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" A Non-world : Chinese Perceptions of the Western International Order."

Introduction

The 'liberal international order' and its core ideas, such as democracy, human rights or free trade have been encountering an increasing amount of challenges during the last decade. However, serious challenging models for the order have been lacking. During the Cold War – especially during the first decades after the Second World War – the rapid growth of the communist economies and their leading edge in space technology seemed to prove that Marxist-Leninist doctrine indeed provided a considerable alternative ideology and development model for the whole mankind. After its collapse, challenging powers have not been able to propose any viable alternatives for the current political order, that is, nation states with market economies and more or less democratic governments.

China, however, seems to be attempting to construct an alternative vision. Within China, the decline of the international order led by the Western countries and China's rise into its traditional position as the leading, 'central country' are seen as almost inevitable historical currents.¹ China's increasingly self-confident leadership centered around president Xi Jinping is arguing that there is, indeed, a unique 'Chinese path' which offers traditional Chinese values and institutions as solutions for our globally shared problems, and which is presented exactly as an alternative for 'Western ideas', such as liberal democracy or market economy.² Yan Xuetong, perhaps the most well-known Chinese scholar of international politics, has similarly argued that because China is the most relevant of the rising great powers, it will also stand as the most likely source for a new global ideology which will, in the long run, replace liberalism.³

The search for a 'Chinese path' can be found also within Chinese academic circles of international politics. Chinese scholars are increasingly arguing that international politics should not be studied relying only on Western theories of international relations, such as realism or liberalism, since they are based on Western historical experience and thus only on a narrow 'Western' conception of what international politics is and, more importantly, what it can be in the future.⁴

Instead, ancient Chinese political concepts and philosophies, such as Confucianism or Legalism, are being studied again. They are seen as offering ageless yet temporarily forgotten pieces of political wisdom which should be tapped into now, that both China and the world are entering a challenging era of multipolar competition and emerging global threats. These new ideas and theories are not of mere philosophical interest. In the strictly controlled academic environment of China, they can be seen as an enlargement of the official political discourse, dominated by the Communist Party of China. The party controls the broad direction of the academia, yet dominating ideas flow back to influence the political leadership in a dualistic, two-way relationship. China's intellectuals are thus, as articulated by Zhang Feng of the Australian National University, "more influential than their counterparts in many Western countries paradoxically because China's repressive political system makes intellectual debates a surrogate form of politics."⁵

One of the most influential fruits of this renaissance of Chinese traditional thought is the 'tianxia theory'. Tianxia theory attempts to utilize an ancient Chinese political/philosophical concept of *tianxia* (天下, engl. all under heaven) in order to create a cosmopolitan vision for the whole world. At the same time, tianxia theory is used for criticizing the prevailing international order and its

1 See for example: *Renmin ribao* 7.2.2017. For an academic perspective, see: Cheng & Wang (2015)

2 Shi-Kupfer & Ohlberg & Lang & Lang & Bertram (2017)

3 Yan (2018)

4 See for example Schneider (2014), 683-703.

5 Zhang (2013)

institutional framework as well as the ‘Western political thought’ behind it, which are both seen as unable to answer the problems of the globalizing world.

From the discussions and debates around the tianxia theory thus emerges an interesting narrative of the ‘West’, both as a historical civilization and as an actor in world politics. Instead of being on the leading edge of modernity, the Chinese narrative depicts the West as offensive, self-centered, and unable to understand international politics from a ‘worldly perspective’. This chapter focuses on these Chinese narratives of the West in world politics as developed by Chinese scholars of international politics. The research data consists of monographs as well as articles in leading Chinese journals, such as ‘World Economy and Politics’ (世界经济与政治, *Shijie jingji yu zhengzhi*), which discuss and develop the tianxia theory and its core concepts.

In search of a Chinese worldview

After the ‘Great Helmsman’ Mao Zeodong died in 1976, China embarked on a project of ‘reform and opening up’, in which the Maoist society was dismantled piece by piece. The socialist economy was privatized and the social order which was based on class background and class warfare was dissolved. Foreign companies were allowed and even invited to invest in China again.⁶

A similar readjustment has been going on within China’s ideological sphere. As the economic reforms commenced, China began also reforming its ideology of Maoist communism. The rhetoric of ‘class struggle’ was played down in the new state constitution of 1982, and the socialist elements have been further weakened in later amendments. During the 1990’s, communism as a guiding ideology of China had become almost like an empty shell. Concepts such as ‘socialist market economy’ or ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’, were, and still are being thrown around, but their meaning is getting increasingly obscure in the new China of glittering skyscrapers and busy business people, running around with Starbucks coffee cups in their hands.⁷

During the years 1949–1978, Maoism was the sacred doctrine which held answers for almost every questions one could ask. It offered a clear identity of who the Chinese were (a vanguard of the world communist revolution), who were they against (capitalists, revisionists, class enemies) and where their country was heading (towards a communist utopia). Importantly, ‘scientific Maoism’ also offered strong legitimation for the governing party and its radical policies.⁸

During the reform era, the communist ideology has not been able to answer questions of identity, nor can it offer the party much legitimacy. The legitimation has stemmed from the fact that the Chinese economy has developed staggeringly, but it is not hard to see that this development is more due to the pragmatic, market economy-based reforms rather than any guiding socialist principles.⁹

From the point of view of the world at large the situation is similar. During the high tide of socialism in China, Chinese brand of communism inspired radical leftists everywhere.¹⁰ After the reforms, China has not been able to offer a credible alternative vision for the world, although it is fair to say that it has not been trying to either. In the modern Chinese ‘low profile’ foreign policy, non-intervention and respect for state sovereignty have been very strong principles.

6 On this process of reform and opening up, see a detailed description in chapters 4, 5 and 6 in MacFarquhar (2012)

7 Ibid.

8 For an excellent introduction to Maoism and its historical development see the essays in Cheek (2010)

9 Kallio (2015) 87–114.

10 Cook (2010) 288–312.

All this has been changing. Little by little, the communist ideology has been substituted by a sort of cultural nationalism, in which traditional Chinese ideas, ideologies and philosophies have been promoted.¹¹ Since the 1980's, the central government has sponsored studies of Confucianism by establishing research institutes and by guiding finances for research projects focusing on Confucianism and other traditional philosophies.¹² Furthermore, during the eras of Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, even the national leadership itself has increasingly used traditional concepts such as 'harmony' or 'humanity', to such a degree that Valerie Niquet has invented a label for this new brand of party rhetoric: 'confu-talk'.¹³ Xi Jinping has also often emphasized the concept of 'cultural self-confidence' (文化自信, *wenhua zixin*), which declares that instead of relying on 'Western thinking' or 'Western values', China possesses a long and illustrious intellectual and cultural tradition it can rely on.¹⁴

This growing interest in traditional culture has often been called 'traditional learning fever' (国学热, *guoxue re*). It hopes to discover a new identity, a new worldview and a new legitimacy for the post-communist China from its imperial past.¹⁵ Within the academic circles of international politics, scholars are studying the classics in order to create a 'Chinese theory of international relations', which would utilize Chinese history and philosophy as its raw material in attempt to develop an alternative theoretical and normative framework for interpreting and guiding international politics.

Theoretical understanding of international politics in China has been heavily influenced by U.S. academic thought. As China opened up, and as its diplomatic networks began to spread out into the world in the 1980's, the country faced a rapidly growing demand of knowledge and expertise on foreign relations and international politics in general. China's own field of international relations, if there even was such a thing, had languished during the Maoist years, but with the help of Ford, Rockefeller and Fulbright foundations among others, first generations of Chinese international scholars studied mainly in the United States. China thus basically adopted the American discipline of International Relations, with its theoretical mainstreams (realism, liberalism and constructivism) and even its name (国际关系, *guoji guanxi*).¹⁶

The interest in creating a Chinese theory of international politics stems from this background. According to Qin Yaqing, president of the prestigious China Foreign Affairs University, China cannot rely on American or European traditions of international politics, as their core problems arise from different geographical, historical and social backgrounds. For Qin, the creation of a Chinese theory of international politics is thereby not only possible but also inevitable.¹⁷ In the same vein, Zhao Tingyang, one of the most notable developers of the *tianxia* theory, has called out for a 're-thinking of China' (重思中国, *chongsi Zhongguo*) which means recreating a completely Chinese philosophical system that would use Chinese concepts and ideas instead of 'Western' ones.¹⁸

The development of this theorization has focused around three streams or schools of thought: first, Yan Xuetong's 'Qinghua school' of international relations and its doctrine of 'moral realism', second, Qin Yaqing and his 'relational theory of international politics' and third, *tianxia* theory.¹⁹ All the three streams apply traditional concepts as their raw matter for theory construction, and

11 Guo Yingjie has proposed that there exists alongside the official party-state sponsored nationalism, a cultural nationalism which is more attached to Chinese culture or Chinese nation than to the current government. See Guo (2004)

12 Brady (2012), 57-76.

13 Niquet, (2012), 76-90.

14 See Xinhua (2017)

15 See Kallio (2011)

16 Nielsen & Kristensen (2014), 97-118.

17 Qin (2016)

18 Zhao (2011), 1-7.

19 On Qinghua school, see Yan (2011). On relational theory see Qin (2018)

accordingly, there are many overlapping ideas between them. For example, all the schools generally emphasize morality and 'humane leadership' as guiding principles in international politics and are interested in relational statuses of political units within larger systems. All the schools also see as their core objective to offer some normative guidelines on how to stabilize the international order and on how to incorporate China peacefully in it. This dual-function bears the legacy of Marxist thought, in which theory (理论, *lilun*) was seen principally as 'guiding political action', instead of simply analyzing or explaining events. Chinese theory of international theory should thus, similarly, also serve as a guide for Chinese foreign policy.²⁰

The core claim of the currently developing tianxia theory is, that for most of its history, China was the center of a unique, East Asian international order, the tianxia system. Tianxia was strictly hierarchic and centrally organized, but it was also a 'harmonious' and loose system, allowing cultural diversity within its domain. It was an alternative method for organizing international relations before the Western great powers forced their Westphalian order upon the world. According to tianxia theorists, studying the principles and institutions of this ancient order might offer a lot of insight for reforming the current, troubled liberal international order.²¹

Whether such a harmonious system ever truly existed is under debate, but most historians agree that the Chinese rulers held a rather coherent and unchanging tianxia worldview.²² From the earliest dynasties on (Zhou dynasty, 1046–256 b.c.e.) the Chinese political elite considered it was ruling the whole world, 'all under the Heaven', according to Confucian principles of hierarchical yet benevolent rule. Within this cosmology, the emperor was thought to be the 'Son of Heaven' (天子, *tianzi*), and Heaven itself was believed to be a superior god or a cosmic force. Heaven had given his son, the emperor, a mandate for ruling the terrestrial issues – but only as long as he followed the Heaven's will.²³ Within this cosmology, there was no 'sovereign states', as everyone under the Heaven was under the authority of the emperor. Smaller kingdoms or other political units would need to demonstrate their submission by sending tributary emissaries to the Chinese capital every now and then. The Son of Heaven, however could not act dictatorially, since "All under Heaven" would be in peace and prosper only when he followed the rules of propriety (礼, *li*) and acted righteously.²⁴

This kind of ethnocentric universal kingdom is of course not unique to China. As other examples, one could mention the well-known distinction between the Greeks and the 'barbarians', and idea of the United States as a shining 'city upon the hill' among other nations. Benjamin Schwartz has argued that what was unique in the case of the Chinese civilization was that for most of its history China was almost completely isolated from the rest of the world by natural barriers. Unlike universal kingdoms elsewhere, Chinese empire never encountered any culturally advanced rivals that could deny its sinocentric cosmology. On the contrary, the fact that China's major neighbors, Japan, Korea and Vietnam adopted China's Confucian ideological system, as well as many other cultural elements, seemed to prove it. Northwestern nomad tribes, although being able to raid China's border regions and wreak some serious havoc, were still considered to be mere barbarians. They too would be eventually civilized by the moral and cultural supremacy of the central kingdom.²⁵

20 Noesselt (2015)

21 Ren (2014)

22 See Kang (2010). For a more critical assessment, see Perdue (2015), 1002–1014.

23 Fairbank (1968). See also Ban (2017).

24 Ibid.

25 Schwartz (1968). 276–288.

This tianxia cosmology dominated the worldview and philosophy of the Chinese empire up until the 19th century, when the Western great powers arrived with technologically advanced gunboats and forced its downfall. Western political cosmology differed from the tianxia considerably. It was based on an idea of equal and sovereign nation states that would interact within the international order according to certain universal laws and institutions. Competition, diplomacy, trade, and war were all integral parts of this international order, which is usually thought to have been formalized in the treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

During the 19th century China slowly learned that its worldview of being the center of ‘all under heaven’, had been a delusion. The last dynasty, Qing (1644–1911), was wavering as it tried to orient itself in the quickly changing political conditions. It attempted to adopt some elements of Western power (such as military technology) in order to fight back the intruders, but at the same time it tried to hold on to its Confucian ideas and cosmology. It could not have both. The Chinese empire and tianxia system around it finally collapsed in the Xinhai revolution of 1911, after which the Republic of China was established.²⁶

During these painful years, China acknowledged that instead of being everything under the Heaven, it was simply another state (国, *guo*) within a larger system of states (万国, *wanguo*). The concept of tianxia was then replaced with the Western concept of ‘the world’ (世界, *shijie*). At the same time, many other new concepts, such as nation (民族, *minzu*), Chinese (中国人, *Zhongguoren*) or the people (人民, *renmin*) had to be imported into the Chinese language as in the all-embracing world conception of tianxia, there had been no place nor need for such ideas.²⁷

The return of tianxia

During the 20th century China became a nation state and at the end of the century, finally stabilized politically and economically. Now, as the search for China’s post-communist identity is intensifying, the forgotten concept of tianxia has been revitalized. Historians, political philosophers and scholars of international politics are studying the concept and its potential for China’s international thinking.²⁸

Tianxia theory in its modern form was first proposed by a liberal economist Sheng Hong in a short but influential article *From nationalism to tianxiaism* in 1996. The idea was brought into the mainstream by Zhao Tingyang, a philosopher from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), with his 2005 book: *Tianxia System*. After the publication of Zhao’s book, a vibrant discussion on the potential of the concept emerged and is still ongoing. Although never becoming a leading theoretical model, Zhao and Sheng brought the idea of a unique tianxia worldview “on the agenda” and the Chinese scholarship has since explained and analyzed Chinese foreign policy thinking by applying their ideas.²⁹ Furthermore, even the Chinese government has increasingly included concepts from the tianxia theory into its foreign policy rhetoric: Xi Jinping, for example, declared in his address to the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015 that China’s foreign policy aims to create “a world truly shared by all” (天下为公, *tianxia wei gong*).³⁰

26 For a rich and detailed description of these events, see Spence (1999)

27 See Zheng (2011), 293–321.

28 Various Chinese terms for the tianxia theory are used, such as: “tianxiaism” (天下主义, *tianxiaizhuyi*), “tianxia theory” (天下论, *tianxia lun*) sometimes “new tianxiaism” (新天下主义, *xin tianxiaizhuyi*), “tianxia order” (天下秩序, *tianxia zhixu*),

29 Schneider (2014), 689.

30 See Mokry (2018) and Kallio (2018)

What unifies the tianxia theorists is the belief that the *hierarchical* Chinese tianxia order was more stable and peaceful than the *anarchic* Western order. It also included many valuable ethical ideals that the globalizing world could perhaps find useful. One of the main claims about tianxia is that it had ‘no outside’ (无外, *wuwai*). Because it covered all under Heaven, there could not exist any outer borders, and thereby every culture, tribe or kingdom was accepted within it. Even if there were strange and barbarous cultures living far away from the center, they were not seen as being outside of tianxia, but merely too far away from its civilizing influence. Tianxia, the argument goes, was harmonious and open to difference, as many different religions and thought systems (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Islam for example) co-existed peacefully within it. There were no ‘others’ in the tianxia, and also no need to forcibly transform others into one’s own culture.³¹

Another common metaphor the theorists propose is that tianxia was like a large family (天下一家, *tianxia yijia*). Instead of fiercely competing nation states like in the ‘West’, the tianxia was imagined as a large family, with the Chinese emperor as the respected but righteous father, and the smaller states, kingdoms and tribes as its filial sons and daughters.³² A child state would need to respect the father state, but it would get security, recognition and economic benefits in return. Hierarchy in the tianxia was thus not comparable to ‘hegemony’ as understood in the Western tradition of international thought. Instead of mere military supremacy, the theorists argue, a true tianxia system can only be based on morally exemplary leadership in which the hierarchy of the system is accepted and even embraced by all its members. According to Zhao: “seizing political power or territory alone is not equal to ‘obtaining tianxia.’ [...] ‘Obtaining tianxia’ means having the approval of the society, and representing the choice of the public.”³³

Tianxia theorists see the current liberal international order of equal and sovereign states as chaotic and unstable. Even if the order functioned satisfactorily for a short period of history, it is now getting obsolete as the ever more deeply globalizing and interlinking world faces increasing problems, such as global inequality and climate change, that no nation state or even a group of states can handle on their own. The theorists claim, that the concept of tianxia is like a philosophical seed which, when cultivated, could develop into a framework for an alternative cosmopolitan world society.³⁴ Instead of an emperor, the new tianxia could have some kind of ‘world institution’ which would oversee the good of the whole planet and act as a mediator in political conflicts.

Tianxia theory has met heavy criticism both within and outside China. Especially historians, such as Ge Zhaoguang, have argued that the historical tianxia order was only a utopian fantasy in the scriptures of Confucian scholars, and ordinary logic of great power politics dominated in China just as in anywhere else.³⁵ In the West, well known sinologists such as William Callahan and June Teufel Dreyer have also offered critical remarks on the historical accuracy of the theory’s basic arguments.³⁶

What is distinctive to the discussion around tianxia theory is that what the ancient Chinese tianxia order was like, and how should the new global tianxia be organized, are matters of heavy dispute. Some, such as Zhao Tingyang, claim that the truest form of tianxia can be found only in the feudal and loose system of the early Zhou dynasty. But for others, such as Sheng Hong, tianxia means the unified Chinese empire after the establishment of the Han dynasty. Many tianxia theorists point to the ‘tributary system’ of Ming and Qing dynasties, and there is even a liberal wing of tianxia

31 Zhao (2011), 34–40.

32 Ren (2014)

33 “成功夺取政权和地理并不等于得天下[...]得天下意味着拥有社会承认，意味着代表了社会公共选择” Zhao (2011), 38.

34 Ren (2014)

35 Ge (2016)

36 Callahan (2008), 749–761. Dreyer (2015), 1015–1031.

theorists (Liu Qing, Xu Jilin, Bai Tongdong) who claim that the new tianxia order should not have a dominating central institution.³⁷

But even though the concept of tianxia itself is rather muddy and vaguely described, all the theorists agree that tianxia had to be something different from the 'West'. It could not have been simply another empire like the other historical empires, but it had to be a unique Chinese system of international politics.³⁸ Creating an identity for oneself always needs the 'other', a mirror from which to reflect one's own uniqueness. In the discussion around tianxia theory, tianxia, no matter what it is, is always placed against an imagined Western civilization and a Western thought system.

Most of the theorists seem to agree on what the West is like, and the West as a concept (西方, *xifang*) is not truly problematized or questioned within the tianxia discourse. Geographically it seems to point to Europe and (or) the United States, but the definition is never made very clear. Similar kind of essentialism is applied to the Chinese civilization, and it and its elements are taken for granted. With this dualism, the tianxia theorists are constructing an *Occidental* grand narrative of the Western civilization. In this narrative, the current, chaotic international order is the result and legacy of Western philosophy and Western value system, which are lacking a 'worldly' outlook.

Occidentalism is here understood as a more or less distorted image and narrative of the 'West' as a coherent socio-cultural entity and as an actor in world politics. Occidental rhetoric attempts to compress and essentialize the multitude of cultures, languages and philosophies under a simple label of the 'West', very similar to what *Orientalist* rhetoric has been attempting with the vast and diverse regions of Asia or the 'East'.³⁹ Occidentalism can be utilized for drawing an inhumane and brutal image of the West by its enemies, yet it can be also applied for positive and inclusive purposes: Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, for example, has argued how an idealized Western civilization was rhetorically invented after the Second World War for incorporating Germany into the transatlantic alliance against the growing menace of the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

Occidental imagery is not a new phenomenon in Chinese thinking. Ever since the Chinese Qing-dynasty and the Western great powers collided during the 19th century, Chinese intellectuals were forced to rethink China's position in the larger world. The image of the West had to be similarly updated: instead of red-haired beasts driven by animal-like instincts, the West was later imagined to represent another civilization, perhaps even of an equal standing with China, and possessing, in the words of a contemporary scholar Wei Yuan (1794–1857), "knowledge of astronomy and geography and [being] well versed in things material and events of past and present."⁴¹

In the process of China's opening to the world, the West as a collective entity became the extreme 'other' and a benchmark into which the Chinese intellectuals reflected China's own achievements. Chinese Occidentalism thus included both the idealization and the enemization aspects of Occidentalism, and the West was seen as either a model to follow or as a menace to fight against. The liberals of the early 20th century China saw the Chinese tradition in a negative light, and the modernization and westernization of China was urged as inevitable for China's very survival. Others, representing more traditionalist viewpoints argued that even though the West was indeed powerful, it was lacking in spiritual quality. China should therefore apply chosen Western

37 Xu & Liu (eds.) (2015).

38 Li (2016), 1–10.

39 Jouhki & Pennanen (2016), 1–10.

40 See Buruma & Margalit (2004). Jackson (2006).

41 The change in Chinese perceptions of the West during this transformative period is well presented in Ch'en (1979), 59–91.

technologies and governmental innovations as needed, but it should leave the Chinese cultural and intellectual *substance* intact (中学为体 西学为用, *Zhongxue wei ti, Xixue wei yong*).⁴²

For many, especially traditionally oriented intellectuals, the West served as a device from which China could reflect its own uniqueness. For example, one of the most important Confucian philosophers of the 20th century, Liang Shuming (1893–1988), dedicated his notable work, *Substance of Chinese Culture* (中国文化要义, *Zhongguo wenhua yaoyi*) for the comparison of Chinese and Western civilizations and their cultural origins. In his words:

Chinese people will never gain a clear understanding if they only remain within the structures of Chinese society; if only they first look to others and then at themselves, then they will immediately understand.⁴³

During the early decades of the People's Republic, Occidentalism was temporarily pushed under the all-encompassing rhetoric of a global class struggle. The demonic caricature of an imperialist 'West' did exist, but it was used mainly for domestic purposes, for maintaining the legitimacy and the dominant position of the Communist Party.⁴⁴ Cultural Occidentalism re-emerged in China after the end of the Cold War when Maoist ideological orthodoxy was relaxed and as the cultural and civilizational models returned to the focus of international politics scholarship on a global scale.⁴⁵

Especially the publication of Samuel Huntington's *Clash of the Civilizations* in 1996 animated traditionalist Chinese intellectuals. The book's core argument was interpreted to be that the West was simply another civilization among many others and its ideological values and political institutions, even though currently triumphant, were not to be taken as universal. The ominous clash of civilizations argument then, ironically, offered hope and confidence for the Chinese scholars as they once again continued their search for China's position in the global order.⁴⁶

Tianxia theory is building its own civilizational argument on this legacy of Chinese Occidentalism. In this narrative, different thought systems of the West and China are presented as opposites facing each other. The Western thought system and its derivative, the liberal international order, are now ruling supreme, but they are not universal solutions and they do not constitute any 'end of history'. The main argument of Zhao Tingyang and Sheng Hong is, that they could – and should – indeed be replaced by their Chinese variants: a modernized tianxia world order and the Confucian value system behind it.⁴⁷

According to Quentin Skinner there can be no a-historical, 'ageless wisdom' in political theories, and every theory is simply an attempt to address the political problematics of its day.⁴⁸ Robert Cox states the same in relation to theories of international politics, which, for Cox, are "always *for* someone and *for* some purpose. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specially social and political time and space. [...] There is, accordingly, no such thing as theory in itself, divorced from standpoint in time and space."⁴⁹

Accordingly, in this chapter, Tianxia theory is understood as a rhetorical device, deriving from the context of China's rise and the West's relative decline. Tianxia theory is criticizing and questioning the legitimacy of the current Western-led international order and the universality of the Western

42 Wang (2013), 103–124.

43 Lu & Zhao (2009), 52–66.

44 See Chen (1995)

45 See Katzenstein (2010)

46 Jun & Smith (2018), 294–314.

47 Sheng (1996)

48 See Skinner (2002)

49 Cox (1986), 207.

values and concepts behind it, and with this, it is providing rhetorical support for the Chinese government, which is similarly constructing its own grand narrative of a uniquely peaceful and harmonious great power China that can challenge Western unilateralism.⁵⁰

As China grows more powerful, its leadership yearns for more say on how international politics is being framed and understood. A well-known Chinese scholar of world politics, Zhang Weiwei, has claimed that the West currently holds a ‘discursive hegemony’ (话语霸权, *huayu baquan*) on how international politics is being interpreted, and on what is thought to be the best for the world. Zhang has urged the Chinese leadership to reinforce its ‘discursive power,’ so that China will be able to define the dominating values, ideals, and master narratives of the world.⁵¹ This is exactly what the *tianxia* theory is attempting to do, and we will now take a closer look at the arguments on the failures of the Western international order found within it.

Tianxia and the Western international order

Sheng Hong’s⁵² article ‘From nationalism to *tianxia*ism’ set the basic parameters of the *tianxia* theory by suggesting that in its ancient past, China was in a similar situation as the current Western international order. During the ‘Warring states period’ (战国, *Zhanguo*, 475–221 b.c.e.) China was split into smaller, independent kingdoms which fought against each other incessantly. All the states were aware however, that this was only a temporary state of affairs. The states shared a dream of unifying all under Heaven under one ruling center again, and the traveling philosopher-scholars of the era offered their services for the kings for reaching this goal. The kings had a historical precedent, as before the Warring states era, the Zhou dynasty had been able to unify China under a loose feudal system, which was thought to be a golden era of stability and prosperity.⁵³

According to Sheng, it was Han dynasty (206 b.c.e.–220 c.e.) that was finally successful in uniting all the warring states under the leadership of the emperor. All under Heaven was then pacified and unified. War and power struggles between states became a thing of the past, and peace, stability and harmony became the leading ideals of Chinese politicians as well as scholars. This *tianxia* system, Sheng argues, became the international political order of China and its surroundings, and it remained in place for thousands of years, with some short breaks, during which it temporarily lapsed back into power struggles. In the West, similar unification occurred only briefly during the Roman empire. After the collapse of Rome, the West degenerated into its own warring states period and it has not been able to recover from it since. One could claim that with the rise of the European Union, the warring states era of Europe had finally concluded, but Sheng sees the EU simply as a larger national state, which is now part of the bigger, global warring states system.⁵⁴

When the Western warring states system reached China during the 19th century, China was still in its harmonious *tianxia* mode. According to Sheng, *tianxia* was based on moral, not military supremacy, and the Chinese defenses were helpless against the Western armies. Chinese *tianxia* thus collapsed and

with the disappearance of the only *tianxia*-culture, which was in China, the whole world returned into the balance of nationalisms. Nationalism was accompanied with the ‘warring

50 Shi-Kupfer & Ohlberg & Lang & Lang & Bertram (2017)

51 Zhang (2012), 125–129.

52 Sheng, Hong is currently working at the Tianze Institute of Economics in Beijing. Tianze Institute is one of the rare independent think tanks in China.

53 Sheng (1996)

54 Ibid.

states logic’, that is the logic of ‘military might reigns supreme’, which spread from the West to all over the world.⁵⁵

In the process, China had to suppress its own traditional culture and adopt such harmful Western ideas as social darwinism and nationalism in order to survive. But it did survive and, Sheng claims, is now playing by the Western, ‘warring states ruleset’ of international politics. However, during the age of nuclear weapons, the global warring states scenario has become all too dangerous.⁵⁶

Zhao Tingyang agrees with Sheng’s description, but for him, the current international order deserves a stronger metaphor than the warring states. For Zhao it is a ‘chaotic world’ (乱世, *luanshi*). In Chinese thought, the concept of *luan* refers to periods of disunity within Chinese history, during which the central government had lost its authority and China had fallen into anarchy. Typically, *luan* ensued when a dynasty collapsed, and bandits and rebels roamed the land causing great suffering and destruction. *Luan* meant that the dynasty had lost the mandate of Heaven, which is a situation that the Chinese dynasties needed to avoid at all costs. A conceptual opposite for *luan* is *zhi* (治), ‘well governed’, when the dynasty is stable and prosperous.⁵⁷ Whether a ‘chaotic world’ or a stage of ‘warring states’, both Sheng and Zhao agree, that the current Western international order is in trouble, and needs a well governing, stabilizing central force.

According to Zhao, the differences of these conceptions of politics in the West and China derive from the very beginnings of both civilizations:

since the political experiences of their early societies were different, both the West and China developed political thoughts, which greatly differed on their values, analytical frameworks and question systems.⁵⁸

In China, the *tianxia* conception was born during the Zhou dynasty, when China was united in a loose feudal system called *fengjian* (封建) under the leadership of Zhou kings. Zhao, like Sheng, claims that the short period of the Warring states was simply an anomaly, and all political thought in China evolved from the point of view of a unified world, *tianxia*.⁵⁹

Zhao argues that in the West, on the contrary, political activity was born in the Greek system of city states. Thus, Western political thinking evolved around the concept of competing states, and the concept for the world as a political unit was never invented. The etymology of both the Western and Chinese concepts of ‘politics’ points to this difference: Western concept of ‘politics’ derives from the name of the Greek city state, *polis*, whereas the Chinese concept of politics, *zhengzhi* (政治) means more broadly a correct governance.⁶⁰ It is as if these two conceptions of international politics had been determined during the Zhou dynasty and the Greek golden age, and neither civilization has been able to change or modify its destiny ever since.

Because of these historical roots, Zhao claims, the Western hierarchy of political units can be divided into the levels of

1. individual (个体, *geti*)
2. community (共同体, *gongtongti*)

55 “随着中国这个几乎可以说是唯一的天下主义文化的消失，整个世界实际上回到民族主义均衡状态之中。与民族主义相伴相生的战国规则，即“军事力量强者胜”的规则从西方走向了全世界。” Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Zhao (2011), 11-13.

58 “由于早期社会的政治经验不同，西方和中国各自发展出在分析框架，问题体系和价值观上都有很大差异的政治思想”，Zhao (2010)

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

3. nation state (国家, *guojia*).

In the Western political imagination, above the nation state there exists only the level of the international (国际, *guoji*). ‘The world’ is merely a geographical concept. It is a playground or a stage in which the nation states can compete and fulfill their destructive tendencies. Another concept Zhao uses for this kind of a divided world is a ‘non-world’ (非世界, *feishijie*).⁶¹

Shang Huipeng, professor of international studies at the Peking University, agrees on the general description offered by Zhao, but develops it further. He argues that the Chinese and Western civilizations, in addition to their differing political systems, have also fundamentally different ethical principles when it comes to relations between individuals, and the way individuals interact is reflected on the macro level: in the other end it creates a *tianxia*, and in the other end the logic of the warring states.⁶²

Shang suggests that in China, relations between individuals have always been based on differing *roles* in hierarchic relationships: everyone is, first, a member of a hierarchical unit, for instance a member of a family. Shang calls this the ‘role principle’ (角色原理, *juese yuanli*), which means that everyone can be expected to act towards other people according to his/her current role in the society. The role principle is similarly found at the international level: within *tianxia*, the political units under the Son of Heaven acted as subordinates, and the Son of Heaven acted according to his role as the father of nations, being authoritative and demanding, but also by offering security and economic benefits – the public goods of the time. Smaller kingdoms accepted the emperor’s supremacy and the tribute they paid was mainly a material symbol of this relationship. Because of this foundation in individual-to-individual relations, equality or sovereignty between individual political units could not be even imagined within *tianxia*.⁶³

But in the West, relations between people are arranged among free and equal individuals, which Shang calls ‘equal units principle’ (单位平等原理, *danwei pingdeng yuanli*). From this perspective, all individuals are considered to be equal, and expected to respect each other's individuality. A Western human being is, first, a unique, individual person, and only after that a member of a larger unit. Like in the case of *tianxia*, this fundamental principle of ‘equal units’ has influenced Western international politics and the principles and values of the current Westphalian international order stem from it: sovereign nation states are the core units of this order, and their interests always come first. The states may join international organizations, but only if they can gain benefits from them, and fierce competition between these units is only natural as it is also on the individual-to-individual level.⁶⁴

Ren Xiao, professor of international studies at Fudan University, has created a similar kind of distinction between individual-to-individual level ethical relations within the Chinese and the Western civilizations. According to Ren, Western relations between individuals are organized as a ‘contract system’ (契约秩序, *qiyue zhixu*) whereas the relations in *tianxia* were organized as a ‘status system’ (名分定秩序, *mingfending zhixu*). Within *tianxia*’s ‘status system’, relations between individuals were always tightly connected to personal statuses of the individuals: they emphasized rituals (礼, *li*) instead of strict laws or rules, and were always open to interpretation, compromise and situational awareness.⁶⁵ There was no international law as such in *tianxia*, because in principle, the political units were supposed to act only as their statuses within the system allowed.

61 Zhao (2011), 11-17.

62 Shang (2009)

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ren (2014)

The Western ‘contract system’ however places the contracts and rules above anything else. Within the West, individuals are equal in face of the law, and there can be no interpretation or situationality when it comes to law. Ren offers an interesting example of these different systems colliding in 1793, when George Macartney visited China as an ambassador for King George III of England. When meeting with the Chinese emperor Qianlong, Macartney declined from the customary ‘kowtow ritual’⁶⁶ everybody was supposed to perform when facing the Son of Heaven. Macartney thought he represented his own sovereign King, who was an equal with the Chinese emperor. He could not understand the value and meaning of the kowtow, because from his ‘contract system’ point of view, there were no hierarchies or any relationality between the heads of states.⁶⁷ For the Son of Heaven, however, this was of course an outrage.

The principles of the Western international order, Ren explains, emerge from the ‘contract system’ of individual-to-individual relations: states are equal units and there is no hierarchy in state-to-state relations – at least in principle. Sovereignty for individual states is achieved, but at the price of losing the greater good of the planet from sight.⁶⁸

Because of these fundamental reasons, the theorists claim, the West has been unable to create a political concept of the world that would transcend the state and the level of the international.⁶⁹ For Zhao, even such illustrious philosophers as Immanuel Kant have failed to think in tianxia-like global terms, since Kant’s cosmopolitan vision, as laid out in the book *For Perpetual Peace (Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf)* is only a world federation of nation states, remaining at the level of ‘internationalness’. Even Kant’s conception of politics, Zhao claims, was thus under the influence of the Western, narrow-minded tradition of world politics.⁷⁰

For Zhao, the current international order operates under the ‘hobbesian law of jungle’ (霍布斯丛林假定, *huobusi conglin jiating*), but the West is not interested in changing this logic. It understands the problems of the order and would like to civilize it so that the fierce, hobbesian competition between the states would be transformed into a more sophisticated economic competition based on rules, but the basic idea of individual nation states and state-level interest would remain intact. Yet even in this pacified form of state competition, powerful states will emerge and break the rules as they see fit. The West cannot fundamentally change this logic, because it is unable to imagine beyond the level of the ‘international’.⁷¹

For both Zhao and Sheng, this kind of a mindset is problematic also because when studying non-Western nations, such as China, the West relies on its own, warring states-minded thinking. Thus, misinformed ideas, such as the ‘China threat’ emerge, as the West can only understand world politics as reflections of its own history, seeing the rise and fall of hegemons as inevitable processes.⁷² Attempting to pacify this *luan*, the best practical solution the West has been able to create is the United Nations, but its name reveals its true nature. For both Zhao and Sheng, the UN is only a forum for the nation states to rush and obtain benefits for themselves, but not for the world as a whole. It is, in essence, an agora without its polis.⁷³

66 Kowtow (*guibai*, 跪拜 or *ketou* 磕头) was a ceremonial bow for expressing deference in face of the emperor, in which one needed to kneel down and touch the ground with his head for several times.

67 Ren (2014)

68 Ibid.

69 Zhao gives some credit to Marxism, however. For him, it is the only Western philosophy which has a truly worldly outlook. He does not study it any further though.

70 Zhao (2011), 11–17.

71 Ibid.

72 Zhao (2011), 11–17. Sheng (1996)

73 Zhao (2009), 6–17.

Finally, the theorists claim, the Western worldview is also limited and plagued by its obsessive search for opponents and enemies, which owes its legacy to Christianity. According to Zhao, when Christianity emerged, the Western worldview ceased to develop towards universal happiness of all humans on earth, and the utopian society was moved into the afterlife of the Paradise. But on the planet, a constant battle between the holy and the heathen would continue until everyone would be converted into Christianity.⁷⁴ Ren Xiao agrees that an important element of Christianity is its offensive missionary attitude as the Western missionaries would brave even the high seas in order to spread their gospel for the pagans. Ren contrasts this with the Confucian *tianxia*, in which a harmonious multitude of religions and philosophies was allowed, and which followed the principle of “the rites should not be preached upon others” (礼不往教, *li bu wang jiao*). Instead of spreading the Confucian doctrine, the Son of Heaven expected his subjects to stand in awe of his virtue, and all the peoples under the Heaven would travel to the center to learn its civilized ways. If they did not come, it simply meant that the center’s virtue was weak, and it did not deserve the admiration of its subjects.⁷⁵

According to Zhao, the Western Christendom never allowed such harmony or diversity within it. It was dominated by an intolerant and discriminating religion, which divided the world starkly into the world of Christianity and the world of pagans. Zhao argues that even though Christianity has lost its influence as a political theory in the West, its legacy of dualist and confrontational thinking has not. It means that the West is constantly searching for ‘others’ to suppress or to transform into its own image:

Since Christianity suppressed the Greek civilization, the Western combative logic of dividing the world into us and the heretics, took its shape. The West has since understood the world as a warzone of opposites, and with its mission of conquering the world, the West has extinguished the concept of an ‘a priori whole world’.⁷⁶

This ‘confrontational’ and ‘dualist’ thinking, originating from Christianity, has since taken various forms in Western thinking. It can be found in Carl Schmitt’s concept of ‘enemy consciousness’ and in his metaphor of ‘politics as warfare’. This same attitude is also influencing Western countries (especially the United States) as they spread their ‘universal values’ and Zhao even mentions the *Star Wars* movies as an example of this Western tendency to pathologically think of the world in terms of us, the righteous and the pagan/others. Because of the legacy of Christianity and its dualistic worldview, the West sees its own conception of international politics as the only and the universal. The current Western international order is therefore not unlike the Christendom of the old, and every state and culture must be converted according to its ‘universal’ principles and doctrines.⁷⁷

Towards a community of common destiny for mankind

Tianxia theorists present a rather coherent narrative of the Western civilization and its essential elements. Because of its historical conditions, the West has organized its societies following individualist principles, and thus Western understanding of international politics also reminds this basic setting: it is based on sovereign nation states which interact like the equal individuals in Western societies. This atomistic state-centeredness has limited West’s capability in achieving a holistic, ‘worldly’ vision of politics. The West is also haunted by its Christian legacy, which remains

74 Zhao (2011), 33.

75 Ren (2014)

76 “自从基督教征服了希腊文明之后，西方就形成了异教识别的斗争逻辑，从此把世界看作是互相对立的和战争性的，以征服世界的使命而毁灭了‘世界’概念的先验完整性”，Zhao (2016), 21

77 Ibid.

dominant in Western philosophy of international politics. The West cannot tolerate alternatives to its liberal vision of democracy, human rights and other 'universal values' and the Fukuyaman 'end of history' argument, from the point of view of the tianxia theorists, can be understood as a continuation for the spreading of gospel of the one and only true God.

Within the narratives of the tianxia theorists, the West is portrayed as the true opposite of the harmonious tolerance and *wuwai* of the tianxia. This can be understood so that these two world systems are not compatible and cannot exist at the same time. The tianxia theorists are, in effect, reproducing a grand narrative of a clash of civilizations to which Samuel Huntington would probably nod approvingly. The narrative points out that the Western-led international order and its elements do not represent the only and the best possible way for organizing international politics. They are simply products of particular, historical developments in the West and they could be replaced by better alternatives.

The narrative can also be seen as a major argument for Chinese exceptionalism and as an answer for the aforementioned search for a new Chinese identity. As the narrative contrasts tianxia to the West, China's own uniqueness is brought into the spotlight. According to the tianxia theorists, China has always had its own, successful methods for organizing both domestic and international politics, and there is no need for blind acceptance of Western ideas, whether they concern 'universal values' or theories of international politics. Similarly, the narrative supports the claim of 'China's peaceful rise': because of the heritage of its unique tianxia worldview, China will not repeat the fatal mistakes of the rising powers of the past.

The cosmopolitan world order the tianxia theorists are dreaming of, is of course utopian, and the means for constructing such an order are not at all accurately described. Even the strongest proponent of the theory, Zhao Tingyang, claims he is only trying to offer some initial philosophical seeds so that a new, post-liberal international order would have a theoretical foundation. All through their arguments, tianxia theorists indeed remain on a highly abstract level. Overall, the theory stands on a rather shaky and loose empirical basis and on a very selective and 'cherry picked' readings of history. An argument, however, need not to be factually correct or logically sound to be useful for political purposes, as everyone witnessing the trumpian era is well aware of.

Many elements and ideas of the tianxia worldview can be found in the Chinese government's foreign policy rhetoric. During Hu Jintao's reign (2002–2012), the concept of a 'harmonious world' (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*) was brought forth, proposing a world order in which all the various civilizations would prosper together in peace and harmony. In the same manner, the ancient Confucian concept of 'harmony without sameness' (和而不同, *he'er butong*) was emphasized, pointing out that in international politics, a harmony of differences is better than a monotonous sameness.⁷⁸

During the tenure of president Xi Jinping (2012–) the general tone of Chinese foreign policy rhetoric has become more assertive and confident. At the same time, the rhetoric has gained even more cosmopolitan and, one could say, tianxiaist overtones.⁷⁹ The main foreign policy concept of president Xi Jinping, and also the best concept to define Xi's vision for the future international order, is the 'community of common future for mankind' (人类命运共同体, *renlei mingyun gongtongti*). According to this idea, the international community will be more and more tightly tied together during the age of globalization, and all the states should let go of their grievances and concentrate on economic and political cooperation. Although the concept is rather vaguely described, the vision

78 Keith (2012), 235–252.

79 Kallio (2018)

of a harmonious tianxia can be easily recognized as an inspiration for the concept, and Xi Jinping has himself described the community using the concept of ‘all under Heaven as a one family’.⁸⁰

Tianxia theory then, rather than being a credible scientific theory of international politics, works better as offering quite sophisticated and effective rhetorical devices for the Chinese leadership as it is attempting to challenge Western ‘discourse hegemony’. Underdeveloped as it is, it already possesses considerable soft power value by framing world politics with stark dichotomies of the warlike and chaotic Western model of international politics against the possibility of a stable, harmonious and peaceful Chinese tianxia order. Especially during the troubled era of our day, when the core elements of the liberal international order seem to be wavering in uncertainty, the promise of the tianxia can be seductive. Interestingly, most tianxia theorists argue that even though the tianxia order was extinguished during the 19th century, its worldview and the political thinking around it have remained in China’s mind as unconscious processes. Perhaps China is indeed dreaming of uniting all under Heaven once more, once and for all?

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