

American Tianxia: The Chinese term for American power

The Chinese word *tianxia* (pronounced tyen-shah) means “all under heaven.”

As China has come to play a major role in global affairs, Chinese scholars have resurrected this classical Confucian term to describe the kind of international system they would like to see: harmonious, ethical, relational, and (it literally goes without saying) centered on China. The classical Chinese *tianxia* was an East Asian world-system focused on one central state (China) to which all other peoples looked for legitimation and leadership.

Today’s millennial world-system is similarly focused on the United States. Chinese scholars have the right concept for today’s world, but they’ve applied it to the wrong country.

The size of the US economy and its location at the center of the world-system has led to a merging of US and global systems of distinction: in almost every field, success in the world means success in the US, and vice versa. This is most true in business, where global value chains are overwhelmingly dominated by US companies, but it is true in most other fields as well.

The result is that when Russian President Vladimir Putin complains of a world in which there is “one master, one sovereign”, it is not just the United States government that irks him. It is the entire American system, what might be called the American Tianxia.

Chinese President Xi Jinping is similarly unhappy to live in a US-centered world, but unlike Putin he has the resources to do something about it. That

“something” is his “One Belt, One Road” initiative to link all of Afro-Eurasia into Chinese economic networks.

The problem for Xi is that the countries that have most eagerly welcomed integration with China are too small and too poor to matter. Even China can't afford to purchase enough people's loyalties to set up an alternative global system, and the fact that it has to pay for what allies it has shows that the effort is unsustainable.

The American Tianxia is an extraordinarily stable world-system configuration. It is stable because the people of the world make it so - not the countries, the people. The United States was founded on individualism, and as more and more people put their individual interests ahead of those of their countries of birth, they come into alignment with the American Tianxia.

Thus liberal individualism - not, pace Francis Fukuyama, liberal democracy - has emerged as the final ideology of freedom at Fukuyama's end of history. World-systems have a lifespan of centuries, so if history isn't exactly over, it will at least be on hiatus for several centuries.

I first heard of the term *tianxia* at the end of 2015. I had spent several months working in the Wang Gungwu Library at the Chinese Heritage Centre (CHC) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Prof. Wang Gungwu didn't donate the money for the library. He donated the books.

As I later discovered, I had been reading “his” books all along. Reading through a great intellectual's library is surely an interesting way to learn: “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” When I finally met Prof. Wang himself at the CHC's twentieth anniversary gala, he suggested that I read his latest book, *Renewal: The Chinese State and the New Global History*.

The first chapter of the book introduces the *tianxia* concept, and a final 22-page appendix is entirely devoted to its intellectual history. They made no impression on me.

Prof. Wang was, however, kind enough to meet me in his office at the National University of Singapore's East Asia Institute to discuss my thoughts on the structure of the world-economy. He mentioned that the *tianxia* concept might apply to the structure I was describing, and the proverbial lightbulb went on in my head.

Sensing my enthusiasm, Prof. Wang immediately cautioned me that *tianxia* has and has had many different meanings in Chinese. I told him not to worry, because henceforth it would have only one meaning in English. The American Tianxia is an emerging world-system in which people of all nationalities seek a share in the economic, cultural, and political system that is America writ large.

Salvatore Babones

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