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Chinese visions of world order: All under heaven in a harmonious hierarchy

Lectio praecursoria 17.7.2020

Matti Puranen

FM & YTM Matti Purasen valtio-opin väitöskirja Warring states and harmonized nations: Tianxia theory as world political argument tarkastettiin lauantaina 17.7.2020 kello 9 Jyväskylän yliopistossa. Vastaväittäjänä toimi apulaisprofessori Duan Demin Pekingin yliopistosta ja kustoksena professori Pekka Korhonen Jyväskylän yliopistosta. Väitöskirja on luettavissa JYX-julkaisuarkistossa osoitteessa <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-8218-8>.

It is not an overstatement to claim that the rise of China is the most important development in world politics of our era. It is shaking the foundations of the currently existing 'international order' established and dominated by the Western great powers.

As we all know, China's economy has continued to grow at a fast pace for over forty years. Following on its wake, Chinese economic and cultural footprints are expanding everywhere, and even the Chinese military has increased its operations all around the planet, all the way up to the Baltic Sea.

It could be said, however, that the speed of China's development has been too fast. A saying goes that "China's mind has been left behind of its body". In other words, as China emerges as an economic and political powerhouse with far reaching influence, it is not at all clear even for the Chinese themselves what kind of a great power it will become, or how or if, China will attempt to transform and modify the international order to better fit its needs.

These questions are very acute, since China's return into being a prominent great power is happening at the same time as the international order is facing serious challenges.

The guiding ideals of the order, such as the belief in democracy, or the belief in universal human rights are being challenged by re-emerging authoritarian governments all around the globe. The order is also challenged within its liberal heartlands, in Western Europe and in the United States, in which powerful populist movements are



calling for the reversal of globalization, and for a return to a romanticized past, in which the nation states were able to fully decide on their destinies.

The multilateral character of the order, that is, the idea that all the states should work together through international institutions and abide by certain international norms – this multilateral character is being replaced by intensifying competition between the states and especially between the leading great powers. During this spring, talks of even a new cold war between the United States and China have been gaining ground.

Paradoxically, at the same time, the international order is in urgent need of more cooperation and less confrontation. The mankind is facing certain serious challenges that no single state or even a great power can handle alone. Challenges such as global warming, international terrorism, mass migration or the regulation of artificial intelligence, require much deeper levels of cooperation than what is evident today.

On this point, we have had a very powerful and concrete lesson this spring with the coronavirus pandemic. This defense of a dissertation is organized virtually, and the honorable opponent is present only through a video link due to our inability to cooperate against global challenges.

The dissertation in question focuses on these grand challenges of world politics. It studies Chinese visions on how the international order should be repaired for making it more fair, peaceful and stable. By studying such visions, the dissertation argues, it is possible to shed light on the questions just mentioned, that is, what kind of an actor China is becoming and how it might be changing the rules of the game of world politics.

Our current international order, sometimes also called as the liberal international order, is made up of sovereign and independent states, which are interacting with each other through diplomacy, trade, and sometimes through warfare. The order is not governed by anyone and all the states are supposed to respect each other's sovereignty for their domestic affairs. Yet the states cooperate through international institutions such as the United Nations and are highly dependent on each other due to economic connections.

During its forty years of rapid economic development, China has abandoned its communist utopias and integrated itself into this international order and into its institutions and norms. For a long time China did not seem to be willing to challenge the basic principles and rules as they also greatly benefited itself.

But during the last two decades, an overall criticism towards the international order has slowly increased in China. Chinese leaders have argued that the position of the Western states within the order is too powerful, and that the developing countries, including China itself, are in an unfair disadvantage within it. The power configurations of the world have changed. The rest is catching up with the West. The structure of the order should represent these changes.

The strength of the Western great powers, according to Chinese arguments, lies not only in mere economic and military power, but in the West's so called 'discursive

power': the ability to dominate the discussion on world politics. To define what world politics is all about, and what are its guiding values, both in the realms of the academia as well as in the daily day diplomatic activities.

For strengthening its power comprehensively, and for succeeding in transforming the order to better suit its interests, China, too, has to develop its own 'discursive power'. To be able to offer its own Chinese values, Chinese ideas and Chinese viewpoints and to provide an alternative Chinese vision of world politics to complement if not even supersede the dominating Western vision.

What is this vision?

In this, the official rhetoric of the Communist Party of China offers mostly vaguely described concepts and slogans, perhaps on purpose. For going beyond this hollow rhetoric, the dissertation focuses on the vibrant discussions within the Chinese academic circles. Discussions on world politics, global governance and on the reform of the international order.

Among the Chinese scholars, there exists a growing consensus that China should no more rely on 'Western ideas' for analyzing world politics, or for repairing its faults. Instead, it should develop its own theories and concepts, as it possesses thousands of years old, rich intellectual tradition from which to draw inspiration. Thus, from the early 2000's on, Chinese scholars have been studying the history of Chinese foreign relations and Chinese classics of philosophy, politics and strategy, and attempting to construct theories of world politics, that would challenge the Western intellectual tradition and discourse power.

These ideas are not of mere academic or philosophical interest, as they are increasingly influencing the official foreign policy imagination of the Chinese government. The ideas and concepts that the scholars are developing are an important resource for the Chinese government as it is developing its global strategy, and as it builds its 'discursive power' to challenge the West.

Among the most prominent ideas in this search for Chinese wisdom is the tianxia theory. The main argument of tianxia theory is that the current international order as well as the dominant interpretations of world politics supporting it are not to be taken as universal.

Both are only products of particular historical developments within the Western civilization, in which the independent nation states and their competition became the central elements of world politics. The Western civilization, because of its military supremacy, has forced this model upon the rest of the world, but this does not mean that the order and its central elements provide the best possible system for organizing world politics. To the contrary, the theorists claim, the Western model is increasingly ineffective in answering the challenges posed by globalization.

According to tianxia theory, Chinese civilization evolved in remarkably different conditions. From the very beginning of its history, China developed a conception of politics that was based on the whole world unified under the benevolent emperor. The

word *tian xia* literally means 'all under heaven' or the world, and within the ancient Chinese imagination, China, and the world were the same thing.

In contrast to the West, which has always been in a state of division, and which even sees this division as a natural condition, China has always seen such division as chaotic lack of order, and attempted to unify and stabilize the world under a centralized hierarchy.

In the Chinese tianxia order, the Chinese emperor, also known as the Son of Heaven, served as a leading center, and all the smaller political units were its vassals or tributary states. Within this system, tianxia theorists claim, sovereignty and equality of the political units was of course limited, but the system as a whole was much more peaceful and tolerant.

As the Western great powers invaded China in the 19th century, the peaceful tianxia order was dismantled. China was forced to join the chaotic and competitive Western international order, which has no leading center and therefore also no understanding of the interests of the world as a whole. In the Western order, independent and egoistic states wage war against each other to the bitter end.

Tianxia was forgotten during the decades of Western supremacy, but according to the theorists, it is now time to resurrect the concept, for it might save the planet from the enormous challenges of globalization. A new, modernized tianxia needs to be established in place of the chaotic Western order and a new central institution, some kind of a benevolent world government, has to be created to protect the peace and prosperity of the whole world.

This is the premise of tianxia theory, but how believable are its arguments and how practical its propositions for reforming the international order?

The dissertation argues that the tianxia theory is based on a heavily distorted story of two civilizations – China and the West – and their corresponding political models.

In the writings of the tianxia theorists, the harmonious and peaceful tianxia is always placed against the chaotic and aggressive West. The West is described as having always been an essentially individual and competitive civilization, which is constantly seeking for enemies to destroy. Due to this historical tradition, the West today is unable to imagine the world as a complete and harmonious whole, and is unable to find any solutions as the international order it has created is crumbling before its eyes.

Chinese civilization, meanwhile, is presented almost as the West's complete opposite: as a peaceful and defensive civilization, which has, since its beginning imagined the world – all under Heaven – as a unified whole, and which does not seek to extinguish 'otherness' or different cultures.

Tianxia theory is built around this dualism. The theory, seemingly cannot survive without the West as an anti-tianxia, in which all the negative aspects can be stacked, and which is used to bring forth China's unique and peaceful characteristics.

This in itself is not surprising as it seems that all ideologies and thought systems must have some sort of major opponents: Christianity has Satan as the ultimate opponent. Communism has capitalism. And liberalism, vice versa, has communism. For tianxia theory, this major opponent is the West.

But to explain world politics by squeezing thousands of years of history and cultural diversity in such simplifying labels as the 'West' or 'China', and to claim that the West is like this and the Westerners think like this, while China is like that and the Chinese think like that, is a highly questionable project. Both the so-called West and China, as cultural areas, are incredibly diverse, and to essentialize them into some unchanging and almost eternal cultural elements does not hold water.

How about tianxia theory's propositions for reforming this chaotic Western mess? Actually, the theorists are very ambiguous on what the new tianxia order would be like, what would its institutional structure look like, and how would it be governed. It would be some kind of a hierarchic international order with a powerful central government, or perhaps a strong great power in the middle, even China, but not much else is known of it.

To clarify this point the dissertation compares tianxia theory to certain established theories of world politics, which have constructed models of global governance. And when compared to the models of, for example, cosmopolitan democracy or liberal institutionalism, tianxia theory, at least in its current stage of development, does not offer much anything completely new. It does not live up to its claims of revolutionary unique Chinese thinking.

But as the dissertation argues, this is not the point. That the tianxia theory is not offering any serious solutions for reforming the international order, or the fact that its central story on the Western and Chinese civilizations is highly questionable – these things are not important, if the whole theory is seen as a rhetorical device.

Instead of science, tianxia theory is better seen as a rhetorical device, which is cleverly and eloquently criticizing the current international order and projecting Chinese wisdom as a magic solution for fixing it. The tianxia theorists argue that the Western-led international order is not necessarily the only and the best possible system for organizing international politics, and that it could be replaced by better alternatives.

According to the tianxia theorists, China has always had its own, successful methods for organizing world politics, and there is no need to blindly accept Western ideas or Western values. With its tianxia model, China presents an alternative vision to the whole world and hints that it could perhaps serve as the new leading center of a new tianxia, and to stabilize the chaotic world.

As the tianxia theory spreads around the world, more and more people discuss it and keep its propositions on the agendas of discussion. Tianxia, no matter how flawed its arguments actually are, is like a meme that gets to be copied from a mind to another mind, sowing seeds of doubt on the legitimacy of the international order. And as the world heads towards a period of increasing instability and lack of governance, tianxia theory's beautiful visions of the world stabilized under a benevolent central institution might find many sympathetic listeners.

Besides this, it is important to notice that the ideas of the tianxia theory are also appreciated within the Chinese government. The central foreign policy vision of current President of China, Xi Jinping, the 'Community of Shared Future for Mankind' (人类命运共同体) has many interesting similarities with the tianxia theory. And although the Chinese leadership definitely does not openly claim that it is attempting to establish a new tianxia and place itself at its leading center, tianxia might be fueling its imagination more than what is immediately apparent.

So, to offer a summarizing conclusion, the dissertation argues that instead of being a useful scientific theory for analyzing or fixing world politics, tianxia theory should be seen as an important part of China's overall rhetorical offensive, in which it is challenging the international order and builds up its discursive power.

It is used for criticizing the legitimacy of the international order, or at least the dominant position of the Western great powers within the order. It is also used to claim that China is, due to historical and cultural reasons, somehow uniquely peaceful and harmonious great power. It holds certain ancient Chinese wisdom, such as the tianxia vision, which could be useful, now, that the West is no more able to govern the world.

Finally, although the dissertation has taken a critical stance towards the tianxia theory, the implication should not be that the tianxia and other Chinese concepts and ideas should be discarded as useless rhetorical tools. To the contrary, studies on such concepts should continue and intensify. Chinese history and the Chinese intellectual tradition, for sure, is neglected within the study of world politics, which, it is fair to say, is highly dominated by Euro-American scholarship and ideas. Chinese historical and intellectual tradition offers a vast ocean of uncharted material, which's study will greatly improve our overall understanding of the dynamics of world politics.

Such studies however, should commence, in a true tianxia spirit, without attempts to prove the supremacy of *any* civilization or by neglecting some ideas because they are Western, Chinese or Indian for that matter.

I think it is only through such open minded discussions between different intellectual cultures that we'll be able to achieve the ancient Chinese ideal of the Great harmony under Heaven (天下大同).

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