

American Tianxia: The United States as the New “Middle Kingdom”

The rise of China in the wake of the slow relative decline of the United States has been the overarching narrative of global studies since the beginning of this century. Is this narrative correct? China’s growth is slowing as it reaches middle income status and the United States is still overwhelmingly more wealthy and powerful than China. If China will someday “overtake” the United States, it will not happen for decades or centuries, depending what is meant by overtaking. But even this more guarded account of US decline is colored by an outdated, state-centric view of human society. The twenty-first century world-system is centered on the United States but not contained within it; individuals all over the world participate in hierarchies of distinction that are fundamentally American in ideology and orientation. Whether or not they agree with US policy, support the US president, or are even able to enter the United States, success-oriented individuals choose to live in an American world—or accept global social exclusion. This is just as true in China as anywhere else, and perhaps even more true for Chinese individuals than for anyone else.

Excerpted from *American Tianxia: Chinese Money, American Power, and the End of History*, Policy Press, 2017. Reprinted with permission.

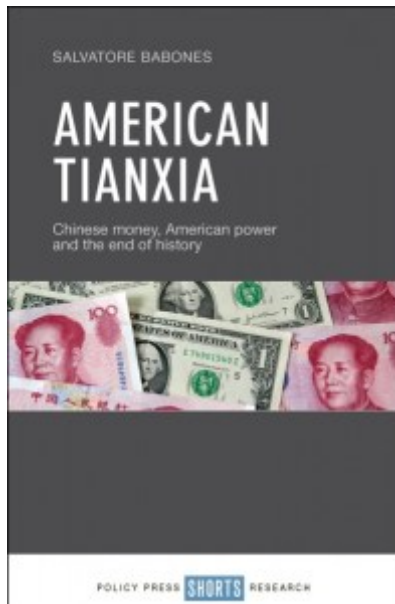
From the dawn of history until the long sixteenth century, China was the economic, political, and cultural center of East Asia. It was arguably the most important economic center in the world. Contemporary China is the lineal

descendant of a civilization that stretches back at least 4000 years and has always existed in situ where it still exists today. More important than its sheer age, it is still being used in the same geographical space by people who identify themselves as being of the same culture – and indeed of the same race—as its prehistoric inventors. China was first unified politically in 221 BC by the Qin Emperor (r. 221–210 BC) but it was a single political space at least a thousand years before that. When Confucius wandered from state to state in the early fifth century BC offering (mostly unwanted) advice on how to rule in a just manner, he understood China as a single political system and his patrons as participants in that system.

The Chinese people and the Chinese language have long recognized the coherence of China as a unified political system, even if China has often been divided into multiple warring polities. The name the Chinese give to their own country is *Zhongguo*. The word is literally translatable as “Central State” or “Central States” (there is no plural inflection in Chinese). It is more evocatively translated into English as “Middle Kingdom.” China is not the land of the Chin (as it is in English, referring to the Qin Emperor) or the land of the Han (the majority ethnic group of China). It is simply and matter-of-factly the central state or states in the same self-evident way that for the Greco-Roman world the Mediterranean was the middle sea. It didn’t need a proper name of its own.

Unlike classical and medieval Western geography, which always placed its own civilization on the northwestern edge of the known world, Chinese geography has always located China in the middle. The traditional Chinese “Five Zone” theory organized the Chinese world into concentric circles: first the royal domain of lands under the personal lordship of the emperor, then the domains of the emperor’s Chinese subsidiary lords, and then the conquered kingdoms of non-Chinese peoples, the internal barbarians (these three zones being inside the Chinese empire itself). Outside these three civilized zones were the tributary barbarians, who sent customary tribute to the emperor’s court as a token of submission, and the “wild” barbarians, who did not. The first three zones were in

theory subject to Chinese law, while countries in the two outer zones were free to live according to their own customs. The five zones taken together formed the Chinese *tianxia* (literally “sky beneath,” idiomatically “all under heaven”).



American Tianxia: Chinese money, American power and the end of history, by Salvatore Babones (Policy Press, July 2017)

The concept of *tianxia* has existed throughout Chinese history but its meaning and implications have shifted over the centuries. Originally applied to encompass the literal whole world, early on it came to represent what the historian Wang Gungwu calls in his book *Renewal* “an enlightened realm that Confucian thinkers and mandarins raised to one of universal values that determined who was civilized and who was not.” It referred to the political system of which China was the central state (or states), not to the geographical world, which might extend to such remote and exotic places as the Roman Empire. The historical Chinese *tianxia* corresponded, roughly speaking, to East Asia and the adjacent regions of Central Asia, a region in which China was (and is again) by far the economically, politically, and culturally preponderant country. From the apparently prehistoric emergence of a common Chinese consciousness until the crisis of January 7, 1841, when a single British ship sank an entire Chinese fleet in less than four hours, China was the central state (or states) of the East Asian political system.

Hierarchy and peace

The First Opium War of 1840-1842 shattered the Pax Sinica. China’s East Asian *tianxia* was hardly an idyllic world of peace and good feelings before the

British arrived, but does seem to have been relatively peaceful, especially when compared to similar periods in European history. The political scientist David Kang argues in *East Asia before the West* that there were only four major international wars during the three centuries of Ming rule among the states that were subject to the Ming tributary system, and the last of those wars hardly counts, considering that it was the one that brought the system to an end. The international relations of the ensuing Qing dynasty were even more stable. Kang certainly overstates the peacefulness of the system by classifying away many lower-level conflicts. Nonetheless, his argument is not without merit. Just one major war per century is surely a record to be envied, however many minor wars may have continued to be fought year in and year out. But should this record of major power peace be attributed to the relationalism of the Ming *tianxia*, or to its hierarchy?

Our own era may seem to be one of endless warfare, but when you take a step back to look at the data it also turns out to be remarkably peaceful. Since 1945 there has not been a single major, internationally-recognized change in the international borders between the countries of the world that resulted from warfare. In the decolonization of the mid-twentieth century many internal borders became international borders, a process repeated again with the breakup of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s. Sometimes these processes of disintegration were characterized by terrible violence, as in the partitions of India and Yugoslavia, and several former Portuguese colonies were violently seized by post-colonial countries (Goa, East Timor). Many countries have also experienced and are experiencing civil wars. But outright wars between countries on the model of the previous 3000 years of human political history have been rare, and when they have occurred the most common outcome has been a return to the pre-war borders. The right of conquest seems to be a thing of the past.

There are limited exceptions that prove the general rule, most prominently the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Neither of these annexations has received widespread international

recognition. This might be credited to the new institutionalism in international relations, were it not for the fact that illegal, de facto annexations are also rare. East Jerusalem and Crimea are exceptions, not the rule. The rule seems to be that countries don't invade other countries anymore, and when they do invade other countries they do so with limited objectives and withdraw to the pre-war borders once those objectives have been met. Sometimes they maintain an open-ended state of uncertainty, as exemplified by Russia's many frozen conflicts with its neighbors. But *veni, vidi, vici* seems to be a thing of the past. Among Western developed countries, including the United States, the whole idea of using military power to conquer adjoining territories is considered mad.

It is ironic that just as the United States became the most powerful country in the world, it stopped using its military power to acquire territory. The United States repeatedly used force throughout the nineteenth century to extend its frontiers across North America to the Pacific Ocean, to establish a settler colony on Hawaii in the 1890s, and finally to seize its first colonial possessions in the Spanish–American War of 1898. And then it stopped. At the Paris Peace Conference that followed the end of World War I, the United States was perhaps the only country that did not press claims for the expansion (or preservation) of its territory. The Treaty of Versailles is often portrayed as a failure because it did not prevent the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War II. But considering that the United States hardly registered as a European power a mere 10 years before, it should perhaps be reappraised as a substantial US diplomatic accomplishment.

The historical memory of World War I has come to be so overshadowed by the tragedies and triumphs of World War II that it is difficult to remember now just how dominant the United States was then. At the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 the GDP of the United States was equal to that of the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, and Japan combined. Despite the enormous physical size of the British and French empires, contemporaries were well-aware that the United States pulled the strings that mattered in global affairs, particularly the

financial strings. In his 1921 book *Cross Currents in Europe Today*, the American historian Charles Beard told an amusing though sadly unsourced anecdote about this, quoting “a keen French economist” as saying:

One fact dominates all others: the rise of the United States to world hegemony. Lord Robert Cecil [architect of the League of Nations] has compared the position of the United States after the Great War with that of Great Britain after the Napoleonic wars. That comparison is not quite exact; because the British hegemony was then essentially European while that of the United States today is universal.

This is not mere American swagger. In their 1923 book *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*, the British philosophers Bertrand and Dora Russell agreed. Regarding the future of relations between the United States and the United Kingdom, they reasoned that:

one of two things must happen, either an alliance in which the British Empire would take second place, or a war in which the British Empire would be dissolved. An alliance would only be possible if we sincerely abandoned all furtherance of our own imperialism and all opposition to that of America. If this should happen, an English-speaking block could very largely control the world, and make first-class wars improbable during its existence.

Russell and Russell’s mooted Anglo-American alliance was not forthcoming at the time, with the result that several more “first-class wars” were fought, culminating in World War II. Even after World War II, the United Kingdom did not “sincerely abandon all furtherance of its own imperialism” and subordinate its foreign policy to the imperative of maintaining its “special relationship” with the United States until after the Suez Crisis of 1956. Half a century later, the United Kingdom and its Anglo-Saxon former dominions (Canada, Australia, and New

Zealand) are extraordinarily well-integrated into American power structures, especially military ones. The Reagan–Thatcher alliance has been credited with bringing about the fall of the Soviet Union, and whether or not that is an overstatement it is clearly true that there have been no “first-class wars” since the solidification of the Anglo-Saxon alliance system half a century ago.

Toward an American Tianxia

Like the United States in the early twentieth century, the United Kingdom after the middle of the twentieth century ceased to use force to impose its rule on foreigners. Most of the rest of the world followed suit. It is surely intriguing that when France withdrew from Vietnam in 1954, the United States did not take over its colonial occupation. However misguided the US involvement in Vietnam may have been, it was a war to support one indigenous regime over another, not a war to impose a US regime. This is typical of the use of US power since 1900 and absolutely characteristic of the use of US power since 1950: the United States uses military force to influence modes of governance within countries, not to change the borders of countries. The American global order is a status quo order with respect to countries’ international borders but an interventionist order with respect to countries’ internal affairs. This is a radically new approach to international relations.

The definitive principle of modern sovereignty was always the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of countries. This principle, though never absolute, is now absolutely defunct. In the post-war period the United States and the Soviet Union repeatedly asserted a right to interfere in the internal affairs of their allies and associates, in effect waging a global proxy war for influence within the borders of other countries. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 the United States has been the only serious force ordering the internal affairs of other countries on a global scale. Russia attempts to do so, but with limited success and mainly inside the borders of the former Soviet Union. The United States, by

contrast, has deep civil and military relationships on every continent, including permanent military facilities in dozens of countries around the world.

The remarkable stability of international borders since the middle of the twentieth century, coupled with the shredding of the Westphalian principle of non-interference in internal affairs, suggests that some powerful overarching force is ordering and stabilizing the contemporary world-system. When it is observed that the United States alone possesses such powerful overarching force, and frequently uses it, the case is complete. Just as China has always been the central state of East Asia, the United States is today the central state of the world. That doesn't mean that the United States dictates the actions of every country in the world. But it does mean that most of the countries of the world accede to American global leadership, both in their rhetoric and in their actions. The political scientist Yuen Foong Khong calls this the "American Tributary System" by explicit comparison to the Ming Dynasty tributary system. A better term might be the "American Tianxia." In his 2013 book *Renewal*, Wang Gungwu was the first to suggest that:

Today ... an American *tianxia* has a strong global presence. It has a missionary drive that is backed by unmatched military power and political influence. Compared to the Chinese concept, it is not passive and defensive; rather, unlike other universal ideals, it is supported by a greater capacity to expand.

The American Tianxia is, in essence, a graded global club that people can join only if they behave in civilizationally-appropriate ways—and then pay a membership fee to boot.

The American Tianxia is not a tributary system on the Chinese model, only larger. It is, as Wang suggests, a new form of *tianxia*, a new ethical system for awarding distinction in virtually every field of human endeavor and ultimately for defining civilization itself. When Khong compares contemporary US international

relations to the Ming tributary system, he focuses on only one aspect of the American Tianxia: state-to-state relations. But in the contemporary world-system, hierarchies of all kinds find their summits in the United States. Those peaks may be in New York (media, finance, art, fashion, publishing, philanthropy, etc.), Boston (education), Silicon Valley (information technology), Hollywood (film), or even Baltimore (medicine), but they all represent a merging of American and global distinction hierarchies. Nowhere is this clearer than in business. In field after field, success in the world means success in the United States, and vice versa.

There are many centers of excellence in specific fields scattered all around the world, but in nearly every field aside from sports the preponderance of peak institutions are fundamentally American institutions. When peak organizations are not actually based in the United States or staffed by citizens of the United States, they are strongly influenced by American organizational models, seek recognition from American governing bodies, run on American software, and conduct business in English. This places a heavy handicap on all non-American organizations and individuals with ambitions to succeed on the global stage, a handicap weighed in direct proportion to the organization's or individual's cultural and political distance from the United States. English-speaking Canadians pay a small price to participate in American/global distinction hierarchies, Italians somewhat more so, Russians much more, and Chinese most of all. American individuals, organizations, and institutions reap the rewards.

The American Tianxia is, in essence, a graded global club that people can join only if they behave in civilizationally-appropriate ways—and then pay a membership fee to boot. Proposals abound for the formation of alternative clubs, but the network externalities of joining the American club are so enormous that few people choose instead to join the Russian and Chinese clubs, despite their much lower membership fees. Even many elite Russians and Chinese prefer membership in the American club to membership in their own. Americans, of course, get in free—not just to their own club, but to most others as well. More

than that, they are often paid to join. It is well-documented that US foreign direct investment abroad systematically earns higher returns than foreigners' investments in the United States. It seems likely that a similar (if less easily measured) "exorbitant privilege" prevails in other fields as well. Simply put, Americans living in an American Tianxia don't have to work as hard as everyone else. When it's time to pay the piper, the piper pays them.

The American within

While the Ming *tianxia* was emphatically Confucian in ideology, the defining ideology of the American Tianxia is individualism. But individualism is an empty container. Liberal principles like human rights, democracy, and rule of law have evolved into a superstructure that elaborates and maintains the base principle of the primacy of the individual, but they have no specific content in themselves (i.e., what policies should democracies pursue? what should people do with their freedoms? what objectives should laws seek to accomplish?). All that is very different from Confucianism. Confucianism prescribed an extensive set of specific policies, actions, and objectives, particularly in its Ming-era neo-Confucian distillation. The American-style "pursuit of happiness" does not simply offer an alternative set of cultural expectations, like Indian Brahmanism or medieval European Christianity. American individualism is the ideology of the empty set: individualism is the ideology that has no tenets.

Individualism means that even when countries have hostile relations with the United States, their citizens can still attend US universities, work in US companies, and (if they want) hope to become US citizens. Ming China used state-to-state relations to defend its society against foreign influences; American institutions self-consciously use people-to-people relationships as a tool for changing values in other societies. This appeal to individuals rather than states generates the ironic contradiction that the American Tianxia is inexorably expansionary while nonetheless maintaining a voluntary approach to the recruitment of new adherents.

The United States, its corporations, its universities, and its NGOs are remarkably successful in exporting liberal values by offering individuals opportunities for personal self-advancement. Chinese elites can realistically aspire to attend US universities and work in US companies if they are willing to embrace an individualistic mindset. If they don't conform, they won't succeed, but that is their choice. This appeal to self-interest is an incredibly powerful recruitment tool. By contrast, in those rare instances when the United States has sought to impose liberal values by force (e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq), it has failed spectacularly.

In the Ming *tianxia*, both economic surplus and economic actors seem to have leaked out of the center, toward the peripheries. The evidence for this is circumstantial but one-sided. Experts agree that the early Ming tributary trade generally benefited the tributary, not China itself. The emperor was able to demonstrate his superior status by bestowing gifts of visibly greater value than those he received in tribute from his vassals, and as a result the imperial court was never very concerned to promote tributary trade. Quite the contrary: the court often sought to discourage it, especially when they thought the prospective tributary not worth the political price. The imbalance between tribute received and gifts bestowed helped maintain the hierarchical East Asian political order centered on China because it made Chinese vassals understandably eager have their inferior status recognized, thus entitling them to send tribute. The emperor could even punish vassals by refusing to receive tribute from them—a “punishment” that makes sense only in terms of the disproportionate benefits accruing to the tribute-giver.

Ming China also imposed extreme punishments for attempted emigration, which suggests a country that people were eager to escape, not a country that people were eager to enter. Nonetheless, throughout the Ming period Chinese traders, prospectors, and ordinary farmers left the country to settle in Southeast Asia. There do not seem to have been major economic migration flows in the opposite direction. The contrast with the American *Tianxia* couldn't be clearer.

The United States is a magnet for the world's money and talent. People and their money are free to leave the United States at any time, but net flows of both are strongly inward. The Ming *tianxia* promoted the interests of the state (both Chinese and tributary) over the interests of individuals, with the result that individual economic initiative had to be brutally suppressed. The American Tianxia, by contrast, promotes the interests of individuals, certainly over the interests of tributary states and sometimes over the interests of the United States itself. The result is another ironic contradiction: the state that puts the individual first may be more robust than the state that prioritized the state.

It is often said that the twentieth century was the American century. The great popularizer of this idea was Henry Luce, who as publisher of *Life* magazine urged the people of the United States to fulfill what he saw as their historic destiny “to rise to the opportunities of leadership in the world” by joining the fight against Hitler. Luce's American century didn't start at the end of World War II. For Henry Luce, as for Charles Beard and for Bertrand and Dora Russell, the American century had begun at the start of the twentieth century, not in its middle. Luce said that in 1919, at the end of World War I, the United States had missed “a golden opportunity, an opportunity unprecedented in all history, to assume the leadership of the world – a golden opportunity handed to us on a proverbial silver platter.”

Luce is well-remembered for calling the twentieth century the American century, but he is not well-remembered for calling the twentieth century the “first” American century. Luce strongly implied that it would not be the last. The United States is a large and powerful state, but as a state it is nowhere near as predominant in the millennial world-system as Ming China was in the pre-modern East Asian world-system. The United States is only able to act as the central state of a global *tianxia* because it has successfully disaggregated the world into individuals. For this it was uniquely (one might say fortuitously) prepared by its founding focus on “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The US Declaration of Independence takes it for granted – literally, by God – that governments are

created by people “to secure these rights” for individuals. In the American tradition, states don’t grant rights to people; people create states to secure rights for themselves.

Any state might have ended up the central state of the global world-system, or none. In the sixteenth century it might have been Spain, with control of half of Europe and most of the Americas. In the nineteenth century it might have been Britain, with control of half the world. In the twentieth century it might have been the Soviet Union, or (God forbid) Hitler’s Germany. But none of these states could have held the system together for very long, because none of these states held any appeal beyond sheer force, and none of them ever had enough sheer force to bind the rest of the system to itself. Only a state founded on the primacy of the individual and ideologically committed to freedom of opportunity for all individuals could succeed as the central state of a truly global world-system.

Salvatore Babones (@sbabones) is an American sociologist at the University of Sydney. His research takes a long-term approach to interpreting the structure of the global economy, with a particular focus on China. He is the author of *American Tianxia: Chinese money, American power and the end of history* (Policy 2017).