A rising “Chinese School” of international relations may have more to say about the United States than about China itself.

Today’s China is a country of great contradictions—and great ironies. In the political sphere, the combined net worth the members of its National “People’s” Congress is over US$90 billion. In the economic sphere, nearly all of the major companies traded on the Shanghai stock exchange are majority owned by the government. And in the cultural sphere, almost every city in this Communist-ruled country has a brand new statue of Confucius. Confucius is back.

Casual observers of China may not know that Confucius had ever left. But Mao identified Confucianism with “imperialism and the feudal class”. During the Cultural Revolution students were told to reject the Four Olds: old culture, old customs, old habits, and old ideas. And “old” in China means Confucius. Ancient books were burned. Statues were tumbled. Red Guards smashed up Confucian historic sites. Teaching Confucius could land you in jail—or worse.

Today, Confucius’s birthplace of Qufu is a major domestic tourist site, Beijing’s 700-year-old Confucius Temple has been lavishly restored, and Nanjing boasts a brand-new Confucius Temple entertainment district. China sponsors more than 500 Confucius Institutes at universities around the world (and another thousand or so high school Confucius Classrooms). And Chinese social scientists increasingly look to Confucian thought to justify one-party rule at home and a more prominent role for China in international relations.

Confucius himself had little to say about international relations. This is perhaps surprising, considering that he lived in a time when state power in China was widely dispersed among competing principalities. Despite a short tenure as an actual government administrator, Confucius did not take the path of Chinese Thucydides or Machiavelli, using his personal experience to write a treatise on great power politics. He was more of a Chinese Plato, contemplatively seeking the foundations of the humane state. Later Confucians took this to mean an end to international conflict.
and the unification of the entire Chinese tianxia (“all under heaven”) under a single enlightened tianming (“mandate of heaven”).

The Confucian’s cherished tianxia came at last with the unification of China under the Qin (221-206 BC) dynasty, during which (in another irony of Chinese history) Confucian thought was suppressed in favor of the competing legalist tradition. A more Confucian tianming was claimed by the succeeding Han dynasty (206 BC - AD 220) and it has been something of a Chinese ideal ever since. By claiming the tianming the Chinese emperor (and by extension the state) asserted the right to be obeyed throughout the tianxia of all under heaven. Allowing for a mixture of cultural metaphors, the logic of tianming somewhat resembles that of Calvinist predestination: the emperor must have the mandate of heaven because otherwise he could not have become emperor; his status of emperor is evidence enough of his fitness to rule.

Toward a Chinese School of international relations

As Confucius has staged a comeback, so too have the concepts of tianming and tianxia. The resurgence of tianming is easy to explain in the context of a one-party state. What better philosophical foundation for the continuing rule of a self-appointed party elite? The Communist Party must have the mandate of heaven or it wouldn’t be in charge. Confucius has been resurrected in support of Communist Party rule under the generic rubric of respect for authority. Obey your government as you obey your parents. Or perhaps: obey your government and the government will make sure your children obey you.

The resurgence of tianxia is more problematic. Applied to Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan it makes perfect sense. Of course Hong Kong is also part of the Chinese tianxia and the Party believes that the wayward children of Hong Kong should show more respect for their parents in Beijing. But the emerging “Chinese School” of international relations seeks to extend the tianxia concept well beyond Hong Kong, Taiwan, or even the overseas Chinese communities of Southeast Asia. The new Chinese School of international relations looks forward to a coming global tianxia of universal harmony presided over by the humane authority of the People’s Republic of China.

The three best-known thinkers in this new Chinese School tradition are Zhao Tingyang, a philosopher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Qin Yaqing, president of the China Foreign Affairs University, and Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of Modern International Relations at Tsinghua University. Though they all trace their intellectual inspiration back to ancient philosophers like Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, their practical political ideas seem to be drawn from the experiences of the more recent Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. Ancient China surely had international relations, but these were not codified for the ages. The Ming and Qing dynasties, by contrast, knew exactly what they wanted from their tributary client states—and they put it down into written law.

In The Mandate of Heaven and The Great Ming Code (2011, University of Washington Press), Jiang Yonglin traces the Ming dynasty’s codification of ancient Confucian principles into modern public law. Jiang had previously translated and annotated the Ming code itself (2005, University of Washington Press) and participated in a translation of the Qing code (1994, Oxford University Press). The compilation of a written legal code occupied the entire thirty-year reign of the first Ming emperor. The Ming code became the basis of the much-expanded Qing code and thus for all of Chinese law for half a millennium.

The Ming-Qing law codes primarily cover family and criminal law, but its associated rituals also specified the proper forms and practices of what might be called international relations; “might be
called” because in the Ming-Qing concept of tianxia the emperor rightly ruled all under heaven. In the Ming-Qing cosmology there were no international relations, only internal relations and sort-of internal relations. It is this “outside is in” concept of international relations that has been picked up by the emerging Chinese School and turned into a new, distinctively Chinese approach to understanding the system of inter-state relations.

In The Tianxia System (2005, Jiangsu Education Press, in Chinese) Zhao Tingyang promotes the concept of “universal harmony between all peoples” under a new tianxia system that includes “all peoples and all lands”. He seeks to connect the Chinese concept of tianxia with the Greek concept of the agora, with the goal of creating an international community that is both a discursive project and a political project. He characterizes the United Nations as an “agora without a polis”—a talking shop without teeth—and wants something more, something akin to a world-polity. That this world-polity will be led by China goes (literally) without saying, at least in Zhao’s writing.

Zhao’s tianxia system has been taken up by the political scientist Qin Yaqing in arguments for a greater focus on “relational” (as opposed to “rules-based”) governance. Though Qin does not directly credit Zhao as an inspiration, the connection is clear: the world needs more consensus-building to develop international relations into true global governance. Qin believes in the utility of hard rules but wants a greater focus on more malleable relationships; less Europe and more Asia. This new Chinese approach to international relations has a very high feel-good factor, but it ignores the inconvenient truth that hard rules can be used by smaller states to shield them from the arbitrary actions of larger ones, whereas governance by relationship nakedly favors the strong. But then, as the then foreign minister of China Yang Jiechi pointed out in 2010, “China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact.”

Writing in Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power (2011, Princeton University Press), Yan Xuetong makes no bones about the future tianxia being a specifically Chinese tianxia. Yan sees the Confucian tianxia concept as a model for how China might govern the world when it gets to the top. Yan has no time for Qin’s relational governance in consultation with the small countries of the world. His vision is much more conflictual and hierarchical, and (in his view) China is on a trajectory to occupy the pinnacle of that hierarchy. If the new world order will be more relational than the old one, it will be because China wants it that way. Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power is a first draft of a field manual for Chinese global dominance.

Drawing on the Confucian ideal, Yan does think that China should govern its new tianxia according to high moral standards. Where the United States has ruled by hegemony, China should aim for “humane authority”. Like Zhao, Yan sees this flowing from a “harmonious international system” governed by shared international norms. But in Yan’s system of humane authority these norms will be drawn from Chinese historical experience, not negotiated in conversation with the rest of the world: China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact. If China receives a new mandate from heaven it will use it. But will China ever receive Yan’s desired tianming?

An American tianxia

The weak point in Yan’s reasoning—and for the entire Chinese School of international relations—is that China is not rising to global dominance. The evidence is accumulating that China’s economy is converging to the middle income level of Brazil, Mexico, and Russia, on a path to surge past that of Japan, Germany, and the United States. Economic growth is slowing, capital flight is increasing, and brain drain is reaching alarming proportions. The Chinese government faces increasing medium-term
social demands on its budget that will crimp its plans for a massive military build-up. China has many supplicants but few friends.

It is perhaps another irony of history that China’s best friend in the world may be the United States of America. The United States consistently supports international investment in China, Western engagement with China despite its poor human rights record, the professionalization (though not the expansion) of the People’s Liberation Army, sanity in cross-strait relations, and China’s ongoing “peaceful rise”. The United States seeks Chinese cooperation on North Korea and in the war on terror. Generally speaking, the United States works to better integrate China into global systems of economic governance and security cooperation, though at a subordinate level rather than as a co-governor.

But of course China is not America’s only or even its primary partner. The United States works so closely with its four Anglo-Saxon allies (Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand) that they and their citizens effectively share in the American administration of global governance. Every major developed country in the world is either a formal or an informal ally of the United States. American political influence runs deep in Latin America and American armed forces hold sway over a large swath of Africa and the Middle East. India and Myanmar increasingly tilt toward the United States. All of the countries of Southeast Asia except desperately poor Cambodia and Laos fear Chinese expansionism more than they resent American hegemony.

As American economic hegemony coalesces into something more akin to broad global dominance, what better word for it than tianxia? The governance structures of the contemporary American world are strikingly similar to the governance structures of the Ming tianxia. The majority of meaningful international relationships are between countries and the United States, not between peer countries themselves. The United States confers or withholds legitimacy on states by classifying them as respectable or rogue. And what is the American president’s leadership of the free world if not a contemporary tianming—a post-modern mandate of heaven?

Though America’s consolidating leadership may not be apparent in time series data on proportions of global GDP, economic preponderance is merely an enabler of power, not power itself. This is made clear by the fact that even though the economic weight of the United States in global GDP was much larger in 1955 than in 1995, the political influence of the United States was clearly much greater in the 1990s. In any case much of the economic activity that contributes to American dominance occurs outside the borders of the United States. For example, the global Internet, financial, and energy sectors have all been to varying degrees brought under American control.

In parallel with the Ming dynasty’s extension of its legal code to cover all of the countries with which it had relations, the United States today projects outward a post-modern human rights regime over which the dependent countries of the world have little say (and which many of them intensely resent). The United States suppresses piracy—on the seas and on the Internet. The extraterritorial application of statutory American law is widespread, and not just in poor countries. Recent high-profile financial and sports corruption cases have even seen the extraterritorial application of American law in Western Europe.

Writing about the potential for a renewed Chinese tianxia in the twenty-first century, Yan Xuetong hedges his bets with the qualification that “the idea of sovereign equality among nations has become a universal norm of the contemporary world and it cannot be replaced with the hierarchical degrees of the tribute system.” Yet the hierarchical degrees of the Chinese tribute system have been
reproduced. The problem for Yan—and for the Chinese School—is that they have been reproduced with the United States rather than China as the tribute-receiving central state.

In the historical operation of the tribute system China demonstrated (or bought) its primacy by giving gifts to its tributaries that were of much greater value than the tribute it received from them. One might say that—through its aid to African countries, its purchases of Russian energy resources, its New Silk Road programs, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and indeed its Confucius Institutes—China continues to do so today. Like the Zheng He voyages of the 15th century, such a system is not self-sustaining and is ultimately unsustainable. China will soon have much more pressing budget priorities than the need to build stadiums in Angola and roads in Tajikistan.

By contrast the United States tribute system is strictly cash-and-carry. People pay full price to see Hollywood movies and attend American universities, make large investments to qualify for American visas, and give their valuable data away to American internet giants. Moreover the United States collects an ongoing tithe from nearly all the peoples of the world through the use of the Dollar as the global reserve currency. China itself holds more than $1 trillion in US Treasury bonds paying a measly 2 percent interest. The American tribute system is eminently sustainable. When it’s time to pay the piper, the piper pays the United States.

In the grand sweep of history, the American tianxia is still relatively new, and it is too early to tell just how much it will come to resemble the “harmonious international system” promoted by the Chinese School of international relations. There are lines of agreement, but their full trajectory will only become fully visible in historical perspective, if at all. Nonetheless it seems much more likely that the United States will ultimately exercise a “humane authority” over China than the other way around. Tens of thousands of elite Chinese already hold US passports. Like most people, they seem to prefer life under the American tianxia than submission to the tianming of a rising China.