"All Under Heaven as one Family":
Tianxiaist Ideology and the emerging Chinese Great Power Identity

*Matti Puranen**

Abstract

The rise of China is perhaps the most important development in world politics today. It is challenging the very foundations of the liberal international order that the Western great powers have created. Yet, as China emerges as an economic and political powerhouse with global influence, it is not at all clear what kind of a great power it will become, and what kind of a world order it sees as its ideal. Chinese official foreign policy rhetoric on the subject offers only vaguely described slogans and concepts. Another approach for studying "China's mind" is to study China's academic discourse on world politics and foreign relations. In this article, the academic debate around the concept of *tianxia* (天下. in English: all under heaven) is analyzed, in order to study the great power identities that China is constructing for itself as it prepares for a bigger role in world politics. The article argues that the "*tianxia* theory" is attempting to distance China from "the West" by creating a completely unique civilizational identity for China. The *tianxiaist* narrative argues that, because of its unique character and because of its "harmonious" and "worldly" *tianxia* conception of world politics, China can offer fresh and relevant alternatives for the international community. This is not only a concern for political philosophers, as the concepts of *tianxia* theory also seem to be influencing and inspiring the foreign policy thinking of the Chinese government.

Keywords: Tianxia theory, tianxiaism, Chinese foreign policy, Chinese great power identity

Introduction

The rise of China is perhaps the most important development in world politics today. It is challenging the foundations of the international order the Western great powers have created. The rise has recently gained even more momentum as the leading superpower, the United States, seems to be backing away from its international commitments and is offering China even more responsibility in global affairs. China appears to be ready too – in the words of President Xi Jinping: "China [is] moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind" (*China Daily,* 2018).

Yet, 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

* Matti Puranen is a PhD candidate at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. E-mail: matti.i.puranen@jyu.fi

at all clear what kind of a great power it will become, and what exactly would be its "great contributions to mankind".

During the early decades of the People's Republic (1949–1978), the Chinese interpretation of Marxism, *Maoism,* offered a consistent identity, as well as a worldview for China. It answered such questions as who the Chinese were (vanguards of the world proletarian revolution), who they were against (capitalists, imperialists, and other class enemies), and what was their plan for the world was (a world communist utopia). After Maoism was practically abandoned in the 1980's, China projected its energies into developing its economy. Questions about its identity could wait, for the time being.

Now that China is moving into "the center stage", these kinds of question are surfacing again. How can a giant state like China be peacefully incorporated into the international system, and what kind of world will China want to create as it emerges as a global rule maker? The official Communist Party rhetoric offers only vaguely-described concepts and slogans as answers. For going beyond this bold yet hollow rhetoric, this article suggests analyzing Chinese academic discussions on world politics as a means for deepening and expanding our understanding of official Chinese foreign policy.

Questions like the ones above are being widely discussed by scholars of world politics in China, and it is a growing consensus that China should not rely on Western ideas for analyzing the world anymore. Instead, it should develop its own theories and concepts, as it possesses a long and illustrious intellectual tradition which goes back thousands of years from which to draw inspiration. Thus, during the early 2000's, a search for a "Chinese theory of world politics" intensified. Studying these "new" ideas offers important insights into Chinese conceptions of world politics and into the new identities which are being constructed for the rising China. These ideas are also not of mere academic, theoretical, or philosophical interest, as they are increasingly influencing the official foreign policy imagination of the Chinese government.

For example, Yan Xuetong's "Qinghua School" of international relations studies ancient Chinese political philosophers such as Xunzi (ca. 310–237 BCE) and Han Feizi (ca. 279–239 BCE) and applies their ideas on "moral leadership" and the "kingly way of governance" to the contemporary world political situation (Yan, 2011). Another important branch of this search is the *tianxia* theory (天下论, *tianxia lun*) or *tianxiaism* (天下主义, *tianxia zhuyi*). *Tianxia* theorists study imperial China's traditional system of foreign relations, claiming that the current international order, which is based on competing national states, should be replaced with some kind of world government that would oversee the good of the whole planet.

This kind of new thinking is important as, in the strictly controlled academic environment of China, it can be seen as an enlargement of the "official" political discourse which is dominated by the Communist Party of China. The party controls the broad direction of academia, yet the dominant ideas flow back to influence the political leadership in a dualistic, two-way relationship. The party, which is shedding its ideological skin, needs the input of academic circles as it is forming a new identity and a new outlook for China after communism (Mokry, 2018).

This article will study these academic visions of world politics, focusing on the *tianxia* theory. The discussion around the *tianxia* theory offers fascinating views into the emerging great power identities of the rising China. At a closer look, it resembles a complete ideology – rather than a scientific theory – with its own political worldview and a normative program for creating a new cosmopolitan world order.

Interestingly, these *tianxiaist* ideas seem to be inspiring China's official foreign policy too, at least on the rhetorical level. In addition to analyzing the worldview and the core concepts of the *tianxiaist* ideology, the article attempts to point out how these same ideas are offering support for the Chinese government as it constructs its grand narrative of a benign and peacefully-rising China with its unique and "worldly" solutions for reforming the international order. This connection is briefly examined in the last section. In the article, *tianxia* theory is approached as a form of political rhetoric, following the conceptual framework proposed by Quentin Skinner and Michael Freeden.

What is the tianxia theory?

Tianxia, roughly translated, means "all under heaven". It points to an ancient Chinese conception of the world in which everything – literally all under heaven – was considered to be under the authority of the Chinese Emperor, the Son of Heaven (天子, *tianzi*). According to this cosmology, the supreme god, Heaven bestowed a mandate on the emperor to rule the Earth (the so-called "Mandate of Heaven"), but only as long as he ruled it righteously.

Tianxia theorists study this traditional cosmology, and their core claim is that, for most of its history, China indeed was the center of a unique, East Asian international order, "the *tianxia* order". This order was strictly hierarchic and centrally organized, but it was also a "harmonious" and loose system, allowing for cultural diversity and autonomy within its domain. It was an alternative system for organizing international relations before the Western great powers forced their Westphalian order upon the world. According to *tianxiaist* thinkers, studying the principles and institutions of this ancient order might offer a lot of insight for

solving the various problems that globalization has intensified: extreme nationalism, international terrorism, or global warming, to name just a few (Sheng, 2014). One could briefly describe *tianxiaism* as a Chinese variant of cosmopolitanism.

Historians, however, debate whether such a unique system ever existed. Without going too deeply into the details, a compromise can be made that, at least during some parts of history (the early Tang, Ming, and Qing Dynasties), China's foreign relations were arranged hierarchically around a "tributary system" in which the smaller political entities acknowledged China's supremacy (at least rhetorically) and received autonomy and economic benefits in return. Even during periods of when China was weak and this was not the case, Chinese emperors did still hold an idealistic, Sinocentric cosmology of being the Sons of Heaven, ruling all under heaven.[1]

This *tianxia* cosmology – even if at times in contradiction with reality – dominated the worldview and philosophy of the Chinese Empire for thousands of years, up until the 19th century when the Western great powers arrived with technologically-advanced gunboats and forced its downfall. The Western political cosmology differed considerably from *tianxia*. It was based on an idea of equal sovereign nation states which would interact within the international system according to certain universal laws and institutions. Competition, diplomacy, trade, and war were all integral parts of this Western international system, which was formalized in the treaty of Westphalia in 1648 (Zheng, 2011).

During the 19th century, China had to learn the hard way that its worldview of being the center of "all under heaven" had been a complete delusion. During these painful years, China was forced to accept that, instead of being the center of everything under heaven, it was simply another state (国, *guo*) within the larger system of states (万国, *wanguo*). The concept of *tianxia* was slowly replaced with the Western concept of the world (世界, *shijie*). Other new concepts such as the nation (民族, *minzu*), the Chinese (中国人, *Zhongguoren*), and the people (人民, *renmin*) had to be invented, as in the all-embracing world conception of *tianxia* there had been neither place nor need for such ideas (Zheng, 2011).

After the revolution of 1911 and the establishment of the Republic of China, China fully acknowledged the principles of the Western international order. It set its aims to become a "normal" modernized nation state and pushed the old cosmology of *tianxia* aside. The creation of the Communist People's Republic of China in 1949 seemed to finalize this disengagement

---

[1] For a modern classic that set the stage for studying this 'Chinese world order', see Fairbank 1968

from the imperial past. Indeed, during the reign of Chairman Mao Zedong (1949–1976), all traditional thinking was heavily criticized and even physical objects such as statues or buildings – most notably perhaps the home of Confucius – were demolished (Paltemaa & Vuori, 2012).

After the death of Mao in 1976 and the rise in power of the pragmatically oriented Deng Xiaoping, China was finally stabilized. Economic reforms were launched and strict Maoism was pushed aside, both in practice and in theory; China initiated its search for a new, post-communist identity. In this process, traditional culture and philosophy were slowly rehabilitated and, since the 1990's, large scale research projects on Confucianism, for example, have been heavily funded by the government (Brady, 2012).

It is against this "traditional learning fever" that we witness the re-emergence of the *tianxia* worldview. This was first mentioned by Sheng Hong in a short but influential article *From nationalism to tianxiaism* (从民族主义到天下主义，*Cong minzuzhuyi dao tianxiazhuyi*) in 1996, but was brought into the mainstream by Zhao Tingyang with his 2005 book *Tianxia system* (天下体系:世界制度哲学导论, *Tianxia tixi: Shijie zhidu zhexue daolun*) After the publication of Zhao's book, the *tianxia* theory was noted also in the West, and many notable sinologists such as William Callahan (2008) and Peter Perdue (2015) have commented on it.

Both Sheng and Zhao suggest that the traditional Chinese *tianxia* order, with its centralized leadership and its hierarchically arranged international relations, would be more stable and peaceful than the current "liberal order" of equal and sovereign nation states in endless competition against one another. They argue that *tianxia* was forgotten during the decades of Western supremacy, but it is now time to resurrect the concept, for it might just save the planet from the enormous challenges of globalization.

Zhao and Sheng are the main proponents of *tianxiaism*, but the idea has been commented on and developed by many other scholars, such as Ren Xiao, Li Mingming, Bai Tongdong, and Xu Jilin. Among these scholars, a vibrant discussion on the possibilities and prospects for the *tianxia* cosmology has emerged. However, strong critics of the concept have also taken part in such discussions (Ge, 2015).

Even though the word that is often used by the discussants is *tianxia* 'theory', one must ask if it is indeed an actual theory in the usual understanding of the concept. *Tianxia* theory does not seem to offer a precise framework for explaining how world politics functions in the manner of *neorealism,* for example. It is much more about sharply criticizing Western politics and proposing vague schemes for a global federation of some kind. Therefore, *tianxia* theory

can perhaps be better understood as an ideology of *tianxiaism*, with its philosophical worldview and its normative framework for guiding action.

How then to approach an ideological construct such as *tianxiaism*? As Quentin Skinner, among many others, has pointed out, political theories – as well as political ideas – are not pieces of timeless cumulative wisdom. They are arguments in debates, embedded in their particular historical and sociopolitical contexts, and they should be studied as such (Skinner, 2002). This is the case also with theories of world politics, as no universal agreement on the nature of world politics exists. What we have instead is different kinds of theories and -isms, offering their distinctive interpretations and normative arguments.

Keeping this in mind, we must ask: why is the ancient concept of *tianxia* being brought forth right now, at this moment in history? What is the historical context, and what are the debates in which it is taking part? I would argue that, for the *tianxia* theory (and for the "Chinese theories of world politics" at large), the context is the ongoing change in global great power relations: China is rising, and the Western powers are declining – at least comparatively. A rising great power will need its own interpretation and narrative of the world, and its own identity: where does it come from, and where is it heading? What shall its contribution for the world be?

We can, thus, define *tianxiaism* as an ideology that argues for the reform of the international order. In this article, a conceptual approach inspired by Michael Freeden is applied, to analyze it. According to Freeden, ideologies should be approached by studying the main concepts that are in use within them. It is through the definition and arranging in the order of its core concepts that an ideology relates itself to other ideologies and to the world (Freeden, 2003).

Although the *tianxia* theorists differ on many accounts, many points of agreement and many similar definitions of the concepts also exist. In this article, following Freeden, these areas of agreement are studied, in order to identify the main elements of *tianxiaism* and to recognize the essential beliefs and assumptions that make up its worldview. 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 concepts. Using this approach, a rather coherent picture of *tianxiaism* can be constructed.

One of the central themes that the theorists agree upon is that *tianxia*, whatever it is, was completely different from "the West". Thus, when explaining *tianxia's* merits, critical descriptions and narratives of "the West" and its seemingly eternal features constantly emerge. The West works as a reflective concept: it is an anti-China, in which all the aspects which are

not part of China's can be stacked. The West is "the other" in which China reflects itself as it attempts to create a unique great power identity for itself.

This is, by no means, a new phenomenon in Chinese thinking. For example, Fei Xiaotong's classic sociological study *From the Soil* (乡土中国, *Xiangtu Zhongguo*) specifically explained China's societal idiosyncrasies by comparing them to their Western counterparts. Fei argued that Western and Chinese societies operate on completely different principles, and it does not make sense to apply Western sociological theories in the Chinese context. One of the most important Chinese philosophers of the 20th century, Liang Shuming, claimed in a similar fashion that:

> 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 (quoted in Lu & Zhao 2009: 52)

The main premise of Liang's most important work, *Substance of Chinese Culture* (中国文化要义, *Zhongguo wenhua yaoyi*), was to compare the Chinese and Western civilizations and their cultural origins.

In order to understand *tianxiaism*, we will thereby first have to take a look at its historical narrative of the West. We will then examine how this is "West" is contrasted with *tianxia* and what kind of a great power identity is thus proposed for the rising China. In the last section, these ideas are briefly compared to the prevailing foreign policy concepts of Chinese leadership.

West – The civilization of chaos

According to Zhao Tingyang, it is because of the independent historical and philosophical foundations of the West and China that both civilizations developed completely different political worldviews, thought systems, and institutional arrangements (Zhao, 2011). The current world order was created by the Western great powers according to their own historically contingent image and conception of international politics. It is, thereby, not "universal", and nor does it offer the best possible system for organizing international politics. On the contrary, it is actually the very source of the global troubles which become more acute every day.

According to most accounts, the current international order developed after its main elements (the sovereignty of national states, diplomacy, etc.) were institutionalized in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The order then spread all over the world, forcing all other political units and regional arrangements to accept its logic (Bull & Watson, 1985). Zhao argues that the seed of the same system can be found in the city state (*polis*) system of Ancient Greece. It is in the

polis-system that the Western conception of world politics was initially created: a conception in which the political world was divided into small units which would compete against one another (Zhao, 2016).

Sheng Hong points out that China was in a similar situation during its "warring states period" (475–221 BCE.). It was divided into small independent kingdoms which fought and fiercely competed against one another. China, however, managed to unify and pacify the warring states in 221 BCE by creating the Chinese Empire, and it has been able to uphold this unification until today. The West, on the other hand, has remained in its own "warring states" period throughout most of its history and, more dangerously, has forced this "warring states logic" upon the rest of the world (Sheng, 1996).

Because of this historical trajectory, the *tianxiaist* argument goes, the West is only capable of imagining international politics through nation states and their interactions. In the Western mind, above the national state there is only the level of "*internationalness*" (国际, *guoji*), not the world as a whole political unit, like in China's *tianxia*.

The West has never been able to overcome this kind of "dividing conception of politics" (Zhao, 2016:). Even such illustrious philosophers as Immanuel Kant have failed to think in *tianxia*-like global terms. 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, and for Zhao, it was under the influence of Western, narrow minded tradition of world politics (Zhao, 2011).

For the West, the world is simply a geographical concept. It is an arena in which sates can draw their borders, compete, and continue their destructive tendencies. Zhao argues that, from the Chinese perspective of *tianxia*, there is a "non-world" (非世界, *fei shijie*) or a "chaotic world" (乱世, *luanshi*). As a result of this conception of the world, the current international order also operates according to a "Hobbesian law of jungle", and the West is incapable of stabilizing it. On the other hand, it does not even want to, as it sees the order and its competitive character as natural, and even desirable. The West hopes to correct the flaws of the order by making the competition more market-based and civilized, but by leaves the logic of division intact (ibid.).

Zhao offers the United Nations as a case in point. On the surface, it might seem like a genuine world institution, but it is merely a forum for the nation states to gain benefits for themselves. The interest of the whole world is absent from its scope, and hence it is "an agora without its polis" (Zhao, 2009).

Zhao (2016) and Li Mingming (2011) both agree that the West has only been able to imagine two ways to bring stability to the Westphalian chaos: the first is by setting up a hegemony of one great power which will dominate all others. This can be efficient for some time, but the hegemon will never have the acceptance of everybody, and mutinies against it will always emerge. The hegemony will, sooner or later, end up collapsing back into an all-out war. The second way is to set up a "balance of power" between the great powers and their alliances. This is also an unstable situation, as it will eventually burst into wars of massive scale. And, even during peaceful times, the risk of a great power war is always lingering (Zhao, 2016). The Western world order is, thereby, always on the verge of collapse, and the West – because of its philosophical roots – is unable to see the core problem

According to Zhao, the Western institutional arrangement, based on the "warring states logic", is, however, not the only problem, since the Western ethical vision of the world is also limited because of its monotheist origins. When Christianity emerged, the Western worldview ceased to develop towards a universal happiness between the humans on the Earth. With Christianity, Zhao goes on, this utopian society was moved into the afterlife, heaven, but on the planet, the mission was set to convert everybody to the one true faith (Zhao, 2011: 33).

Zhao sees Christianity as an intolerant religion whose main effect is to sharply divide the world into the world of Christianity and the world of the pagans. Zhao argues that, even though Christianity has lost its influence as a political theory in Western thinking, its legacy of dualist "confrontational thinking" has not. It is because of this legacy that the West is constantly searching for "others" to suppress or transform into its own image (Zhao, 2011).

This "confrontational thinking" has, since, taken many different forms. It can be found in Carl Schmitt's concept of "enemy consciousness" and in his metaphor of "politics as warfare". This same attitude also influences Western countries (especially the United States), as they keep spreading their "universal values" (Ibid.). Because of the legacy of Christianity and its dualist worldview, the West sees its own conception of world politics as the only and universal one. The current Western international order is, then, like the Christendom of the old, and every state and culture in it must be converted into its "universal" principles, values, and doctrines.

From these core elements, a sinister image of the West is narrated. According to this image, the perils of the international order – wars, conflicts, and competition – are the results of Western worldview which is based on divisions and opposites. The West is not able to see the whole, and nor can it ever tolerate a diversity of values and beliefs. From the point of view of *tianxiaism*, the perils of the international order, hence, do not originate from a fixed human

nature or any other inevitably determined source. They could and should be overcome with a new *tianxia* system.

Within this narrative, the concept of the West is never problematized or even defined clearly. It is taken as a civilizational entity with its essential elements, in the same manner as in Samuel Huntington's theory of the "Clash of Civilizations". The civilization of the West is filled with all the elements that are not part of the Chinese civilization, and this image is then used as a mirror for creating the unique alternative order of *tianxia*.

China – The civilization of peace and harmony

According to the *tianxiaist* narrative described above, the Western conception of politics developed around nation states and their interactions. The Chinese conception of politics, on the contrary, developed from the viewpoint of the whole world as a political unit and the Chinese ideal has, since the dawn of history, been that 'all under heaven' should be unified and pacified.

Zhao argues that the *tianxia* conception first emerged during early Zhou-dynasty (1046–771 BCE), when a loose feudal order – *fengjian* (封建) – was created. Within this system, the Zhou court served as a leading center, and the various feudal states, tribes, and bands accepted its central status. The feudal states had a high degree of autonomy in their domestic policies, so the Zhou court's main task was to maintain the stability, peace, and prosperity of the whole realm. Zhao argues that this was an ideal situation: instead of constant war and insecurity, the whole known world was unified, yet remained a diverse and harmonious whole (Zhao, 2010).

Sheng Hong offers a different starting point for *tianxia*. For him, *tianxia* emerged much later, during China's Han-dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), when the warring states were pacified and unified under one emperor (Sheng, 1996). The centralized empire of the Han is clearly different from the loose feudal system of the Zhou, but the core idea is the same for both Sheng and Zhao: the whole known world was united and considered to be one political unit. The competition of sovereign, regional units was seen as a dangerous, unstable anomaly which should never again be allowed to re-emerge.

Tianxiaists argue that, because of this historical tradition, Chinese political thinking evolved towards a worldly approach to politics. It valued stability over liberty, peace over war, and hierarchy over anarchy. For Zhao, the difference is evident in the etymologies of the concepts of politics in both civilizations. The Western concept of 'politics' originates from the name of the Greek city state, *polis*, whereas the Chinese word *zhengzhi* (政治) means

'governance', more broadly. The main political question for China was, from the beginning, how to harmonize and pacify the whole world (Zhao, 2010).

From the point of view of *tianxia* cosmology, the collapse of the world into smaller competing entities means chaos (乱, *luan*). Li Mingming has argued, that because of this experience, the Chinese have developed a mass-psychological "order complex" which forces China to analyze world politics from the point of view of "order". Peaceful chaos, such as in the liberal international order of our day, is not "order" in a Chinese sense, as a kind of "ethical order" also has to exist in the world (Li, 2011).

What does this ethical order mean? Whereas the Western concept for the world is only geographical, the Chinese concept of the world, *tianxia*, consists of three important aspects:

First, like the Western concept, *tianxia* also means the geographical world: all under heaven and thus all the geographical formations in it. Second, it has a (social) psychological meaning. *Tianxia* included all the people under heaven and, for *tianxia* to enjoy peace and prosperity, all the people needed to acknowledge its legitimacy. For the emperor to obtain his mandate to rule all under heaven, it was not enough to simply conquer all the territories through warfare. One had to obtain the approval of the world, the so-called "will of the people" (人心, *renxin*) (Zhao, 2016).

Third, *tianxia* bears an ethical or political meaning. *Tianxia* was considered to be an ethical order, resembling a big family (天下一家, *tianxia yijia*). The emperor was thought to be like a respected father who was expected to wield his power righteously. Smaller political entities were the "children", which would need to demonstrate their submission, but which would also enjoy the security and economic benefits offered by the emperor (Ren, 2014).

Tianxia was a complete cosmology in which all and everything, humans and nature, had their rightful places under the emperor's protective shadow. Indeed, according to *tianxiaism*, an important element was that there was "no outside" (无外, *wuwai*). Because *tianxia* covered everything, it could not have clear outer borders, and nor could it leave anyone outside of it. *Tianxia*, therefore, did not have pagans or "others" which it would need to convert or repress (Zhao, 2011). Peoples living far away from the center were considered to be "strangers", but not heretics who needed to be conquered or converted. As one traveled further from the center, the might of the emperor withered, but there was never a clear outer border (Ren, 2014).

Tianxia was a hierarchical and relational world order, and the Western concept of sovereignty was simply not comprehensible within it. Instead of sovereign units, different kinds of relations between the center and the political units around it existed. Some were close and

intimate, some friendly, and some more distant (Ren, 2014). Because *tianxia* was based on relations of varying intimacy between the political entities instead of clear-cut borders, nationalism was also an unknown concept within it. Nationalism, and all of its curses, arrived in China only with the Westerners, and after the collapse of *tianxia* (Sheng, 1996).

In a striking contrast to the West, *tianxia* is also presented as a realm of cultural diversity, as it is claimed to have allowed religious, cultural, and ethnic heterodoxy to exist within it. Different religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and even Christianity were all allowed coexist. *Tianxia*, however, did make a distinction between the civilized center and the barbarian people living on the rim. But, according to *tianxiaist* interpretation, the center never attempted to forcibly proselytize the barbarians. Instead of converting them, China believed in a patient "transformation" (化, *hua*) of the barbarians. This meant that, given time, the barbarians would witness the cultural supremacy of the center, and would slowly adopt its civilized ways (Ren, 2014).

An important element of this transformation is that "one does not go and teach the rites" (礼不往教, *li bu wang jiao*). In general, using force for achieving *any* needs was considered to be shameful, as this meant that the emperor's virtuous conduct had not been enough (Ren, 2014). The *tianxiaist* narrative sets this defensive and morally superior attitude in stark contrast with that of the West, with its aggressive tendency of forcing "universal ideas" upon others, and most definitely with weapons if necessary.

Li Mingming has argued that these differences originate from different conceptions of human nature. Western civilization sees human nature as evil and power hungry. Thus, the Western conception of world politics follows: the world is an anarchic battleground of states fighting for power and hegemony. China, on the other hand, has always believed in a gradual change: human nature is open and it can be cultivated through proper education and with a proper virtuous example. The Chinese conception of world politics is similarly optimistic and cooperative in nature (Li, 2011).

Central elements of Tianxiaism

To sum up the above, the worldview of *tianxiaism* presents a grand narrative of two civilizations, the West and China, which evolved in very different directions during the course of history. Both civilizations developed their own philosophies and value systems, as well as unique institutional solutions for the political realities surrounding them. The Western solution was efficient for some time, but now, during the era of globalization, it has run out of steam. It

needs to be replaced with the long-forgotten *tianxia* solution, which is better suited for the globalized world politics of the future.

According to the *tianxiaist* argument, China was once the center of its own order which was, in many important ways, superior to the current Western order. But, because of its peaceful nature, the *tianxia* order could not resist the "warring state" logic of the West, and it had to surrender. After the fall of *tianxia*, the West was able to force its own world order upon the globe (Sheng, 1996).

The core of this narrative is that, historically, China has not been a great power like the others. Similarly, the zero-sum great power competition of the modern world is only a Western phenomenon, and a result of regional developments in the West. Already, thousands of years ago, China had overcome of this kind of mentality, and instead contemplated politics in worldly terms. The traditional Chinese *tianxia* conception thus superseded the *realpolitik* logic of world politics, and it could be resurrected again for the salvation of the world.

From the comparison of the two civilizations, a table of value concepts can be made:

Table 1.

China / Tianxia	The West
Stability / Order	Chaos
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Harmony	Competition
Acceptance of difference	Confrontational thinking
'No outside'	Strict division between units
World	State
Family	Individual

Source: Author's own work

By such an interpretation of history, *tianxiaism* attempts to unite modern China with its glorious imperial past. The values of *tianxiaism* can then be understood as values for China's "new" great power identity. It is an identity of a great power that has a unique, peaceful, and worldly approach to world politics. It is a great power which strives for stability, yet also cherishes harmony and cultural and political diversity within the world.

Tianxia, although peaceful and tolerant, did, however, have a center of authority to which all the smaller political units had to pledge loyalty and submission. *Tianxiaists* also generally propose that a kind of world institution should be established, but nowhere in the discussion is it explicitly stated that China should establish this new center. Yet, it is impossible not to gain the impression that the rising China should strive for such a position, because the West is unable to see a solution for the troubles of the globalized world. It is the task of China to realize on a global scale the harmonious and peaceful order it commanded for millennia. After the long and tormentous years of foreign intrusion and inner instability, China is now finally returning to reclaim its title as a middle kingdom, *Zhongguo* (中国).

Tianxiaism and China's Foreign policy

At the end, we should briefly return to the original premise of this article; that is, what kind of a great power is China going to become, and what kind of a world order is its top leadership dreaming of? And how does the study of Chinese academic ideas on world politics, such as *tianxiaism*, help us to decipher the official foreign policy thinking of the Chinese leadership?

These questions will be discussed in detail elsewhere (Puranen, *upcoming*) but, to put it briefly, the relationship between *tianxiaism* and China's official foreign policy line is not straightforward yet it is recognizable. The official rhetoric of the Chinese government does not apply the exact same wording, and nor does it directly quote any of the *tianxia* theorists. However, many implicit elements of *tianxiaism* can be found below the surface. Already, during the reign of President Hu Jintao (2002–2012), such core foreign policy concepts as the "harmonious world" (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*) and a "new type of great power relationship" (新型大国关系, *xinxing daguoguo guanxi*) were introduced. Both imply a world order in which political units and even civilizations would coexist peacefully, respecting each other's unique characters. States, and especially great powers, should focus on building mutual trust and "win-win cooperation" and the dangerous, competitive, Cold War mentality should be set aside (Keith, 2012).

During the tenure of President Xi Jinping (2012 onwards) the general tone of Chinese foreign policy rhetoric has become more assertive and confident. A turn from "the discourse of humiliation" into "the discourse of rejuvenation" is taking place; a shift in identity from the "modest, victimized, developing country China" into a "confident and assertive great power China" is happening. At the same time, the rhetoric has gained even more cosmopolitan and – one could say – *tianxiaist* overtones. (Mokry, 2018)

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,* thereby CCFM)[2]. 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 of a harmonious *tianxia* can be easily recognized as the inspiration for the concept, and Xi Jinping himself has described CCFM using the *tianxiaist* concept of "all under heaven as a one family" (CCTV, 2017).

Remarkably, officially or semi-officially sanctioned Chinese scholarship which interprets the meaning of the CCFM usually confirms the *tianxia* cosmology as one of its core elements. For example, a recent book *Building a community of shared future for mankind*, whose publication has been overseen by Renmin University Communist Party General Secretary Jin Nuo, argues that the philosophical sources of CCFM can be traced to, firstly, the traditional Chinese *tianxia* worldview; secondly, to the ideology of socialism with Chinese characteristics; and thirdly, to modern Chinese experiences in diplomacy. The book states poetically that "when the great way prevails, all things under heaven are shared equally and justly" and that this traditional ideal "communicates the Chinese sense of responsibility that goes beyond national boundaries" (Chen & Pu, 2017: 21).

An article written by Jiang Shihong, a Professor of Law at Peking University, offers another interesting example of a semi-officially sanctioned scholarship on China's foreign policy. In his article, Jiang interprets the lengthy speech given by Xi Jinping at the Nineteenth Party Congress held in Beijing in October 2017 in which Xi described China's new ideology of "socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era" (新时代中国特色社会主义思想, *xinshidai Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi sixiang*). Jiang argues that the foreign policy components of China's new ideology is drawn from Marxism, but also from China's historical tradition, especially from the *tianxia* cosmology. He goes even further by claiming that the communism that the party is striving to build is actually the age old Confucian ideal of the "great unity under heaven" (天下大同, *tianxia datong*) (Jiang, 2018). Marxism and *tianxiaism* thus seem to coexist peacefully in the ideology and foreign policy of China's "new era".

---

[2] Interestingly, the official English translation uses the word "future", although the original Chinese term 命运 (*mingyun*) means 'destiny' or 'fate'.

Non-Chinese scholars such as Jyrki Kallio and Didi Kirsten Tatlow have arrived at similar conclusions. Kallio points out that Chinese scholars such as Jiang would not dare to "go out in public explaining the national leader's thoughts" unless they had some backing from the high level of Chinese leadership for their ideas. Kallio thus sees *tianxiaism* as influencing the thoughts of Xi Jinping and the Communist party leadership at large (Kallio, 2018). For Tatlow, *tianxiaist* ideas are not simply a concern of rhetoric or ideology, as they are already evident in the actual methods and strategies of Chinese foreign policy (Tatlow 2018).

Conclusions

To conclude, it can be argued that the Chinese leadership is tapping into various different ideational sources as it is modernizing its great power identity. Officially sanctioned academic debates on China's position in world politics are one such source, and the article argues that the analysis and understanding of these debates and the prevailing ideas in them forms an important part of illuminating the "black box" of Chinese foreign policy thinking.

Tianxiaism can be seen as an ideational resource which is helping China's leadership primarily in writing a new grand narrative of world politics – a narrative that differentiates China from the West and the core elements of the Western international order which China wants to reform. With foreign policy concepts inspired by *tianxiaism*, China wants to argue that it has always had a unique approach to world politics, and that it can thereby offer a relevant alternative vision for the whole of mankind. Underdeveloped, and even clumsy as a proper theoretical argument, *tianxiaism* still serves well as a powerful rhetorical device in this project of China's search for discursive power (话语权, *huayu quan*) on the world stage.

References

Brady, Anne-Marie. 2012. "State Confucianism, Chineseness, and tradition in CCP propaganda." In Brady, Anne-Marie, ed. *China's thought management*. New York: Routledge: 57-76.

Bull, Hedley and Adam Watson, Adam. eds. 1985. *The Expansion of International Society.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Callahan, William. 2008. "Chinese visions of world order: post-hegemonic or a new hegemony?" *International Studies Review.* 10(4): 749–761.

CCTV. 2017. "Xi Jinping: Shijie geguo renmin yinggai bingchi tianxia yijia' de linian."
December 1. Available at:
http://m.news.cctv.com/2017/12/01/ARTItpvfRkdaIkqyeFMQslkq171201.shtml. [Accessed
on October 11, 2018]

Chen, Yue and Ping and Pu, Ping, eds. 2017. *Building a Community of Shared Future for
Mankind*. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.

China Daily. 2018. "Full text of Xi Jingping's report at 19th CPC National Congress."
November 4. Available at:
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-
11/04/content_34115212.htm. [Accessed on May 5, 2018]

Fairbank, John K. ed. 1968. *Chinese World Order*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Freeden, Michael. 2003. *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Ge, Zhaoguang. 2015. "Dui 'tianxia' de xiangxiang: yige wutuobang xiangxiang beihou de
zhengzhi,   sixiang   yu   xueshu".   Aisixiang.   October   14.   Available   at:
http://www.aisixiang.com/data/92884.html. [Accessed on February 20, 2018]

Jiang, Shihong. 2018. "Philosophy and History: Interpreting the 'Xi Jinping Era' through Xi's
Report to the Nineteenth National Congress of the CCP", *The China Story*. May 19. English
translation by David Ownby. Available at: https://www.thechinastory.org/cot/jiang-shigong-on-
philosophy-and-history-interpreting-the-xi-jinping-era-through-xis-report-to-the-nineteenth-
national-congress-of-the-ccp/. [Accessed on October 12, 2018]

Kallio, Jyrki. 2018. "Xi Jinping thought and China's future foreign policy: Multipolarity with
Chinese characteristics." *FIIA Briefing Paper*. 243.

Keith, Ronald C. 2012. "New History Inside Hu Jintao's Foreign Policy: 'Harmony' versus
'Hegemony'." In: Cheng Y.S. Joseph, ed. *China: A New Stage of Development for an Emergent
Superpower*. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press: 235-252.

Li, Mingming. 2011. "Lun tianxia sixiang zhong de zhengdao yu zhidao." *Shijie Jingji yu
Zhengzhi*. 2011(12): 109–125.

Lu, Weiming and Zhao, Xiaoyu. 2009. "Liang Shuming's Viewpoint of Chinese and Western
Cultures in the Substance of Chinese Culture". *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 40:(3): 52-66.
Mokry, Sabine. 2018. "Decoding Chinese concepts for the global order: How Chinese scholars
rethink and shape key ideas of foreign policy." *MERICS China Monitor*. October 4. Available
at:
https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/201810/180927_MERICS_ChinaMonitor_Foreign_
Policy.pdf. [Accessed on 10 October, 2018]

Paltemaa, Lauri and Vuori, Juha. 2012. *Kiinan kansantasavallan historia*. Helsinki:
Gaudeamus.

Perdue, Peter. 2015. "The Tenacious Tribute System." *Journal of Contemporary China*.
24(96): 1002–1014.

Puranen, Matti. *Upcoming* 2020. Dissertation on tianxia theory as a rhetorical device. University of Jyväskylä.

Ren, Xiao. 2014. "Lun Zhongguode shijiezhuyi: duiwai guanxi sixiang he zhidu yanjiu zhi er." *Shijie Jingji yu Zhenghi*, 2014, (8). 30–45.

Sheng, Hong. 1996. "Cong minzuzhuyi dao tianxiazhuyi". *Zhanlue yu Guanli*, 1996 no. 1. Available at: http://www.360doc.com/content/16/0726/20/28525985_578594652.shtml. [Accessed on March 6, 2018]

Sheng, Hong. 2014. "Zhongguo zai guoji guanxi zhong de shuangchong shenfen." *Aisixiang.com*. September 23. http://www.aisixiang.com/data/78171.html. [Accessed on 10 October, 2018]

Skinner, Quentin. 2002. *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tatlow, Didi Kirsten. 2018. "China's cosmological Communism: a challenge to liberal democracies Imperial philosophy meets Marxist orthodoxy in Beijing's global ambitions". *MERICS China Monitor.* July 18. Available at: https://www.merics.org/en/china-monitor/cosmological-communism. [Accessed on 11 October, 2018]

Yan, Xuetong. 2011. *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zhao, Tingyang. 2009. "A political world philosophy in terms of all-under-heaven (tian-xia)." *Diogenes.* 221: 5-18.

Zhao, Tingyang. 2010. "Tianxia Tixide Xiandai Qishi." *Wenhua Zongheng.* June 16. Available at: http://www.21bcr.com/a/zazhiwenzhang/2010niandisanqi/2010/0612/847.html.   [Accessed on March 6, 2018]

Zhao, Tingyang. 2011. *Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun.* Beijing: Renmin Daxue Chubanshe.

Zhao, Tingyang. 2016. *Tianxia de dangdaixing: Shijie Zhixu de shijian yu xiangxiang.* Beijing: Zhongxin Chubanshe.

Zheng,Yongnian. 2011. "Organizing China's inter-state relations: from Tianxia 'all-under-heaven' to modern international relations." In Zheng Yongnian, ed. *China and international relations: The Chinese view and the contribution of Wang Gungwu*. New York: Routledge: 293-321.