a simplistic inheritance or superficial borrowing from the traditional Heqin spirit. Instead, grounded in core principles of modern international relations—such as sovereign equality and multilateral governance—it systematically reconstructs traditional ideas by stripping away their feudal, hierarchical, and instrumental characteristics. This process achieves a modern elevation of China's

traditional diplomatic wisdom. Such creative transformation does not sever historical continuity; rather, it preserves tradition through critical refinement and empowers it through reconstruction, thereby aligning the reasonable emotional essence of the traditional Heqin spirit precisely with the diplomatic demands of the new era.

3.1.1 From "Kinship Community" to "Community with a Shared Future": The Modern Expansion of Its Connotation

In traditional Heqin systems, the concept of "kinship" ("qin") was primarily embodied through blood ties among ruling elites of different political entities. Fundamentally, this represented an extension of the feudal patriarchal clan system into the realm of diplomacy. Given that the patriarchal clan system itself featured an inherent hierarchical structure, such kinship-based political relations naturally carried a hierarchical and differential character: Central Plain dynasties typically positioned themselves as the "Celestial Empire" or "suzerain state," regarding their Heqin partners as "vassals" or "distant states." Consequently, the establishment and maintenance of these kinship ties often functioned as a top-down appeasement strategy. For instance, in Han-Xiongnu and Tang-Tibetan Heqin arrangements, the ultimate purpose of constructing such kinship-based political relations was to sustain the feudal tributary order characterized by a "center-periphery" hierarchy.

In contrast, the notion of "qin" in China's contemporary "Closeness, Sincerity, Mutual benefit, and Inclusiveness" diplomatic philosophy fundamentally transcends the dual constraints of biological kinship and social status, evolving instead into what can be termed "destiny-based kinship" within the framework of a community with a shared future for humanity. The core logic of this new form of kinship is "equality and coexistence": it emphasizes that all states—regardless of size, strength, or wealth—possess equal international personhood and are equal members of the international community, with no hierarchical distinction between "center" and "periphery." The pathways to realizing this vision are also more diverse and multidimensional: they include high-level reciprocal visits and strategic dialogues—akin to "visiting relatives"—to build political trust; cultural exchange years and people-to-people interactions to foster mutual learning among civilizations; and cross-border railway projects and livelihood assistance programs to enhance practical connectivity. The ultimate goal is to forge a new type of state-to-state relationship characterized by "mutual respect as equals, solidarity in times of need, and shared destiny."

For example, bilateral cooperation mechanisms and regional platforms established between China and its neighboring countries have cultivated emotional resonance and a shared sense of destiny that transcend narrow geopolitical interests through sustained interaction and exchange. This has genuinely transformed the meaning of "qin" from "kinship-bound ties" to "people-to-people affinity." Recent initiatives—such as the "China-ASEAN Year of People-to-People Exchanges"—have served as catalysts to broaden humanistic exchanges among regional countries, promoting interactions in sports, think tanks, media, tourism, and other fields, thereby continuously strengthening the

foundation for mutual understanding, affinity, and enduring friendship (Wang Yi, 2023).

3.1.2 From "Strategic Means" to "Value-based Principles": An Essential Upgrade in Positioning

Looking back at history, traditional Heqins were more often a provisional strategy adopted by Central Plains dynasties to deal with border crises and alleviate military pressures, characterized distinctly by "instrumental rationality." In the logic of feudal dynasty diplomacy, whether to implement a Heqin and the choice of partners were mostly centered around the short-term political goals of the dynasty—when borders were stable and national strength was strong, Heqins were often put on hold; when borders were turbulent and national strength declined, Heqins became an important means of "subduing hardness with softness." ⁵² For example, in the early Western Han Dynasty, facing military threats from the Xiongnu, Liu Bang adopted Liu Jing's suggestion to establish a Heqin to secure border peace; during the reign of Emperor Wu, as national strength grew, the strategy shifted to military strikes, and the Heqin was temporarily interrupted. This characteristic of being "intermittent and changing with circumstances" determined that traditional Heqin could not become a stable and lasting diplomatic norm.

The concept of Closeness-Sincerity diplomacy completely breaks through the limitations of the instrumentality of traditional Heqin, elevating "closeness" and "sincerity" to core value principles of Chinese diplomacy, achieving an essential upgrade from "strategic choice" to "value adherence." These value-based principles possess great stability and consistency, running through China's interactions with all countries, undisturbed by differences in national systems, ideological divergences, or short-term interest games. Whether interacting with socialist countries, developing countries, or developed countries, China always uses "closeness" as an emotional bond and "sincerity" as a principle of conduct, adhering to commitments and valuing promises. For instance, in addressing global ³⁹ challenges such as climate change and fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, China has consistently upheld the concept of "Closeness-Sincerity," actively providing technical support and material aid to developing countries, fulfilling its commitment to jointly address risks and challenges, and fully demonstrating China's diplomatic value adherence and sense of responsibility (China International Studies Academy, 2023). This positioning as a "long-lasting path" rather than a "temporary policy" has won China's diplomacy broad international recognition and injected stability into the turbulent and transforming international community.

3.1.3 From "Regional Practice" to "Global Vision": A Breakthrough Expansion of Scope

Constrained by ancient transportation limitations, cognitive horizons, and state governance capacities, traditional Heqin diplomacy was historically confined to the "peripheral zones" of East and Central Asia. Its primary function was to serve ancient China's frontier governance and regional order-building. Within the feudal dynasties' worldview of "All-under-Heaven" (Tianxia), the reach of

Heqin extended outward in concentric circles—from the Central Plains dynasty to frontier tribes and neighboring states—reaching as far as the Western Regions and Tibet, yet generally remaining within the boundaries of the East Asian cultural sphere. The ultimate objective was to construct a "Tianxia order" ⁵⁴centered on the Central Plains dynasty, ensuring stability and peace along the frontiers—a quintessential example of regionally oriented diplomatic practice.

In the era of globalization, the "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomatic philosophy has fundamentally transcended the geographical constraints of traditional Heqin. Adopting a global perspective in strategic diplomatic planning, it represents a breakthrough expansion from "regional practice" to "global vision." The scope of Closeness-Sincerity diplomacy no longer focuses solely on neighboring countries but extends to all nations worldwide, with particular emphasis on deepening ⁴²cooperation with the broader community of developing countries. Guided by the principle of "pursuing the right approach to justice and interests" (Zhengyi Guanli Guan), it seeks to foster a global development paradigm characterized by solidarity, equality, balance, and inclusiveness (Xi Jinping, 2022). Its core aim is to dismantle the unequal "center-periphery" international order established since modern times and advance global governance toward greater fairness and reasonableness. From ⁴the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to the proposal of the Global Development Initiative; from forging "all-weather friendships" with African nations to building comprehensive strategic partnerships with Latin American countries—the practice of Closeness-Sincerity diplomacy now spans the globe, disseminating its core values to every corner of the world. This marks a qualitative leap in both strategic scope and vision compared to traditional Heqin diplomacy.

3.2 The Innovative Development of the Diplomatic Concept of Closeness-Sincerity towards the Traditional Spirit of Heqin

Based on a creative transformation of the traditional spirit of Heqin, the diplomatic concept of affinity and sincerity integrates China's new era foreign mission of ¹promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind," further endowing the traditional spirit of alliance with new contemporary connotations, practical paths, and value objectives. It realizes an innovative development from "traditional wisdom" to "modern solutions," providing Chinese thoughts and wisdom for global governance.

3.2.1 Enriching the Connotation of "Win-Win": From "Material Exchange" to "Common Development"

The mutual benefit embodied in traditional alliances mainly remained at a low-level "material exchange" and "frontier stability maintenance." In ancient practices of Heqin, the Central Plains dynasty exchanged silk, grain, tea, and other materials for horses, furs, and other specialties from frontier tribes while gaining temporary peace in frontier regions; the targets of these alliances gained political recognition and material support from the Central Plains dynasty by constructing and maintaining kinship-political relationships, achieving their own stable development. This mutually

beneficial relationship had obvious limitations: on one hand, the areas of cooperation were singular, focusing primarily on material exchanges and political alliances; on the other hand, the scope of benefits was narrow, benefiting mostly the ruling class, with ordinary people hardly enjoying the tangible benefits brought about by such alliances.

The diplomatic concept of affinity and sincerity elevates the connotation of "win-win" to the strategic height of "common development," breaking through the limitations of traditional mutual benefit models and establishing a comprehensive, multi-level, and universally beneficial win-win pattern. With the ²⁰ "Belt and Road" initiative and the Global Development Initiative as core practical platforms, it transforms concepts like "Genuine commitment, Real results, Closeness and Sincerity" and "Closeness, Sincerity, Mutual benefit, and Inclusiveness" into specific cooperative projects, promoting infrastructure connectivity, upgrading industrial cooperation, and making livelihood projects widely beneficial and shared. For instance, the completion and operation of the China-Laos Railway not only opened up land routes between China and Southeast Asia but also boosted economic development and improved living standards along the route; agricultural cooperation projects between China and African countries have helped African nations increase food production and alleviate food security issues (White Book on International Development Cooperation in the New Era, 2021). This "win-win" situation is no longer a partial, short-term interest exchange but a vision of development where "each appreciates its own beauty, and together we appreciate the beauty of all," allowing the fruits of cooperation to truly benefit more countries and peoples, realizing an upgrade from "material exchange" to "mutually promoted development".

3.2.2 Strengthening the Foundation of "Equality": From "Winning Over Distant People" to "Mutual Respect"

In the deep logic of traditional Heqin spirit, there has always been an implied sense of cultural superiority and hierarchical concept of the Central Plains Dynasty. The Central Plains Dynasty viewed Heqin as a means of "winning over distant people" and "subduing others by virtue", believing that through the provision of goods and the export of culture, it could make "barbarian states" submit to the civilization system of the "Celestial Empire". This mindset was particularly evident in Heqin documents and exchanges of envoys - the edicts of the Central Plains Dynasty were often phrased with tones like "following the mandate of heaven" and "graciously permitting Heqin", regarding Heqin as a "bestowal" to border tribes, which in turn needed to "acknowledge allegiance and pay tribute" in return. Essentially, this logic of "winning over distant people" is an extension of the feudal hierarchy into international relations, fundamentally incompatible with the modern principle of equality in international relations.

The diplomatic philosophy of sincerity and integrity completely abandons the hierarchical concepts in traditional Heqin, taking "mutual respect" as the core foundation of state interactions, truly implementing the principles of democratization in international relations. China explicitly proposes

that mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs are prerequisites for state interaction, affirming that all countries, regardless of size, strength, or wealth, have the right to independently choose their development path without external interference. In diplomatic practice, China consistently respects the history, culture, social systems, and development paths of all countries, not imposing its own development model on others; in international affairs, China adheres to multilateralism, advocating resolving differences through consultation and dialogue, opposing hegemonism and power politics. For example, in cooperation with developing countries, China always upholds the principle of "no political strings attached, no interference in the internal affairs of other countries", providing assistance within its capacity to developing countries; in addressing regional hotspot issues, China maintains an objective and fair position, promoting resolution of disputes through dialogue and consultations (Xi Jinping, 2018). Such diplomatic practices of "mutual respect" thoroughly break the hierarchical logic of traditional "winning over distant people", laying a solid foundation for building new types of international relations characterized by equal treatment.

3.2.3 Expanding the Dimension of "Peace": From "Conflict Resolution" to "Joint Order Building"

The core objective of traditional Heqin was to "resolve immediate conflicts and maintain short-term peace," characterized distinctly by a feature of "passively maintaining stability." In ancient societies, ethnic tensions and military conflicts frequently occurred in frontier regions, with central dynasties and border tribes often alternating between states of "war and peace." As a non-military strategy, Heqin function by establishing kinship-based political ties to ease tensions and shift relations between parties from a "state of war" toward "peaceful coexistence." However, such peace is often fragile and short-lived—once the balance of power shifts or core interests clash, the peaceful arrangement tends to collapse. For instance, during the period of Heqin between Han and Xiongnu, military conflicts still occurred multiple times, with the peace maintained by these alliances always remaining in a "wavering" state. Therefore, the "peace" dimension of traditional Heqin remained at the level of "passively resolving conflicts," unable to achieve long-term stable peace.

On the basis of inheriting the "peace gene" of traditional Heqin, the diplomatic concept of Closeness-Sincerity further expands the dimension of "peace," achieving a sublimation from "conflict resolution" to "joint order building" and a shift from "passive stability maintenance" to "active order construction." This diplomacy integrates "peace" with dimensions such as "development," "security," and "civilization," proposing the long-term goal of building a community with a shared future for mankind, advocating for resolving international disputes through multilateralism and dialogue consultations, and promoting global security initiatives, global development initiatives, and global civilization initiatives. This "peace" is no longer simply a "state without war," but rather an "active peace"—by promoting reform of global governance systems to construct a fair and reasonable international order; strengthening international cooperation to jointly address global challenges such

as terrorism, climate change, and public health; and promoting mutual learning among civilizations to eliminate cultural estrangement and conflict (Xi Jinping, 2022). For example, China's promotion of the "peace process" in the Middle East region, and active emission reduction commitments in the field of climate change, all embody the core logic of "actively shaping peace and jointly building international order" under the diplomacy of Closeness-Sincerity, leading the connotation of "peace" from "short-term stability maintenance" towards "long-term order construction," providing new paths for realizing lasting peace and development for humanity.

4.Promote the spirit of traditional diplomacy of Heqin and vigorously advance "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomacy

Based on the core connotation of the amicable spirit and combining it with the contemporary diplomatic concept of amicable sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness, targeted practical measures can be proposed from the following four dimensions to achieve an effective connection between traditional wisdom and modern diplomacy:

4.1 Anchor the core of "peace first" and build a multi-subject peace consultation mechanism

Inheriting the peace appeals of the amicable policy such as "stopping war for martial valor, harmonizing myriad states", deeply integrating the concept of "non-confrontational communication" into the practice of amicable sincerity diplomacy, building a multi-dimensional, all-encompassing peace consultation and communication mechanism. On one hand, establish multi-level bilateral/multilateral peace consultation platforms, resolutely abandon zero-sum game and hegemonic bullying thinking towards international disputes and regional conflicts, actively promote all parties to replace military threats and confrontations with dialogue negotiations, interest coordination, third-party mediation, and other flexible methods. Drawing on the idea of "courtesy before alliance", "communication before cooperation" during the era of amicable policies, through signing peace agreements, establishing dispute early warning mechanisms, setting up regular consultation hotlines, etc., to lay a solid institutional foundation for peaceful development; simultaneously, practicing the concept of "being friendly, securing, and enriching neighbors" in neighborhood diplomacy, adhering to the principle of "shelving disputes and jointly developing" on sensitive issues such as territorial disputes and resource allocation, promoting the establishment of win-win cooperation mechanisms, resolving differences, and building consensus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Shelving Disputes, Jointly Developing"). On the other hand, expand channels for civil peace exchanges, give full play to the bridging role of diverse entities such as non-governmental organizations, think tanks, enterprises, academic institutions, conduct transnational peace forums, people-to-people friendly visits, academic exchange seminars, etc., like sending envoys during the era of amicable policies to convey goodwill, building regular people-to-people communication bridges; at the same time, increase support for people-to-people friendship organizations, encourage transnational

public welfare cooperation, peace education, and publicity activities, let the concept of peace penetrate deep into the hearts of the people, cultivate a popular consensus of "opposing war, advocating peace", injecting lasting people-to-people power into the long-term stability of state-to-state relations.

4.2 Advancing Cross-Civilizational Exchange and Mutual Learning through an Orientation of "Inclusive Coexistence"

Drawing on historical experiences—such as the use of Heqin and cultural exchanges to transcend the traditional "distinction between Chinese and non-Chinese" (Hua-Yi distinction) and foster reciprocal cultural understanding—we should promote inclusive and open interactions among diverse civilizations. This approach strengthens the cultural foundations and popular support for a foreign policy grounded in closeness, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness.

First, implement the "Civilizational Exchange and Mutual Learning Partnership Initiative." Tailored cultural exchange programs should be developed based on the unique cultural characteristics, historical traditions, and public needs of different countries (as outlined in the official announcement "'Global Civilizational Exchange and Mutual Learning Cooperation Research Program' Officially Launched"), thereby deepening mutual understanding between China and other nations. We must enhance international cultural ²⁴cooperation, innovate approaches to people-to-people exchanges, enrich the content of cultural interactions, and continuously ²⁶elevate the quality and impact of such exchanges (as stipulated in the 2017 "Opinions on Implementing the Project for Inheriting and Developing China's Fine Traditional Culture").

Second, strengthen practical cooperation in cultural fields by establishing long-term, stable transnational collaboration mechanisms in education, arts, sports, science, and technology. In education, promote joint degree programs between Chinese and foreign universities, student exchange initiatives, and co-established research centers to cultivate interdisciplinary talents equipped with both cross-cultural perspectives and professional expertise. In heritage conservation, collaborate with countries worldwide to establish joint cultural heritage protection bases, undertake cooperative projects in artifact restoration and archaeological excavations, and collectively safeguard humanity's shared civilizational treasures. In arts and sports, organize international art festivals, sporting events, and cultural performances that utilize artistic expression and athletic competition as bridges to overcome civilizational divides and cognitive biases, thereby fostering greater cultural affinity and emotional resonance among nations. Through these efforts, we aim to build a new paradigm of civilizational exchange—one where each civilization thrives in its own beauty, and together, they create a harmonious symphony of shared excellence ("each cherishes its own beauty, and all beauties flourish together").

4.3 Activate the Value of "Emotional Empowerment," Establish a Network of Emotional Bonds for People-to-People Connectivity

Continuing the historical wisdom of "managing politics and consolidating the state through emotions" as seen in Heqin, emotional bonds should be at the heart of people-to-people connectivity initiatives, deepening the popular foundation and societal bedrock of sincere diplomacy. Firstly, create a "warmth in livelihood cooperation brand," focusing on areas such as healthcare, education development, rural revitalization, and infrastructure construction that are of concern to the public in various countries. Implement targeted, inclusive projects for the benefit of the people: Drawing inspiration from the practices during historical Heqin where the Central Plains dynasties actively improved living conditions in surrounding ethnic regions, we will proactively offer medical and health assistance to developing countries, dispatching medical expert teams for free clinics, training local medical personnel, and aiding in the construction of hospitals and epidemic prevention facilities. In the field of education, donate teaching equipment, build Hope Schools, conduct teacher training, and help elevate local educational standards. In rural revitalization, share agricultural planting techniques, carry out livestock breeding training, aid in irrigation project constructions, and contribute to resolving food security issues, ensuring that the fruits of cooperation genuinely benefit ordinary citizens, thus establishing cross-border emotional resonance through concrete improvements in livelihood.

Secondly, expand channels for interpersonal emotional exchanges, building an all-round, normalized network of friendly civilian contacts: Promote transnational youth study tours, summer camps, cultural exchange camps, etc., enabling face-to-face interactions between Chinese and foreign youths, cultivating a new generation of civilian goodwill ambassadors; support mutual visits and cooperation among civilian associations, non-profit organizations, industry associations around common issues like environmental protection, charity, and public welfare, encouraging volunteers to engage in cross-border volunteer services to convey kindness and warmth. Meanwhile, make full use of new media platforms to create transnational cultural exchange IPs, using formats such as short videos, live streaming, and documentaries to tell stories of friendship between China and other countries, showcasing the local customs and sentiments of different nations, narrowing the psychological distance between peoples of different countries, and fostering a sense of emotional identification akin to being "one big family." This makes people-to-people connectivity a lasting driving force for advancing inter-state relations.

4.4 Implementing the ¹Ideal of "Community with a Shared Future" and Promoting Practices of Mutual Benefit and Win-Win Collaborative Development

Inheriting and promoting the ideal of harmonious world order characterized by "the world as one family," deeply integrating the concept of "a shared future" into diplomatic practices of "closeness, sincerity, benefits, and inclusiveness," and promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind through pragmatic cooperation. On one hand, deepening pragmatic cooperation in economic and trade development areas, with the core principle of "joint consultation, joint construction, and shared benefits." Relying on cooperation platforms such as the Belt and Road

Initiative, extensive collaborative efforts are carried out in infrastructure construction, trade investment, energy conservation and environmental protection, digital economy, and other fields: Drawing from the mutually beneficial and win-win model of "mutual market access and commerce" during harmonious periods, promoting the construction of cross-border economic cooperation zones and free trade pilot zones, lowering trade barriers, optimizing investment environments, and facilitating the free flow of goods, capital, technology, and personnel; In the field of infrastructure construction, focusing on promoting interconnectivity projects, aiding the construction of railways, highways, ports, power facilities, etc., breaking through development bottlenecks faced by developing countries; In the area of energy conservation and environmental protection, engaging in renewable energy cooperation, pollution control technology research and development, climate change response collaboration, achieving green and low-carbon development; Meanwhile, establishing benefit-sharing mechanisms, allowing more cooperative dividends to benefit the people of both sides through technology transfer, capacity cooperation, employment assistance, etc., realizing complementary advantages and common development among countries. On the other hand, strengthening synergy and collaboration in global governance areas, actively addressing global challenges such as climate change, public health security, food security, counter-terrorism, and stability maintenance, taking the initiative to assume responsibilities and act positively, and building efficient collaboration platforms with various countries: In reforming the global governance system, promoting the establishment of a fairer and more reasonable international order, enhancing the voice and representation of developing countries; In the field of public health, constructing a global epidemic prevention and control cooperation network, sharing epidemic prevention experiences, donating anti-epidemic supplies, jointly researching and developing vaccines, collectively safeguarding human health; In the domain of food security, carrying out agricultural technology cooperation, establishing emergency food reserve mechanisms, assisting in solving global food shortages; Through a series of practices characterized by "moral influence and mutual benefits," demonstrating the responsibility of a major country, promoting the construction of a fairer, more reasonable, inclusive, and beneficial global governance system, injecting strong impetus into the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

5. Conclusion

At a critical juncture of historical development, when unilateralism and division pose severe challenges, the spirit of Heqin from China's fine traditional culture, through creative transformation and innovative development via the "Two Combinations", has been refined into the new era's diplomatic concept of "Closeness-Sincerity". This injects warm and resilient wisdom with Eastern characteristics into an international society full of turmoil and change. From ancient brotherhood agreements between Han and Xiongnu, to kinship alliances between Tang and Tubo based on inter-ethnic kinship political relationships, up to today's diplomatic practices of "Genuine commitment, Real results, Closeness and Sincerity" and "Closeness, Sincerity, Mutual benefit, and Inclusiveness", a path of civilizational interaction characterized by emotional ties, peace as its keynote, and mutual benefit and win-win as goals, continues to thrive over millennia.

The core of kinship emotions, the essence of peace and friendship, and the function of regulating diverse relations embodied in the spirit of Heqin are not just legacies of historical value but have become the ideological foundation of the "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomatic concept after creative transformation. The "Closeness-Sincerity" concept advocated by General Secretary Xi Jinping, which promotes interactions akin to relatives who visit each other often, breaks through the class limitations and hierarchical concepts inherent in traditional kinship-based political practices. It deeply integrates the principle that "the bond between nations lies in the closeness between their peoples" into international relations practice, prompting state-to-state relations to shift from pure interest games towards emotionally rich connections. Diplomatic concepts and practices such as "China-Thailand being one family", "China-Vietnam comrades plus brothers", "China-Malaysia being close like family", "China-Africa Community with a Shared Future", and "China-Latin America Community with a Shared Future" vividly embody this style of diplomacy that mimics visiting relatives, confirming the enduring nourishing effect of emotion on maintaining and developing international relations.

The mutual promotion of theoretical innovation and practical exploration highlights the unique value of China's distinctive international relations theory. Theoretical innovation based on the "Two Combinations" not only overcomes the limitations of Western-centric international relations theories but also provides scientific guidance for diplomatic practices of Closeness-Sincerity; while the achievements of these diplomatic practices, such as the mutually beneficial and win-win pattern facilitated by the Belt and Road Initiative and the concrete advancement of the Global Civilization Initiative, continuously infuse vibrant energy into theoretical innovation. This complete loop from "traditional wisdom to theoretical innovation to practical testing" not only constructs a knowledge system of international relations with Chinese characteristics but also proclaims to the world a new path of development featuring coexistence and harmonious symbiosis among diverse civilizations.

Standing at a new historical starting point, promoting the traditional spirit of Heqin and advancing diplomatic practices of Closeness-Sincerity is both an inevitable requirement for China to enhance its international discourse power and a positive response and responsibility towards common concerns of all mankind. Only by using "closeness" as an emotional tie to lay a solid foundation and "sincerity" as a standard to consolidate mutual trust can we effectively transcend civilizational estrangement and resolve interest differences, seeking the greatest common divisor in global governance. Just as the spirit of Heqin once effectively promoted the integration and coexistence of multiple ethnic groups in ancient times, "Closeness-Sincerity" diplomacy will surely vigorously promote the construction of a community with a shared future for mankind, making the concept of peaceful development transcend time and space, illuminating the future, and composing more brilliant chapters in the starry sky of human civilization history.

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8 Author Contributions

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

All data, documents and reference materials involved in this research are publicly available. Readers can access and retrieve the relevant literature, historical records and research data through official websites, public databases, published academic works and open academic platforms. There are no confidential data or restricted materials in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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