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Tianxia, Empire and the World: Soft Power and China's Foreign Policy Discourse in the 21st Century

William A. Callahan
University of Manchester

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Abstract

China's recent 'charm offensive' is captivating the world stage. Although there has been a thorough cataloguing of China's soft power assets in terms of the effectiveness and limitations of the PRC's public diplomacy, much less attention has been paid to how the normative aspect of China's growing soft power will set the world agenda. This essay will examine the concept of 'Tianxia' to understand Chinese visions of world order. Tianxia is interesting both because it was key to the governance and self-understanding of three millennia of Chinese empire, and also because discussion of Tianxia is becoming popular again in the twenty-first century as an alternative world order that is universally valid. Firstly, the paper will examine *Tianxia tixi* [The Tianxia System], a popular book that discusses an all-inclusive world order that aims to solve the globe's problems with a world institution that embraces difference through a 'magnanimous' system of governance. Then it will examine some of the philosophical and historical problems posed by this romantic understanding of Tianxia, in particular how its approach to 'Otherness' encourages a 'conversion' of difference, if not a conquest of it. The essay thus examines how Tianxia has been redeployed in ways that blur the conceptual boundaries between empire and globalism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. It concludes that Tianxia is a strong example of how domestic and international politics overlap and inform each other as part of a broader struggle over the meaning of 'China'. Soft power thus works not just in international influence, but also can tell us about the identity politics of national image in domestic politics. Hence rather than guide us towards a utopian world order that will solve global problems, Tianxia is an example of how some in China are working to re-center Chinese understandings of world order as a patriotic activity. This essay thus 1) critically describes a non-western worldview as an example of soft power, and 2) examines how ideas get put into play in Chinese foreign policy discussions.

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Biography

William A. Callahan is Chair of International Politics at the University of Manchester. He is also the Research Director of Manchester's Centre for Chinese Studies and Co-Director of the British Inter-university China Centre. He has published articles on East Asian politics in journals including *International Organization*, *Alternatives*, *Asian Survey*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and his most recent books are *Contingent States: Greater China and Transnational Relations* (Minnesota, 2004) and *Cultural Governance and Resistance in Pacific Asia* (Routledge, 2006).

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I. Introduction: Soft power, utopia and politics in China

In the past two decades many concepts have been floated to understand post-Cold War international politics, ranging from 'the end of history', to 'the clash of civilizations', 'globalization', and new understandings of 'empire'.¹ With the rise of anti-Americanism around the world in the wake of the Iraq War, the concept of 'soft power' has taken on new relevance. Indeed, although Joseph Nye introduced this concept to rationalize a decline of US hard power in the early 1990s, in 2003 he felt it necessary to clarify and systematize the soft power concept at the height of US hard power. Nye's purpose in the 2000s thus was different, namely to warn the American leadership of the hazards of 'going it alone' as the sole superpower in the twenty-first century.² But while American soft power has experienced a dramatic decline in the past five years, the soft power of the concept itself has increased: 'soft power' has now spread beyond analyses of US influence to understand the non-coercive power of the European Union, Japan and other states.³

Most recently, the concept of soft power has been employed to understand the rise of China beyond its growing military power and economic clout. Rather than acting as a revolutionary power that challenges the international system, Beijing has been engaging in a 'charm offensive' to convince the world of its peaceful status quo intentions. Scholars thus have been busy analyzing the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s growing soft power in terms of state policies that have successfully spread China's culture, language, development model and peacekeeping troops around the world.⁴

One of the most important aspects of soft power is the ability of a state to set the agenda of international politics and use its values to define not only world problems, but also define the range of solutions to these problems.⁵ Although there has been a thorough cataloguing of China's soft power assets in terms of their effectiveness and limitations, much less attention has been paid to the normative aspect of soft power. If the predictions about China overtaking the United States to be the dominant superpower in the next few decades are true, then how would China run the world?

Investigation of Chinese visions of world order are not new – in 1968 the doyen of American Sinology, John King Fairbank, edited the seminal text on this topic: *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations*.⁶ Fairbank's idealized description of a hierarchical Sinocentric world order with the Chinese empire at the core and loyal tributary states and barbarians at the periphery has generated considerable debate over the past four decades.⁷

¹ Fukuyama 1989; Huntington 1993; Held, et al. 1999; Hardt and Negri 2000; Harvey 2003.

² Nye 1991; Nye 2003; Nye 2004; Leheny 2006. Although Nye coined the term, the concept of soft power draws on earlier international politics theorists such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Ray S. Cline, Klaus Knorr, Richard N. Rosecrance, Robert Cox and sociologists such as Steven Lukes (see Nye 1991, 29-35, 266).

³ Nye 2004, 73-89; Haine 2004; Leheny 2006.

⁴ Gill and Huang 2006; Ramo 2004; Kurlantzick 2006; Pan 2006; Joseph S. Nye, 'The Rise of China's Soft Power', *Wall Street Journal Asia* (29 December 2005). Chinese officials and scholars have also been discussing the PRC's growing soft power (see Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 'Soft power, a new focus at China's "two sessions"', (14 March 2007); Pang 2006; Pang 2005; Wei 2005).

⁵ Nye 2004, 7.

⁶ Fairbank 1968b.

⁷ Fairbank 1968a; Rossabi 1983; Mancall 1983; Cohen 1986; Hevia 1995; Kang 2003; Liu, LH 2004. Hevia (1995:7-15) summarizes much of this debate. Fairbank's view also informs understandings of

But what is most interesting is that while prominent western experts have concluded that China is status quo power that is unlikely to challenge the international system,⁸ this idealized version of China's imperial past is now inspiring Chinese scholars' and policy-makers' plans for China's future – and the world's future. Rather than simply provide suitably Chinese parallels to 'international', 'security' or other mainstream international relations concepts, many public intellectuals in Greater China have been promoting the ancient concept of 'Tianxia' (天下) to understand Chinese visions of world order in ways that go against China's official policy of peacefully rising within the international system.

Tianxia is interesting both because it was key to the governance and self-understanding of three millennia of Chinese empire, and also because discussion of Tianxia is becoming popular again in the twenty-first century. In April 2005 a prominent philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Zhao Tingyang, published *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* [The Tianxia System: A Philosophy for the World Institution] to describe a Chinese model of world order that is universally valid.⁹ *The Tianxia System* became a best-seller in China because it caught a wave of interest in Chinese-style solutions to world problems, and especially an interest in how the traditional concept of Tianxia combines the seemingly contradictory discourses of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Tianxia thus has become a topic of conversation not just among public intellectuals and IR scholars, but also in much the broader arenas of popular culture and state policy: Zhang Yimou's recent film *Hero* was not just an international blockbuster, it also promoted the notion that heroism involves sacrificing everything for Tianxia.¹⁰ Likewise, Chinese president Hu Jintao's new 'harmonious world' foreign policy narrative draws on concepts similar to Zhao's Tianxia system.¹¹ Discussion of Tianxia also has spread beyond China's borders: the premier historian of overseas Chinese, Wang Gungwu, chose 'Tianxia and Empire' as the topic for the inaugural Tsai Lecture at Harvard in 2006, while Chinese-American academic Fei-Ling Wang warned of the influence of concepts like Tianxia in the *International Herald Tribune*, as did Geneva-based Xiang Lanxin in Singapore's *United Morning News* [*Lianhe zaobao*].¹² Hence in the past few years, there has been a Tianxia buzz not just in China, but also among the Chinese diaspora, as part of a lively debate over whether Tianxia constitutes 'China's contribution' to world civilization. While Chinese scholars have been employing traditional concepts – including Tianxia – to explain current domestic and foreign policies for over a decade,¹³ Zhao's plan for a Chinese-inspired world utopia dramatically shifted these discussions from the margins to the mainstream as a sort of patriotic cosmopolitanism. In this way, the Tianxia system is the current answer to the perennial question that transfixes policy elites in China: what is China's proper role in the world?

Discussions of cosmopolitanism in the past few decades have often sought to decenter power and knowledge relations, and question hierarchical modes of governance. Yet recent trends among Chinese intellectuals are going in a different direction: 'decentering' has been the problem for Chinese intellectuals; their key goal for past century has been to 're-center' China as the focus of world politics.¹⁴ In terms of its economic strategy, China certainly is 'going global'

China's traditional foreign policy among many current international relations scholars in the PRC (see Qin 2006; Yan 1995; Dan 2005).

⁸ See Shirk 2007; Shambaugh 2006; Johnston and Ross 2006; Shambaugh 2004/05; Johnston 2003.

⁹ Zhao 2005.

¹⁰ Zhang YM 2004.

¹¹ See Hu 2005.

¹² Wang GW 2006; Fei-Ling Wang, 'Heading Off Fears of a Resurgent China', *International Herald Tribune*, (11 April 2006); Xiang Lanxin, 'Jieyan quqi, shenyan hexie' [Give up talking about [China's] rise, be careful discussing [world] harmony], *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), (26 March 2006).

¹³ See Dan 2005, 23-38; Li 1999; Sheng 1995; Liu 1992.

¹⁴ See Tu 1994; Tu, et al. 1992.

by seeking to create a set of successful ‘Chinese’ global consumer brands, as well as developing its own set of global technical standards.¹⁵ This essay will explore how Chinese state intellectuals likewise have been involved in developing universal standards of civilization for a Chinese-style world order.

To explore the normative aspects of emerging China’s soft power politics, this essay will examine Zhao’s discussion of how the all-inclusive Tianxia system would solve the world’s problems with a world institution that embraces difference through a ‘magnanimous’ system of governance. Since Zhao (as we will see below) is looking to the positive aspects of Chinese thought, the first section will sympathetically summarize his argument.¹⁶ Then the next section will examine some of the theoretical and historical problems posed by this romantic understanding of Tianxia, in particular how its approach to ‘Otherness’ encourages a ‘conversion’ of difference, if not a conquest of it that transforms all difference into the (Chinese) self.

The essay thus examines how Tianxia recently has been redeployed by China’s intellectuals of the state and public intellectuals among the Chinese diaspora in ways that blur the conceptual boundaries between empire and globalism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. It concludes that Tianxia is a strong example of how domestic and international politics overlap and inform each other as part of a broader struggle over the meaning of ‘China’. Soft power thus works not just in international influence, but also can tell us about the identity politics of national image in domestic debates. The power of Tianxia comes less from the sophistication of its theoretical argument than from its strategic placement in China’s discursive networks of power. Rather than guide us towards a utopian world order that will solve global problems, Tianxia is an example of the workings of soft power in the sense that it re-centers Chinese understandings of world order as a patriotic activity in domestic politics. The popularity of Zhao’s very peculiar book therefore helps us understand how discussions of ‘soft power’ often tell us more about a state’s internal identity politics than about its role in international society. In other words, it shows how worldview, national image and soft power are intimately linked in discussions of foreign policy.¹⁷

II. The Tianxia system

The problem in international politics today, according to Zhao, is not ‘failed states’ but a ‘failed world’.¹⁸ Indeed, he declares that our world is actually a ‘non-world’.¹⁹ Here Zhao is appealing Chinese philosophy’s guiding normative logic: while ‘world’ should refer to a peaceful order, what we have is a disordered world of chaos. While many would see world disorder as a political or an economic problem (that would be solved by a better political or economic system), Zhao feels that world chaos is a conceptual problem: ‘to order the world we need to first create new world concepts which will lead to new world structures’.²⁰ Since western concepts (especially

¹⁵ Ramo 2007; Zhang YJ 2005; Suttmeier, et al. 2006.

¹⁶ This is more difficult than it may appear. The book contains three long chapters that utilize many of the same arguments and examples in sometimes contradictory ways. In a way, this book was not written as a single narrative, but is a collection of Zhao’s musings on Tianxia. Moreover, the book is transnational in form as well as content – two of the three chapters were first written and presented in English (see Zhao 2006a), and only later translated into Chinese in a more detailed and polemical style (Zhao 2005, 34, 110). It is necessary to describe the Chinese version because the Chinese book is the text that informs broader debate over soft power and foreign policy in the PRC.

¹⁷ See Wei 2005; Ramo 2007; Wang HY 2003; Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, ‘Soft power, a new focus at China’s “two sessions”’, 14 March 2007.

¹⁸ Zhao 2005, back cover.

¹⁹ Ibid, 21, 110.

²⁰ Ibid, 1.

those from the Westphalia system) have gotten us into this mess, Zhao boldly states that only the Chinese concept of *Tianxia* – literally translated as a All-under-heaven – can properly order the world. Throughout his discussion, he plays with the definition of this ancient and often vague term, sometimes reading *Tianxia* as ‘the World’, and other times understanding it as ‘Empire’. Either way, *Tianxia* is presented as a legitimate world order that is very different from western imperialism. This new way of thinking of global problems on a global scale presents a utopia that orders political relations in quite different ways from popular understandings of globalization and cosmopolitanism.²¹ But this is a utopia that will set the analytical and institutional framework necessary to solve the world’s problems – in other words, *Tianxia* is presented as a utopia that has practical applications.

Tianxia: three interwoven meanings

In its most basic sense, *Tianxia* is a geographical term. *Tianxia* is actually one of the few classical Chinese concepts that uses two characters: *tian* and *xia*. *Tian* is the heavens, the sky, and what is on top, while *xia* is an indexical term meaning below, lower, inferior.²² *Tianxia* thus refers to everything below the sky, and thus is commonly used in classical texts to refer to the earth or to the (Chinese) world.

But Zhao argues that in addition to this material and geographical sense, *Tianxia* also contains two other important meanings that are not just descriptive, but normative: a) *Tianxia* referring to all the people, the people’s heart (*minxin* 民心), the people’s will, and b) *Tianxia* as the world institution.²³ Each of these three meanings of *Tianxia* – geographical, psychological, and institutional – is necessary and interdependent in Zhao’s normative world. They are indivisible; otherwise ‘*Tianxia*-the world’ would be ‘destroyed’.²⁴ Here Zhao is elaborating on Chinese thought – *Tianxia* is actually *not* the focus of contemporary or historical debate in Chinese philosophy – and directing his arguments at a much wider audience to tackle problems not just in political philosophy, but in political science.²⁵ In this way Zhao seeks to unify not only the world, but the world of thought as well.²⁶

1. Tianxia as ‘the World’ geographically

Zhao argues that world chaos comes from using the improper perspective to view the world, conceptualize its problems and thus formulate solutions. Arguing that a world order based on national interests leads to conflict – including wars – Zhao tells us that we need to think about world order in terms of a truly world view. The world’s problems are too big for any one nation, superpower, region or international organization. Although the United Nations and the European Union are good ways of thinking beyond the state that come from good intentions, Zhao feels that they are still limited by their reliance on the analytical framework of international relations that is based on thinking from the nation-state.

To counter this mainstream way of framing ‘the international’, Zhao looks to an ancient passage from Lao zi’s *Daode jing* (Ch. 54) that instructs us to ‘use the world [*Tianxia*] to examine the world [*Tianxia*]’. Zhao uses this important passage to argue that *Tianxia* is more than a place: it is a method for looking at world problems and world order from a truly global perspective – thinking *through* the world rather than thinking *about* the world from an inferior national or individual perspective. While existing theories provide a ‘view from somewhere’,

²¹ Ibid, 35.

²² See Xu 1981, 1, 2.

²³ Zhao 2005, 41, 123-24.

²⁴ Ibid, 42.

²⁵ Ibid, 32.

²⁶ Ibid, 30. For a historically informed discussion of the unity of world and the world of thought in China see Bøckman (1998, 310-46).

Zhao's Tianxia presents a holistic 'view from everywhere'.²⁷ Likewise, to have world order, we need to measure the world according to a world standard, rather than according to national interests.

By thinking through the world with a view from everywhere, Zhao argues that we can have a 'complete and perfect'²⁸ understanding of problems and solutions that is 'all-inclusive'. With this all-inclusive notion of Tianxia, there is literally 'no outside' (*wuwai* – 无外). Since all places and all problems are domestic, Zhao says that 'this model guarantees the *a priori* completeness of the world'.²⁹ World unity thus leads to world peace and world harmony.

2. Tianxia as 'all the people'

The all-inclusive nature of Tianxia is more than geographical. Zhao uses it to define the second notion of Tianxia as 'all the people'. Here he underlines how a proper Tianxia system does not have an 'outside' either geographically or ethically.³⁰ While the present world system is defined according to the competing needs of nation-states, Zhao highlights how Chinese thought stresses political philosophy, especially ethics and human relations. Zhao looks to Carl Schmitt to argue that the west organizes political life according to distinctions between friends and enemies,³¹ which inevitably leads to division and conflict. He contrasts this with Chinese philosophy's all-inclusive nature, where difference is not converted into absolute Otherness. While the west organizes human relations around the idea of 'tolerance', according to Zhao China looks to the practice of being 'magnanimous' (*dadu* 大度) to difference: 'Those who come are not rejected, resulting in very beneficial and good things'. Citing Derrida's argument that we 'only have to be tolerant toward intolerable things', Zhao feels that tolerance is only necessary when we basically promote our own values. While China can have a 'tolerant heart', it doesn't have 'tolerant thought'; rather China has 'magnanimous thought' that doesn't reject 'the Other'.³²

In China's all-inclusive Tianxia system, then, distinctions between inside and outside, and even friends and enemies are more relative than absolute.³³ While the west divides the world according to racial distinctions, Chinese thought unites it according to an ethical logic that is cultural.³⁴ The goal of the Tianxia system is 'transformation' (*hua* 化): the aim of this 'comprehensive model' is to change the self and the Other, and thus normatively order 'chaos' by transforming the 'many' into 'the one'.³⁵ While Schmitt defines politics as the practice of publicly distinguishing between friends and enemies, Zhao tells us that 'Tianxia theory is a theory for "transforming enemies into friends," where "transformation" seeks to attract people rather than conquer them'.³⁶

Thus Tianxia as 'the world' includes 'all peoples'. Zhao glosses the famous classical passage 'Tianxia is shared' (*Tianxia wei gong*) to argue that 'Tianxia is the people of Tianxia's Tianxia. The people of Tianxia all think in terms of Tianxia. Of course this is the superior ideal'.³⁷ Likewise, Zhao quotes another famous classical passage, 'Tianxia is one family' (*Tianxia yi jia*) to argue that the world is one family.³⁸

²⁷ Zhao 2005, 108.

²⁸ Ibid, 40.

²⁹ Ibid, 51.

³⁰ Ibid, 14, 30.

³¹ See Schmitt 1996.

³² Zhao 2005, 13.

³³ Ibid, 51.

³⁴ Ibid, 53-4.

³⁵ Ibid, 13.

³⁶ Ibid, 33.

³⁷ Ibid, 30.

³⁸ Ibid, 41, 77.

The philosophical and political problem, for Zhao, is how to represent the interests of the people of Tianxia as a truly world interest. He argues – at length – that democracy is illegitimate for representing the world interest because 1) it is based on individual desires, which are manipulated in both elections and surveys, and 2) although democratic institutions may work in domestic politics they don't (and he argues can't) work on a global scale.³⁹ Because of these problems and contradictions, democracy is judged to be an 'erroneous' way of determining the people's will.

Because 'the masses always make the wrong choices', Zhao reasons that the people's general will needs to be determined by a 'careful observation of social trends'. These 'careful and sincere observations', Zhao tells us, 'can better detect the truth and come to a better reflection of public choice than do democratic elections'.⁴⁰ Since the masses are easily misled, only the elite can think through the world and have a 'view from everywhere'.⁴¹ Moreover, since 'most people do not really know what is best for them, but that the elite do [sic], so the elite ought genuinely to decide for the people'.⁴² Zhao thus concludes that majority rule needs to be guided by the rule of the majority of the Tianxia people's 'elite'.⁴³ Indeed, Zhao states that democratic elections have led to the 'disasters' of Hitler's Germany and America's 'new imperialism'.⁴⁴ Therefore the elite task of representing the people's heart is more important than popular democracy.⁴⁵ The criteria to judge the people's heart thus is not 'freedom' but 'order' – which is one of the main themes of Chinese thought (i.e. order/chaos – *zhi/luan* 治/乱). Tianxia, Zhao reminds us, refers to the greatest and highest order.⁴⁶

3. Tianxia as the world institution

Since the Tianxia system is defined by order, Zhao argues that this alternative world order needs to be established and maintained through a world institution. As he concludes the book: 'Tianxia theory is the core philosophy ... that provides the deepest theoretical plan for the world institution'.⁴⁷ Because Tianxia refers to the greatest order, its structure as the world institution has fundamental legitimacy.⁴⁸ Again, Zhao tells us that although the EU and the UN seem to be super-state regional and world institutions, they are limited by a worldview that is based on nation-states.⁴⁹

While the west organizes political life in terms of the three levels of 'individual, community and nation-state', Zhao tells us that Chinese political thought looks to the levels of 'Tianxia, state, and family'. While the western world prioritizes the individual and works in terms of the nation-state, the Tianxia system starts at the largest level, Tianxia, and orders political and social life in a top-down manner.⁵⁰

The legitimacy of the Tianxia world system does not come from procedural measures such as those that define liberal democracy (i.e. elections or the outcome of rational debate in civil society), but from two substantive criteria: universal effectiveness and complete

³⁹ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁰ Zhao 2006a, 31.

⁴¹ Zhao 2005, 108.

⁴² Zhao 2006a, 32.

⁴³ Zhao 2005, 28-9, 57.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 152.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 28; also see Zhao 2006b.

⁴⁶ Zhao 2005, 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 160.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 151-55.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 17.

transitivity.⁵¹ Thus the political rules and ethical judgements that apply at one level need to apply effectively at all levels: remember that democracy is an ‘error’ because it applies only at the domestic level of the state, but not at the world level of Tianxia. To argue these points about effective transitivity, Zhao uses a famous passage from the Confucian ‘Great Learning - *Daxue*’ that links pacifying Tianxia, governing the state and properly ordering families.⁵² He argues that this logic shows the ‘priority and primacy of world governance by a world institution’ with order ‘descending down to states and families’.⁵³ In this hierarchy, both ends of this continuum are important – but for different reasons: while Tianxia provides political order for ‘inferior’ levels, family (*jia* 家) morality sets the ethical standard for superior levels.⁵⁴ As a way of shifting our attention away from state-centric views of order and world politics, Zhao stresses that the family and Tianxia are the two pillars of his world institution.

Zhao concludes one of the core chapters of *The Tianxia System* with a comparative analysis of historical empire systems, arguing that the Tianxia system is the most appropriate for the twenty-first century.⁵⁵ The Roman empire, the British empire, and America’s new empire all have fatal flaws. The Roman empire was a universal empire that expanded its territory through military conquest, and thus had no natural borders. The British empire, on the other hand, is an example of modern imperialism that is based on the logic of the nation-state, which integrated the illegitimate ideas and practices of nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism. This conjunction of capitalism and imperial colonialism resulted in an unbalanced world system that followed the divisive logic of the nation-state by imposing territorial borders between peoples. America’s ‘new empire’ of globalization has transformed modern imperialism’s direct control into a more hidden domination of the world’s politics, economics and culture. This globalization of American values means that the US not only plays the game, but sets the rules as well – which Zhao feels is ‘disastrous’.⁵⁶

Lastly, Zhao presents the ‘Tianxia model’ as the solution to both modern imperialism and new imperialism.⁵⁷ While previous empires have taken a particular nation-state as the model and universalized its particular values, criteria and standards, Tianxia is the only system that thinks through the world. When we take Tianxia as an *a priori* and complete concept for the world institution, then we can distinguish a positive globalism from a negative globalization.⁵⁸ Still, Zhao stresses that he is not advocating the resurrection of ancient China’s imperial practice; his objective is to sketch out a utopia, with Tianxia theory providing only a ‘theoretical plan’ that utilizes the resources of China’s tradition thought.⁵⁹ Indeed, he spends the bulk of this five page description of Tianxia criticizing other people and other places: the US-led Iraq War, Habermas’s communicative rationality, Nye’s soft power, Hardt and Negri’s new understanding of empire, the international politics of human rights, the limits of liberalism, and so on.⁶⁰

Hence Zhao doesn’t dwell on the details of how the world institution would work in the twenty-first century, or how we would get from the present international system to his utopian Tianxia system, except to note that participation is voluntary.⁶¹ At other times, Zhao states that while Tianxia institution is shared, each locality would be independent economically, politically

⁵¹ Ibid, 19.

⁵² See Confucius 1971, 357-59.

⁵³ Zhao 2006a, 8.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Zhao 2005, 102-09.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 102-05.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 105-09.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 105.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 106.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 106-09.

⁶¹ Zhao 2006a, 36.

and culturally as sub-states in the Tianxia system rather than autonomous nation-states in the Westphalian international system.⁶² Indeed, on the last page of the book Zhao opines that ‘What we have discussed here is merely limited to the philosophical questions of Tianxia theory, and the realization of the future’s world institution model certainly poses very complicated questions, which philosophy cannot yet answer’.⁶³

To sum up, Zhao tells us that the world has serious political problems that need to be solved first conceptually, and then institutionally. Zhao’s arguments grow out of a more general feeling among Chinese intellectuals that China’s ethical system of domestic and international order was destroyed by the violent tendencies of selfish (Western) nation-states that operated in the Westphalian world system that continues to order the world. Zhao provides the Tianxia system as the solution to the world’s problems, arguing that we need to think through the world to understand it, and thus effectively and legitimately govern it. Tianxia is a hierarchical system that values order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy and human rights. It is literally a ‘top-down’ prescription for the world’s ills. Employing a mixture of tradition and modernity, the book uses ancient texts to propose a very modern solution to the very modern problems of world order. Tianxia is presented as *the* proper all-inclusive master narrative of world order that will solve all the world’s problems through a single master institution that has ‘no outside’ and operates according to a ‘view from everywhere’. Rather than being like contemporary philosophical debates that often question such master narratives, Zhao’s reasoning is like popular strands of theoretical physics that seek the final ‘theory of everything’.

III. Philosophical and Historical Criticism

Before proposing the Tianxia system as the solution to the world’s problems in the body of the book, in his ‘Introduction’ Zhao needs to clear the scholarly terrain of rival theories from both China and the west. He quickly goes through the history of contemporary Chinese thought, arguing most strongly against a group of scholars who give a robustly self-critical view of China’s struggles with modernity and the west.⁶⁴ Zhao feels that this obsession with ‘digging up skeletons’ from China’s past and looking to the west for answers makes the Chinese people lose hope, and thus damages China’s ‘social cohesion and unity’.⁶⁵ He quotes Foucault’s power/knowledge argument,⁶⁶ but argues that ‘at the same time we also must stress the relations of “knowledge/responsibility” as the theoretical meaning of knowledge’. He concludes that ‘truth is not the highest judgment, for truth must be good, truth must be responsible, because in the end what humanity needs is life, not truth’.⁶⁷

Zhao’s project thus is to ‘transcend the historical limits’ of Chinese tradition in order to explore the theoretical possibilities offered by Chinese thought for dealing with contemporary problems.⁶⁸ Rather than dwelling on ‘past mistakes’, Zhao very deliberately takes what he calls a ‘positive view’ of Chinese tradition: ‘Simply put, we must discuss the positive meaning of the concept of “China”’.⁶⁹ In this way, Zhao is able to revive an 3000 year old (and unachieved) ideal like Tianxia by looking to ‘its conditions of possibility’ and ‘potential beyond history’.⁷⁰

⁶² Zhao 2005, 78.

⁶³ Ibid, 160.

⁶⁴ For an interesting discussion of debates in contemporary Chinese thought see Wang Hui (2003, 140-187).

⁶⁵ Zhao 2005, 4-5.

⁶⁶ See Foucault 1980.

⁶⁷ Zhao 2005, 5-6.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 46.

The goal thus is not criticize China (whose problems are all figured as in ‘the past’ rather than the present), but to ‘rethink China’ in order to deal with the world’s future.⁷¹

Beyond his general rhetorical style, Zhao’s presentation of the Tianxia system raises a number of issues for both classical Chinese philosophy and contemporary social theory. I will first examine the problems of his use of classical Chinese texts, and then consider the problems of his engagement with contemporary social theory.

Chinese philosophy

Zhao is certainly not the first Chinese scholar to look to tradition for answers to contemporary problems. This was the task of New Confucian movement of the twentieth century, which was revived in the 1980s-90s on mainland China by overseas Chinese scholars such as Harvard’s Tu Weiming. Curiously, recent philosophical and social science investigations of Chinese thought rarely discuss ‘Tianxia’ as a global idea.⁷² Rather they look to Confucian ethics to see how Chinese culture can help us better understand social relations in terms of human interactions on a very inter-personal scale, or look to *tian* to explain China’s immanent and anthropomorphic spirituality.⁷³ The closest they come to Zhao’s work is in trying to shift discussions of human rights from legalistic ‘rights talk’ to concentrate more on ‘human dignity’ figured as the product of human relations, which includes obligations to society.⁷⁴ Thus rather than explore the possibilities of Tianxia system, this diverse group of scholars is more interested in ‘Confucian humanism’. More to the point, although many contemporary scholars are also interested in Confucianism as a universally valid philosophy, it is common to distinguish ‘Confucian humanism’ from the historical legacy of ‘imperial Confucianism’ as an authoritarian state practice. Hence most authors consciously avoid talking about Tianxia as part of the contemporary potential of Chinese thought.⁷⁵

While Zhao is certainly striking out in a new direction by exploring the theoretical possibilities of Tianxia, his argument is based on a cavalier use of a few key passages from Chinese thought, which upon closer consideration actually *don’t* support his Tianxia worldview. Zhao’s argument for thinking through the world is based largely on his reading of Chapter 54 of Lao zi’s *Daode jing*: ‘use the world [Tianxia] to examine the world [Tianxia]’. This passage is cited numerous times in each chapter, but Zhao usually takes it out of context. The larger passage is ‘use the self to examine the self, use the family to examine the family, use the neighbourhood (*bang* 邦) to examine the neighborhood, use the world to examine the world. How do I know that the workings of the world [Tianxia] are like this? From this’.⁷⁶ Thus while there is nothing in this passage that prioritizes Tianxia over other spaces of activity – and actually suggests that we start with the self, not with the world – Zhao reads it as a top-down hierarchy: ‘while you can’t easily sacrifice the needs of units at one level for the interests of a unit at another level, at the same time, it also signifies that the superior levels have to exist, and that common interest comes from them more than from the units at the inferior levels’.⁷⁷ Quoting Lao zi to support a world institution also goes against the general tenor of the *Daode jing*, where utopia is presented as suspicious of grand ordering projects and even thinking beyond one’s village (see chapters 60,

⁷¹ Ibid, 10-11.

⁷² See Tu, et al. 1992.

⁷³ Tu 1989; Hall and Ames 1998, 235-44; Tu et al. 1992.

⁷⁴ Ames 1997; Rosemont 1988; Zhao 2005, 22-25, 98, 109; Zhao 2006b.

⁷⁵ Also see Xiang Lanxin, ‘Jieyan quqi, shenyan hexie’ [Stop talking about [China’s] rise, be careful discussing [world] harmony], *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), (26 March 2006).

⁷⁶ Translation based on Ch’en 1981, 241-42; Chen 1985, 273-75. For a different interpretation see Ames and Hall (2003, 160-62).

⁷⁷ Zhao 2005, 62.

80). Thus, Zhao is disingenuous in his use of the *Daode jing* to support his argument for a hierarchical world order that thinks through the world and acts through world institutions.

Zhao likewise plays fast and loose with other key classical Chinese texts. Throughout the book, Zhao employs the phrases ‘Tianxia is shared – *Tianxia wei gong*’ and ‘Tianxia is a family – *Tianxia yi jia*’ to support his argument that Tianxia is the highest and best perspective, and that it works like a family.⁷⁸ But, once again, these phrases come from a key classical text – the *Book of Rites (Liji)*’s ‘Great Harmony’ – the full passage of which actually calls into question Zhao’s arguments.⁷⁹ A closer consideration of the Great Harmony passage shows how these two phrases are going in opposite directions: while ‘Tianxia is shared’ is the utopian goal, ‘Tianxia is a family’ refers to the failure of Great Harmony. It is neither the norm nor the objective; ‘Tianxia is a family’ is something to be avoided, or perhaps only tolerated.

Is Zhao’s presentation of Tianxia a productive ‘misreading’⁸⁰ of the Chinese tradition that opens up theoretical possibilities? Perhaps. In many ways, Tianxia is an empty or negative term – it refers to everything *but* the heavens – that needs to be explained and interpreted. While other contemporary scholars stress the need to actively interpret Chinese thought,⁸¹ Zhao appeals to ‘tradition’ for authority while also using a more positivistic style of stating ‘facts’ and criticizing ‘errors’. I am not arguing that Zhao’s Tianxia system is ‘a lie’, ‘wrong’, ‘erroneous’ or a ‘mistake’, so much as suggesting that on philosophical grounds his use of Chinese texts is not very persuasive. Rather than a productive misreading of the tradition, Zhao seems to be more interested in selecting a few phrases to use as slogans to brand his new Tianxia system: ‘use Tianxia to examine Tianxia’, ‘Tianxia is shared’, ‘Tianxia is a family’.

Social theory

In discussing the benefits of the Tianxia system, Zhao employs contemporary social theory’s concept of self/Other relations to compare how analytical borders are drawn in China and the west. Here he is following thinkers like Levinas and Bachelard in seeing social relations and space as ethical and normative practices.⁸² Connolly and Walker applied this mode of analysis to international relations to question how foreign policy emerges when the national self performs its identity as a mode of exclusion of the Other as a foreign enemy.⁸³ The critical aim of these theorists is to resist the urge to convert difference into Otherness, and thus let diverse modes of life exist.

Zhao’s most important argument, then, is that Chinese thought and the Tianxia system provide a productive form of self/Other relations that does not alienate difference to the outside. But upon scrutiny, Zhao’s argument that China has no outside or Others runs into problems. His argument concentrates on how the west has absolutely excluded otherness, and has dealt with difference through conquest. Yet Todorov’s analysis of early European-American encounters shows how violent conquest is only one mode of dealing with difference: conversion to the conqueror’s worldview is the other technique of imperial violence.⁸⁴ In other words, although exclusion is an important issue recent feminist analyses of patriarchal societies, for example, have shown how it is important to examine how self/Other relations work to *include* difference in hierarchical ways. Thus although Zhao’s all-inclusive Tianxia system may not have an outside, its institutionally-backed ‘self’ utilizes both absolute exclusion and hierarchical inclusion to control three social groups: the west, the people, and other nations along China’s frontier.

⁷⁸ Zhao 2005, 30, 63, 65.

⁷⁹ See de Bary 1960, 176.

⁸⁰ See Bloom 1975.

⁸¹ Liu 2006; Tong 2006.

⁸² Levinas 2000, 75-88; Bachelard 1994.

⁸³ Connolly 1991, 36-63; Walker 1993.

⁸⁴ Todorov 1984.

1. Excluding ‘the west’

Zhao’s master narrative is based around a fundamental and absolute distinction between a moral China and an immoral west, whose individualist thought system and Westphalian world system he feels need to be transcended. Although Zhao is very interested in how analytical frameworks set the terms of debate,⁸⁵ he is going in a different direction from scholars such as Wang Hui who argue that it is essential to question such absolute distinctions to understand China: ‘So, just what are China’s problems? Or, what methods or even language should be used to analyze them? ... [since] the binaries of reform/conservatism, the West/China, capitalism/socialism, and market/[state] planning are still hegemonic concepts ... problems can hardly be brought to light’.⁸⁶ Hence even though Zhao is very critical of how western thought employs absolute binaries, he uses the same analytical framework of China/west to construct and exclude ‘the west’ as the Other.

Although he cites numerous modern and contemporary western thinkers – including Kant, Marx, Husserl, Schmitt, Habermas, Foucault, Rawls, Derrida, Hardt and Negri – Zhao does not explore their views at any length. Rather he describes western thought in terms of an absolutist version of Christianity that is intolerant of ‘heresy’, and violently excludes unbelievers as ‘pagans’.⁸⁷ In this way, Zhao ignores the vibrant explorations of cosmopolitanism since Kant revived this discussion in the late eighteenth century. Indeed, one Chinese word to describe cosmopolitanism is Tianxia-ism (*tianxia zhuyi*).⁸⁸ Perhaps Zhao overlooks current discussions of cosmopolitanism because their focus on ‘cosmopolitan democracy’⁸⁹ and ‘actually existing cosmopolitanisms’⁹⁰ runs against his Tianxia system’s unitary world institution governed by elites. Zhao is more interested in critiquing ‘mainstream’ thought, so he likewise treats international relations theory as nothing but state-centric realism, and thus does not consider how post-positivist IR theory is self-critically considering many of the same questions that interest him. In other words, Zhao is not interested in critically understanding western thought so much as creating an Occidentalized west as the Other, so as to reaffirm the identity of Tianxia as the all-inclusive self.

In a broader sense, Zhao is mixing up ‘is’ and ‘ought’ by using his utopian Tianxia model to criticize the faults of historical empires. This is especially significant because China actually has a 2500 year history of empire(s), and thus a wealth of historical experience in world ordering.⁹¹ Moreover, each empire has had its own utopian ideal – Pax Romana, the civilizing mission, white man’s burden, manifest destiny, free world, and so on – to inspire its governance regime. In other words, all of the ‘western’ empires discussed in *The Tianxia System* have likewise argued that they are best for the world as the manifestation of an altruistic philosophical project that is not only just, but inevitable. In this sense, Zhao’s *Pax Sinica* mission is quite similar to that of the western imperial scholars who he criticizes; he is likewise aiming to integrate culture and power,⁹² in what some now call China’s ‘yellow man’s burden’ of using China’s ethical mode of governance to pacify and civilize the world.⁹³ As Friedman summarizes:

⁸⁵ Zhao 2005, 1, 7.

⁸⁶ Wang Hui 2003, 146.

⁸⁷ Zhao 2005, 14, 49, 51-54, 59, 77, 99.

⁸⁸ The more common Chinese word for cosmopolitanism is world-ism (*shijie zhuyi*).

⁸⁹ See Archibugi & Held 1995.

⁹⁰ See Cheah & Robbins 1998.

⁹¹ See Wang GW 2006.

⁹² See Said 1978, 2; Said 2000, 346.

⁹³ See Nyiri 2006, 106; Ren 2006, episode 12.

‘To be a Chinese patriot is to be an ethical being committed to a better future for the human race in an authoritarian, hierarchical, China-centered world.’⁹⁴

2. Guiding the masses

As noted above, Zhao’s main argument against democracy is that the world’s masses are incapable of thinking through the world, and thus cannot be trusted to act in a truly world interest. He goes on at length to criticize common people as ‘blind followers, selfish, irresponsible, foolish, and vulgar’. Zhao likewise worries about the legitimacy of a society that is dominated by ‘swindlers, petty people, whores, idiots, and scoundrels’.⁹⁵ In this sense Zhao is following a Maoist line of using the category ‘the people’ not inclusively to embrace all persons, but in a restrictive sense that hierarchically organizes people according to the distinction of ‘the people’ and ‘non-people’.⁹⁶ Zhao’s solution thus is not to totally exclude the people, but to include them in a hierarchical way that is guided by the elite.

3. Conquering and Converting Other Nationalities

Zhao does not give much historical evidence for the utility of the Tianxia model. As we saw above, he is more interested in the possibilities of pure thought than in the messy experience of history. Even so, at times Zhao does elaborate on what he means by an all-inclusive Tianxia that seeks to transform enemies into friends. But rather than stress how inside and outside are ‘intimately’ interwoven,⁹⁷ Zhao argues that Tianxia describes a place that is all part of the normatively good ‘inside’, and thus lacks an outside (*wuwai*). Within the all-inclusive Tianxia, there are distinctions between inside and outside (*nei/wai* 内/外), including in international relations.⁹⁸ Yet Zhao feels that these relations are not of absolute Otherness, but of relative cultural difference. Zhao thus uses imperial China’s ‘tribute system’ as the guiding model for the effective integration afforded by Tianxia. He cites the example of inner and outer zones (*neifu* and *waifu*) in the Sinocentric imperial order to explain how difference co-exists in the Chinese system which was not organized around clear territorial borders. Rather imperial China and the Tianxia system order the world through a series of concentric circles with the civilized imperial capital at the center flowing out to embrace the various ‘barbaric’ peoples at the periphery. This differentiation between inner and outer led to imperial China’s ‘civilization/barbarism distinction’, where ‘[a]ccording to Chinese concepts, barbaric lands and tributary states became beneficial competitors’ for Chinese civilization.⁹⁹

While Zhao stresses that these were not racial distinctions, this is a moot point. If we accept that ‘race’ is a pseudo-scientific concept deployed to explain cultural differences, then the category of ‘racism’ did not exist before modern science and social Darwinism. When Zhao says that the benefit of this ‘civilization/barbarism’ interaction was an ‘objective discussion of the long term advantages and disadvantages of different cultures’, it certainly sounds like a hierarchy of cultures analogous to modern racism and the PRC’s current concern with the ‘population quality’ of its ethnic minorities.¹⁰⁰ More to the point, these hierarchical cultural relations where the goal is to transform enemies into friends follows the logic of the other technique of empire discussed above: conversion.¹⁰¹ The workings of conversion are clear in this important passage from the key Confucian text, *The Mencius*, which later became a slogan for a dominant strand of

⁹⁴ Friedman 2007, 8.

⁹⁵ Zhao 2005, 27.

⁹⁶ See Schoenhals 1994.

⁹⁷ Bachelard 1994, 217-18.

⁹⁸ Zhao 2005, 53.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 53, 59-61; also see Dan 2005, 25-39; Hevia 1995, 7-15; Fairbank 1968a.

¹⁰⁰ Zhao 2005, 54; Jiang 1999, 8, 10, 12; Dikötter 1992; Kipnis 2006; Nyiri 2006.

¹⁰¹ See Todorov 1984.

Chinese frontier policy: ‘I have heard of the Chinese converting barbarians, but not of their being converted by barbarians’.¹⁰² While Zhao suggests that we need to transform peoples by ‘improving their interests’, Shapiro reminds us that community-building always entails community-destroying.¹⁰³

In current discussions of world order, it is popular to see traditional China as a benevolent empire that provided peace and stability for centuries before the arrival of western imperialism in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ This narrative is now often used in international relations texts to explain why China is not a threat to world order in the twenty-first century.¹⁰⁵ Yet this comparison of a war-mongering Westphalian Europe with a peace-loving imperial China that didn’t wage war for centuries employs a very narrow definition of ‘war’ as an inter-state phenomena.¹⁰⁶ Actually, the Chinese state was constantly engaged in violent interactions with states and semi-states along its frontiers. In its first century, the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) expanded massively in the west, including a struggle over the northwest frontier with Czarist Russia and the Mongolian Zunghar state that lasted into the 1770s. Rather than being a case of western imperial incursion into China, (as it is presented in Chinese modern history textbooks), this episode is better understood as a violent struggle between three empires – the Manchu Qing, Czarist Russia, and the Mongolian Zunghar – which resulted in the annihilation of the Zunghar as a people.¹⁰⁷ A key classical phrase that Zhao does not mention is instructive: ‘The Tianxia is united’ [*Tianxia yitong*] describes ‘uniting the tianxia through conquest’.¹⁰⁸ This reflects how the Chinese empire had a *para bellum* policy where, as Johnston argues, war was a constant occurrence in a zero-sum game that employed both pure violence and absolute flexibility.¹⁰⁹

Violent conflict along China’s borders is down-played in Beijing’s official record because this narrative was written by imperial officials from the center who engaged in what Giersch calls ‘textual incorporation’: they told Beijing that the empire was in control of frontier areas, when in fact it wasn’t.¹¹⁰ Indeed, new analyses of China’s borderlands are able to contest the romantic view of China as a benevolent empire because they use sources from outsiders who were subject to China’s often violent imperial control. Curiously, such research is not common in China itself, where the Chinese empire is rarely seen as an example of imperialism (which following Lenin is defined as a western capitalist phenomenon). Wang Hui explains that while postcolonialism is popular in Chinese academia, it focuses on a critique of western imperialism, thus making it ‘often synonymous with a discourse of [Chinese] nationalism’. Because imperial China is distinguished from modern imperialism, there is ‘not a single Chinese postcolonial critique of Han [Chinese] centrism from the standpoint of peripheral culture’.¹¹¹

Hence Zhao’s argument that Tianxia is all-inclusive seems to miss the point that not everyone wants to be included. China’s imperial and contemporary history in Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang is instructive for what happens to difference that prefers to stay outside and not be transformed into a ‘friend’ – it is redefined as a terrorist separatist threat that warrants military action. China’s *legal* claim to these territories is strong, but Zhao’s point is to stress the *ethical* legitimacy of the Tianxia model, which is sorely lacking. The main question then is not whether

¹⁰² Mencius 1970, 3A/4; Dikötter 1992, 18.

¹⁰³ Zhao 2006c,1; Shapiro 2004, 126.

¹⁰⁴ See Fairbank 1968a; Zhao 2006a, 36.

¹⁰⁵ Li 1999; Zhang, YJ 2001.

¹⁰⁶ See Kang 2003, 65-66.

¹⁰⁷ See Perdue 2005, 256-89. For a description of similar – but less successful – wars in the Ming dynasty see Johnston (1995).

¹⁰⁸ Wang GW 2006, 3; also see Bøckman 1998, 310-46.

¹⁰⁹ Johnston 1995, 249-54.

¹¹⁰ Giersch 2006, 12.

¹¹¹ Wang 2003, 170; also see Dutton 1998.

China has a pattern of self/Other relations that is similar to the west (or not),¹¹² but how the Tianxia system addresses difference. Because Zhao figures his Tianxia system as ‘all-inclusive’, any difference risks being converted into the sameness of the overarching (Chinese) self.

Zhao’s *The Tianxia System* is not a one-off; it is popular because it taps into China’s current *zeitgeist*. The PRC’s official policy is to peacefully rise as a status quo power within the international system. But many Chinese take for granted that the current Westphalian system is immoral, legalistic and encourages war. Imperial China’s Sinocentric hierarchical world order thus is seen as the solution rather than the problem. Since Chinese culture is taken to be superior, many feel that it is the duty of patriotic Chinese to spread Chinese values, language, and culture not just in Asia, but around the world.¹¹³ Hence, in the twenty-first century to be cosmopolitan is to be patriotic, and vice versa. But this popular foreign policy of patriotic cosmopolitanism often goes against the PRC’s official foreign policy of peaceful rising, in a ‘nationalist’ struggle that is seldom seen outside Chinese-language texts.

To sum up, this section has shown how Zhao’s Tianxia utopia has serious theoretical problems both in terms of its cavalier reading of classical Chinese texts and its odd use of contemporary social theory’s vocabulary of ethical relations in a way that promotes ‘conversion’ rather than ‘conquest’. Lastly, it is necessary to point out the irony of one of Zhao’s main arguments. He understandably criticizes the west, and America in particular, for universalizing its particular worldview at the considerable expense of other worldviews. But is Zhao doing anything different? Isn’t he trying to universalize the very particular Chinese concept of Tianxia in order to apply it to the world? And doesn’t Zhao’s *Pax Sinica* risk creating the very problems of an intolerant world order that he seeks to solve?

This leads us to the next section’s argument that the real meaning of the Tianxia system is not found in its novel world order, but in its role in contemporary Chinese politics. In this way, Tianxia is a strong example of how domestic and international politics overlap and inform each other as part of a broader struggle over the meaning of ‘China’. Qin Yaqing put it simply when he stated that the main issue for the PRC’s engagement with the international system is not the institutional politics how will China fit into multilateral organizations, but the identity politics of answering the question ‘Who is China?’¹¹⁴ Once again, worldview, national image and soft power are intimately related in discussions of foreign policy.

IV. Conclusion: The soft power of rethinking China & rethinking the world

Although Zhao doesn’t discuss it, the meaning of Tianxia is even more complex than the Empire/World dynamic. According to classical and modern dictionaries, Tianxia also means ‘China’. This is one reason why Zhao’s book is so popular: Tianxia is about China, and China’s role in the world in the twenty-first century – which are very hot topics in the PRC and among overseas Chinese. According to many scholars, imperial China’s Tianxia system of governance worked very well – until it was challenged by western imperialism. Thus in modern times China was forced to build a modern nation-state to defend itself from these foreign challenges. The question that many Chinese scholars are now asking is whether it is time for China (which is now a strong nation-state) to engage in promoting, establishing or constructing Tianxia – not just for China’s benefit, but for the world.¹¹⁵ Indeed, Zhao quotes another public intellectual who feels that after China’s recent economic success the world will ask China about its contribution to world civilization, especially with theories of world order.¹¹⁶

¹¹² See Shih 2007.

¹¹³ See Friedman 2007, 7-8; Nyiri 2006, 106.

¹¹⁴ Qin 2006, 13.

¹¹⁵ Chen 2006; Wang GW 2006; Wang YW 2006, 3; Sheng 1995.

¹¹⁶ Zhao 2005, 11.

In this way, ‘Tianxia’ discourse is a good example of how ‘soft power’ takes shape as the romanticization of a particular national culture into ‘universally desirable values’. Following this line of argument with the Japanese case, Leheny feels that the concept of soft power ‘has less value as a tool for evaluating Japan’s regional importance than it does as a heuristic device for grasping how Japanese policymakers now see their regional role’.¹¹⁷ Likewise, Tianxia provides us with a heuristic device for understanding how Chinese elites view their role in the world, and the world itself. Moreover, the rise of Tianxia discourse in China can also help us grasp the soft power of soft power: how Tianxia has become a dominant way of understanding the future Chinese world order. Zhao’s *The Tianxia System* is meaningful not just as a philosophical or an academic text. It is a bestseller that generates broad discussion about the meaning of ‘nationalism’ and ‘globalization’ in China. Its power emerges not necessarily from its arguments – which as we saw above are quite broad and vague – but from its position in a network of debates among public intellectuals, state intellectuals and political leaders about China’s role in the world as a major power.¹¹⁸

Among public intellectuals, the Zhao’s Tianxia theory thus is embedded in China’s political culture that on the one hand has an enduring anxiety about unity and disunity (including order and chaos), and on the other has a strong tradition of utopian thought that seeks to address these perennial issues with the ‘complete and perfect world’.¹¹⁹ Zhao thus is not alone in looking to the past for China’s future strengths: Zhang Yimou’s film *Hero* concludes with the assassin being transformed into a hero (i.e. enemy transformed into friend) when he decides not to kill the emperor. The lesson drawn from this historical parable is that the individual has to sacrifice himself and his kingdom for the greater good of the Tianxia empire, because as the hero reasons, ‘Only the King of Qin can stop the chaos by unifying Tianxia [through conquest]’.¹²⁰ Indeed, the subtitles translate Tianxia into English simply as ‘Our Land’. The Chinese television documentary series on ‘The Rise of Great Powers’ from Portugal to the US that captivated the PRC in 2006 applies this historical lesson to China’s future as a major power.¹²¹ ‘The Rise of Great Powers’ is popular because like *The Tianxia System* it appeals to a common feeling among Chinese people that it is China’s turn (again) to civilize and harmonize the world. Indeed, in early 2007 the same directors travelled to Japan, Europe and North America to conduct interviews for the sequel: ‘China’s Road’.¹²²

Hence Zhao’s book is part of the broader discussion of *how* China will be a world power: his ‘Introduction’ of *The Tianxia system* is called ‘Why we need to discuss China’s worldview’. Zhao feels that to be a true world power, China needs to excel not just in economic production, but in ‘knowledge production’.¹²³ Contemporary Chinese thought, Zhao tells us, is sorely lacking because Chinese scholars are captivated by western theory. To be a knowledge power, China needs to stop importing ideas from the west, and exploit its own indigenous ‘resources of traditional thought’. Thus the aim of his book is to ‘rethink China’ so as to ‘restructure China’. But because China’s problems are the world’s problems, we then need to rethink and restructure the world in terms of Tianxia.

¹¹⁷ Leheny 2006, 223.

¹¹⁸ For a fascinating analysis that uses a similar method to understand how ‘nationalism’ is produced in China’s discursive networks see Hughes (2005).

¹¹⁹ Zhao 2005,40; Hua 2001; Hua 2005; Callahan 2004; Tu 1994.

¹²⁰ Zhang YM 2004.

¹²¹ Zhou, 2006. This popular documentary series was broadcast twice on China’s national television network (CCTV) in late 2006. It has also generated a series of nine best-selling books (see *Daguo jueqi* 2007; Author’s interview with a director, 6 May 2007 in Manchester).

¹²² Author’s interview with a director, 6 May 2007 in Manchester. ‘China’s Road’ is scheduled for broadcast in late 2007.

¹²³ Zhao 2005, 1.

Here Tianxia is embedded in an important debate about how China can fit into the world system as a ‘responsible great power’ that has emerged through a network of liberal Chinese IR scholars in the past decade.¹²⁴ China is trying to prove to the world (especially the west) that it is no longer a revolutionary state that challenges international order, but is a ‘responsible’ member of international society.¹²⁵ The PRC has demonstrated this by pursuing a more multilateral foreign policy that includes expanding its membership in international organizations at both the regional and the global level. Zhao’s ‘Introduction’ also talks about China’s ‘responsibility’ to the world, but he adds a theoretical twist to argue that China will become a responsible great power not merely in economic or military terms, but in terms of concepts and structures:

Bearing responsibility for the world, and not just for one’s own country, this is China’s philosophical perspective. In practice it provides totally new possibilities, especially if we use ‘Tianxia’ as the primary analytical unit for understanding political/economic benefits. When we use Tianxia to understand the world, then we can use ‘the world’ to analyze problems, and transcend the western mode of thought that relies on nation/state, and then we will be able to take responsibility for the world as our own responsibility, and thus create new world concepts and new world structures.¹²⁶

Here the notion of a ‘responsible China’ shifts dramatically from that of a conservative state that is responsible to the present world order to Zhao’s Tianxia that is responsible for creating a totally new world order. Rather than the China problem being a world problem, the ‘world problem’ is now ‘China’s problem’.

While ‘responsible China’ appealed to a network of liberal IR scholars in China, a group of IR theorists is also very interested in Zhao’s Tianxia system. This network is engaged in promoting a ‘Chinese style’ of international relations theory.¹²⁷ The ‘China school’ of IR theory thus follows an academic trend that expands from Deng Xiaoping’s formulation in the mid-1980s that the PRC needed ‘to build socialism with Chinese characteristics’, to build sociology, history, law (and so on) ‘with Chinese characteristics’. Deng was not interested in reviving Chinese tradition, which he criticized as ‘feudal ideology’; he concentrated on the ‘socialism’ side of the formulation to protect his market-based reforms from leftist criticism.¹²⁸ But since the 1990s, Chinese scholars have much more interested in the ‘Chinese characteristics’ side of the formulation, as a way of carving out space in a transnational academic market for their own unique research.¹²⁹ Thus many key IR scholars are hailing Zhao’s Tianxia system as a way to create space for a ‘China school’ of international studies in an intellectual marketplace that is dominated by western IR.¹³⁰ Indeed, the editors of China’s top international studies journal, *World Economics and Politics*, invited Zhao to write the editorial page essay for their September 2006 issue.¹³¹ But again, Zhao is doing more than contribute to this debate which sees the ‘China school’ as an assertion of cultural sovereignty that protects China’s unique way of understanding the world. Zhao is interested in transcending this chaotic (and nationalist) intellectual scene by unifying the world of thought under the banner of the Tianxia system.

¹²⁴ See Wang 1999; Xia 2001; Shih 2005.

¹²⁵ See Shirk 2007, 105-39; Shambaugh 2004/05; Johnston 2003; Medieros & Fravel 2003.

¹²⁶ Zhao 2005, 3.

¹²⁷ See Liang 1997; Song 2001.

¹²⁸ Deng 1987.

¹²⁹ See Shi 2006; Li 2002.

¹³⁰ See Qin 2006; Wang YW 2006.

¹³¹ Zhao 2006c. Zhao was invited to speak to an international politics group at the Institute of World Economics and Politics in March 2007, where he was well-received, especially among younger scholars (Author’s interview with Wang Yizhou in Beijing, 12 April 2007).

Lastly, Zhao's writings are embedded in the discursive network of China's top political leaders; Tianxia's utopian themes chime with Beijing's latest foreign policy narrative: 'harmonious world'. Just five months after *The Tianxia System* was published, Chinese President Hu Jintao outlined his four point plan for a 'Harmonious World' at the United Nations in September 2005.¹³² Since then, the 'harmonious world' formulation has dominated China's explanations for its responsible engagement with the world, including an important section of the December 2005 white paper 'China's Peaceful Development Road'.¹³³ Even hard-core realists like Yan Xuetong now exuberantly use this idealistic slogan to describe China's recent diplomatic victories.¹³⁴

The relation of scholarship and government policy – especially the ties between philosophers and the foreign ministry – is certainly opaque in China. On the one hand, Zhao and the editors of *World Economics and Politics* all work for CASS, China's largest and most important think-tank, which is often compared to a state ministry in terms of its size and influence. Zhao, on the other hand, rarely refers to the Chinese state (and never to the Communist Party) in his book. When he is criticized by other scholars for trying to use the Tianxia system to 'harmonize the world' under Chinese leadership,¹³⁵ Zhao demurs by saying that he is only interested in 'purely theoretical' questions of world order. But then a few lines later Zhao praises the Chinese government for 'once again utilizing the resources of China's tradition thought' in its twin policies of building a 'harmonious [domestic] society' and a 'harmonious world'.¹³⁶ Like with *The Tianxia System*, Zhao's argument here is both 'nationalist' and 'cosmopolitan' since his form of utopian globalism is based on Chinese ideals.

Thus Tianxia is embedded in a broad discussion of Chinese visions of world order that includes a feature film like *Hero*, 'The Rise of Great Powers' TV series, dozens of articles in prominent IR journals, and even the Chinese president's 'harmonious world' foreign policy narrative. Zhao's ideas are **not** influential in the standard sense of everyone agreeing with his proposed Tianxia system: actually the film, the TV series, academic articles and state policy all disagree with him on many important issues. Rather Zhao's ideas are indirectly influential according to the normative logic of soft power: he has been able to set the agenda, and thus productively generate a powerful discourse that sets the boundaries of how people think about China's past, present and future. Zhao does this by employing familiar vocabularies: for the general audience he talks of 'sacrifice for Tianxia'; for liberal IR scholars he talks of China as a 'responsible great power'; for IR theorists he discusses how China has its own 'worldview' that is different from the west; and for Beijing's political elite his ideas resonate with China's 'harmonious world' policy. Zhao actually has very different understandings of these key phrases from each of these groups, but he uses this familiar language to position himself at the center of these core discursive networks, and thus present his contrary views as the mainstream view. By rethinking China in this way, Zhao is also able to rethink the world, and thus set discursive boundaries to control Chinese popular understandings not just of the past and the present, but of the future as well.¹³⁷ In this way, the Tianxia system is part of China's assertion of normative soft power, but in a way that complements China's hard power of economic and military strength.

¹³² Hu 2005.

¹³³ 'Wu Jianmin: "Harmonious World" helps rebut "China Threat"', *People's Daily*, 20 March 2006; State Council 2005.

¹³⁴ Yan Xuetong, 'China's first step forward in its "harmonious world-oriented" diplomacy', *People's Daily*, (19 December 2006).

¹³⁵ Xiang Lanxin, 'Jieyan quqi, shenyan hexie' [Stop talking about [China's] rise, be careful discussing [world] harmony], *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), (26 March 2006).

¹³⁶ Zhao 2006c, 1.

¹³⁷ See Shapiro 2004, 48.

Although Zhao's book was reviewed alongside Habermas's work,¹³⁸ perhaps the best way to understand the role of *The Tianxia System* is to compare it to Samuel Huntington's high profile writings. The point is not whether (or not) Huntington's articles are intellectually sophisticated, or whether (or not) US policy is dictated or influenced by them. Rather the texts are powerful as polemics that define problems in specific ways that actually serve to limit the range of possible solutions. In this way, Huntington set the terms of the debate about post-Cold War international politics that in turn generated a certain range of responses. Even when these responses are critical of the clash of civilizations argument, they add to its influence by recirculating the 'clash of civilizations' concept.

Zhao was already famous among intellectuals in the humanities before he put together his thoughts on Tianxia in 2005. *The Tianxia System* worked to grow the market for a politically-inflected discussion of Chinese utopia, and is provoking responses from both IR scholars and political leaders in China. By inserting his discussion of a Chinese utopia into powerful discursive networks, Zhao has asserted himself as the 'mainstream' for discussions of China's future – and of the world's future. Zhao mainstreamed Tianxia not by making arguments that all would agree with; rather Zhao was successful because he described this exotic idea in terms of already existing vocabularies and debates. People now have to respond to his arguments, even when they are discussing something else: nationalism, globalization, socialism, world peace, and so on.¹³⁹ Although *The Tianxia System* has serious theoretical problems, the book has quite successfully generated considerable social capital for Zhao as well as enhancing China's soft power as a source of universally valid model of world politics. But rather than showing how soft power can help us to understand the international influence of China's worldview, Zhao's manoeuvres show how soft power actually is better understood as an inward-looking phenomena. It helps us understand how ideas about foreign policy – including those that chafe with the official view – get put into play in Beijing as part of the domestic politics of China's national image. That the main significance of *The Tianxia System*.

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¹³⁸ Sun 2005.

¹³⁹ See Fei-Ling Wang, 'Heading Off Fears of a Resurgent China', *International Herald Tribune*, (11 April 2006); Xiang Lanxin, 'Jieyan quqi, shenyan hexie' [Stop talking about [China's] rise, be careful discussing [world] harmony], *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), (26 March 2006). This, of course, includes the author.

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