American Tianxia: A Chinese Term for American Power

BY SALVATORE BABONES

China has always been the 800-pound gorilla of East Asia. The historical interstate system of East Asia was remarkably stable for more than two millennia, with China as the central state and Japan, Korea, and Vietnam on its periphery. This configuration is so ingrained in Chinese ways of thinking that the Chinese name for China, Zhongguo, literally means “central state.” When outsiders call China the Middle Kingdom, they are just using a version of China’s own name for itself.

China’s neighbors also recognize the centrality of China in their languages. China is called the “central state” or some variation on that theme in Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese. The terms merely reflect the reality that China had always been the dominant country of East Asia, the one country that every other country in the system had to work with or against.

Chinese scholars use the Chinese phrase tianxia (“all under heaven”) to describe this historical East Asian interstate system centered on China. For Chinese scholars like the philosopher Zhao Tingyang and the political scientist Qin Yaqing, tianxia has connotations of peaceful coexistence, a harmonious ordering of the world under the benign leadership of the central state. Of course, in their vision China will once again be that indispensable central state.

In this emerging Chinese model of international relations, China will provide moral leadership to the global interstate system. China’s central role will be legitimated by the openness of institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and reinforced by aid given through the generous Belt and Road Initiative. Like the historical Chinese tianxia, the twenty-first century Chinese tianxia will based on the voluntary acceptance of Chinese leadership.

Chinese Concept, American Reality

The only problem with this vision is that it’s not true. China’s closest neighbors, the states that made up the historical Chinese tianxia, are all wary of China. Japan and South Korea host substantial US military forces. Vietnam leans strongly against China and has sought closer ties with both the United States and Russia to balance against possible Chinese aggression.

Other states in the Asia-Pacific region similarly tilt toward the United States. Singapore cooperates very closely with the US military. The Philippines is protected by a mutual
defense pact with the United States. Taiwan effectively relies on the United States for the means to defend itself. China has few friends in the region other than North Korea and Cambodia, and China itself often seems wary of the unreliable Kim regime in North Korea.

All things considered, contemporary East Asia seems to resemble much more an American tianxia than a Chinese one. And not just East Asia. America’s NATO allies are tightly integrated into US-centered security institutions, and the European Union is in effect controlled by NATO countries. Nominally neutral Western European countries like Switzerland and Sweden are clearly in the American camp. And though India is careful to maintain its foreign policy independence, it seeks to balance China, not to join it.

Looking around the world, the list of willing participants in a renewed Chinesetianxia seems to be limited to a number of poor, weak, and isolated countries that desperately need the kinds of no-strings-attached financial support that only China is willing to give them.

**Harmonious Order**

In Chinese Confucian thought, the concept of tianxia represents not just the world as a whole, but a harmoniously ordered world. The historical Chinesetianxia was not an empire. It was a community. But it was a hierarchically structured community, with non-Confucian barbarians at the bottom and the Chinese emperor at the top.

In the twenty-first century, the global interstate system forms a hierarchically structured community, but this community is not centered on China. It’s centered on the United States. In this new American tianxia, the United States is the central state that offers its vision of global order to a mostly cooperative world.

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Like the historical Chinese tianxia, the contemporary American Tianxia is not an empire, with the United States commanding the allegiance of other countries. It is a community, with America’s four Anglo-Saxon allies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and most of all the United Kingdom) in the inner circle, America’s NATO and Pacific allies in the second circle, other aligned countries (like Sweden, Switzerland, and Singapore) in the third circle, and friendly non-aligned countries in the fourth circle.
Only a small number of the 193 member states of the United Nations are not aligned with or at least friendly toward the United States and the interstate system it leads. Some of these choose to maintain their policy independence even though they must do so at great cost. The most prominent of these is Russia. Others are excluded from the American system due to historical enmity with the United States. The most prominent example of these is Iran.

It is not yet clear where China stands in this system. Chinese government rhetoric combatively asserts Chinese sovereignty, and China has backed this up with an aggressive program of island building and forward military deployments in the South China Sea. Yet China has become deeply integrated into the larger global economy, relies heavily on foreign direct investment from the United States and its allies, and has worked hard to have its currency endorsed by the Washington-based International Monetary Fund.

Perhaps more importantly, since 1979 China has sent more than 4.2 million students abroad, more than half of them to the United States. Around 2.2 million have returned, having absorbed Western (and particularly American) ways of thinking. Another 2 million have become permanent residents or citizens of their host countries, most of them in North America. Now many Chinese women are also traveling to North America to have American and Canadian babies. It is hard to imagine China ever seriously opposing the American system when so many elite Chinese are themselves part of it.

**Resentment, not Resistance**

Specialists in international affairs thrive on conflict — and perceptions of conflict. It should come as no surprise that they tend to find conflict everywhere. But it is important to keep a sense of perspective. With more than 1,000 direct flights a week between Japan and China, is it meaningful to characterize the relationship between the two countries as conflictual? With 300,000 Chinese students currently studying in the United States, is it meaningful to talk about China challenging the American global order?

In the world today, there are at least a dozen serious conflicts raging that affect tens of millions of people. But for the vast majority of people, including people in Russia, Iran, and China, the world is a relatively peaceful place characterized by a clear hierarchical order. Thought leaders in Russia, Iran, and China are under no illusions as to the structure of this hierarchy. They may object to American dominance, but they do not deny it. Quite the contrary: by objecting to it, they admit its objective factuality.

The orientation of most of the world around American-dominated power structures is neither fair nor democratic. But it is largely harmonious, and it is largely voluntary. In countries like Iraq, Libya, and Syria where the United States has used overt military force to attempt to install pro-American regimes, it has failed. But the overwhelming majority of countries that are free to choose whether or not to align with American power have chosen to do so.
Popular movements in many of these countries, including many Western European countries, deeply resent the fact that their countries are embedded in a global American tianxia that often does not reflect their own values or interests. A major reason for this is the fact that the American Tianxia, like the historical Chinese tianxia, is fundamentally undemocratic, and lacking any mechanism for input from most of the people who are governed by it. Even many Americans believe that their own government lacks proper democratic oversight.

These (often legitimate) resentments should not be portrayed as some kind of global conflict or revolution in the making. Resentment is not the same as resistance. Many of the peoples of historical East Asia probably resented Chinese supremacy. Nonetheless they understood that China was the central state that guaranteed the stability of “all under heaven.” Today that central state is the United States, and the harmonious order of “all under heaven” in the twenty-first century is the American Tianxia.

About The Author

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