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China's Pledge to Civilise "All Under Heaven"

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Klaas Dykmann and Ole Bruun

Abstract

With China's global rise, both its state leadership and key academics have engaged in developing a civilisational discourse for the twenty-first century partly based on ancient cosmological concepts. This article explores the meanings of and intentions behind this discourse, including its promise of a Chinese-led world order, and discusses its intended audience and international appeal. In the backdrop of theoretical debates on empires and their missions, the article claims that without a corresponding cultural appeal, China's rising economic power and geostrategic clout are insufficient conditions to realise an empire in the classical sense. Growing inconsistencies mar the country's imperial ambitions, such as those between a global civilising outreach and a toughening domestic embrace. Instead, imperial rhetoric is cautiously integrated in the party-state's restoration of a Chinese "empire within," indicating self-centredness and a lurking re-traditionalising of Chinese state power.

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Keywords

China, *tianxia*, empire, world order, civilising mission

Introduction

Inspired by China's global economic rise, a range of its writers and political actors have participated in the reconstruction of a civilisational discourse since around 2000, in which ancient cosmological concepts and their reinterpretations play a key part. New notions in support of a Chinese-led world order may be seen to operate across three

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levels: grand philosophical ideas, such as the concept of “all under heaven” (天下, *tianxia*), political theory containing neoclassical reasoning and distinct Chinese virtues, and global governance schemes such as building a “harmonious world” (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*). It is in the conjunction between these levels, and further motivated by a public passion for national learning (国学, *guoxue*), that Chinese popular writers, intellectuals, academics and party affiliates debate about and contribute to the construction of a new global civilising discourse. However, the evocation of classical concepts combined with the insistence on Chinese exceptionalism render a Chinese-led world order tantamount to a Chinese *empire*.

By building on a literature review combined with indications of China’s international ambitions, this article explores the expressive intentions and possible meanings behind this discourse, including its promise of an alternative and superior world order. The present article primarily builds on works published in English, although several works were originally written in Chinese. A methodological challenge relates to the fact that Chinese works translated into English may not represent the full breadth of the current Chinese debate or may be deliberately designed for a Western audience (see section Global Governance with Chinese Characteristics: HarmoniousWorld and Shambaugh, 2013: 27–34). We take as a starting point the claim that China’s rising economic power and geostrategic clout are insufficient conditions for achieving such a monumental change. To be recognised as a credible force in the establishment of a new world order, China must also have the long-term attraction of a convincing culture that can be sustained without excessive use of force: this is not the case at present. Aware of this gap in “soft power,” the Chinese party-state has invested massively in global media of all sorts and a global network of Confucius Institutes, and simultaneously opened a domestic space for political actors to develop new concoctions of nationalist ideology and politico-cosmological concepts drawn from classical Chinese literature.

As China’s civilising project is posed as a grand strategy to build a better world based on unselfish greatness (see below), this indicates that domestic and international policies are increasingly interconnected. We assume that China’s civilising narrative is intentionally kept vague to avoid criticism of deviating practices or inherent contradictions. It also does not offer a tangible new world order in which China would assume the responsibilities associated with a superpower status (see Pu, 2018; Yeophantong, 2013), costly and potentially damaging as they may be. More importantly, however, China’s global civilising project may be seen to mobilise the Chinese public and cultivate a new sense of global worth, while implicitly legitimising a toughening political embrace at home and along its periphery – in what may be called Greater China. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has inherited features of an empire, such as is reflected in the historical politico-cosmological concepts discussed below. It continues to struggle not only with the ordering of nations and citizens along its geographical periphery – including in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang – but also with a conflicting global identity/persona. The promise of global Chinese leadership, which has featured prominently in state media since the 2008 Olympics and has reached new heights during the 2020 coronavirus epidemic, is the wilful negation of the country’s predicament.

We see as a crucial aspect of China's civilising discourse the restoration of an *empire within*, consisting of the current Chinese state and its nominated subjects, including the Chinese diaspora and other marginal and liminal population segments that are in critical positions and potentially dangerous to the regime. Political opposition to and alternative discourses on China's global role may breed there, and be reflected back to the Chinese public. We argue that China's global civilising discourse follows neatly in the wake of nationalist and nativist discourses in the previous decades, and ultimately serves the same purpose: mobilisation for the survival of the party-state in a globalising and increasingly complex cultural and political setting. Yet, the party-state itself may transform in the process.

How China Fits In: Characteristics of the Empire and Its Mission

Based on Enlightenment philosophy, global expansion, and industrialisation, Europe has served as the main reference for the idea of civilisation for a long time. Bowden (2009: 2–3) even speaks of an “Empire of Civilisation” and claims that the dominant actors in international society continue to be informed by a faith in the “Enlightenment ideal of progress and humankind's universal linear march toward modernity that is universally liberal democratic, market capitalist and cosmopolitan in appearance.” Academic debate on empire and imperialism has thrived for at least a century across disciplines, although their foci have shifted along with the global order and political sentiment. Economic and historical studies have provided nuanced accounts of how empires from Rome to the present have governed, and of the factors that cause their downfall (Maier, 2006). There is wide agreement that comprehending the phenomenon of the empire requires interdisciplinary contributions, including from social studies and anthropology (Pitts, 2010: 213). Yet, the category of *empire* may vary substantially, from the given historical manifestations to notions of an omnipresent and agentless system of domination (Hardt and Negri, 2000), and to possible political dominance over a given world economic system (Wallerstein, 1979). Moreover, such exemplars as colonial empires may highlight the significance of uncertain boundaries and imaginary categories, including those of people and territories, without clear manifestations on the ground (Stoler, 2006). Nevertheless, the commonly noted characteristics of empire include a large and expansive political unit that exercises dominion over populations that are perceived as different from that of the dominant state, and a capacity to entrench and reproduce subordination, and inequalities of power and wealth among the societies it annexes (Calhoun et al., 2006; Maier, 2006; Pitts, 2010: 213). Thus, the managing of diversity is presumably at the heart of the imperial project and vital to its success, most typically involving strategies for the recruitment and co-option of the elites in subordinated societies.

As normatively informed programmes of progress or improvement, external civilising missions are commonly at the core of imperial ideology. They usually derive from the civiliser's own sense of being superior or exceptional, and a self-proclaimed responsibility to improve other cultures (e.g. Below, 2015). Thus, narratives and discourses of

how empires lay claim to their power and make sense of their existence are key aspects of historical comparisons. At the same time, historical awareness and comparisons are commonly evoked as part of imperial ideology to create a sense of greatness. Because the empire involves a cultural practice, it is by looking at past empires that people have learnt how to be imperial (Pollack, 2006: 176). Although empires cultivate a sense of political belonging among its internal and external subjects, what “civilising” does to the civiliser is equally important. For instance, European national identities might in part have been constituted through colonial and imperial practices (Pitts, 2010: 212). “Civilising within” is clearly a distinct category that may be connected to a colonial or an imperial project (Dykmann, 2013: 16–20; Schröder, 2005: 30). Current Chinese discourse distinguishes itself by covering all levels from domestic to global, featuring close parallels between a domestic “harmonious society” and a global “harmonious world” under a joint *tianxia* order (e.g. Hagström and Nordin, 2020; Nordin, 2016). We think that such an all-inclusive mission formally constitutes an attempt to perpetuate, rebuild, or establish an empire, albeit with inbuilt contradictions between a consolidated nationalism and a *tianxia* ideal transcending nation-states. We review below debates on China’s rise and global civilising project to match them up against the general characteristics of empires outlined above.

China’s Rise in the Twenty-First Century

In our view, a global actor operates worldwide, beyond its own region, and a superpower is dominant in many policy areas in other world regions. The academic literature on China as a global actor and potential superpower is already vast and is rapidly growing. It spans studies on China’s development and foreign policies (Chan, 2009; Hu, 2018; Lanteigne, 2016; Medeiros, 2009); China’s role in world politics (Bu, 2015; Wang, 2015; Hu, 2018); Chinese contributions or challenges to global governance (Wang and Rosenau, 2009) and to world order (Fairbank, 1968; Ikenberry et al., 2015; Kim, 1979; Zhang, 2010); and studies on China as an emerging, actual, or future superpower, which is catching up with and potentially superseding the USA in geopolitical clout, military strength, and in such vital areas of technology as artificial intelligence. This literature generally shows that Western hopes of China’s economic growth eventually leading to the democratisation of the Chinese Communist Party and opening of the Chinese society are tantamount to wishful thinking (Nathan, 2016; Pei, 2018). Conversely, the Communist leadership uses its full potential to tighten internal control and has shown greater external assertiveness under the strengthened position of President Xi Jinping, who is no longer restrained by a term limit. Strong-arm tactics in the South China Sea, overt threats to Taiwan’s independence, effective dissolution of Hong Kong’s separate political system, ethnic repression in Tibet and Xinjiang, and harsh reactions to opposition within and outside China demand a new perspective on Chinese expansion beyond the old narrative of its peaceful rise/peaceful development (as proposed by party advisor Zheng Bijian and Premier Hu Jintao, Chinese Government, 2005). Many Chinese realist scholars early on denounced the narrative as a straightjacket (e.g. Shambaugh, 2013: 33).

China's ability to build a large and expansive political unit, as is associated with an empire, is closely connected to its status as a political superpower. The literature on China as an emerging superpower falls into three logical positions, according to which (1) China will not become a superpower, (2) China is not yet a superpower but is on the path to becoming one, or (3) China is a superpower and will become the dominant one. The three positions are dynamic and interactive over time, and debates have shifted considerably along with China's rising power from the 1990s to the 2010s, particularly taking note of such economic mega-projects as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Scholars who support positions (1) and (2) have in common their focus on the hurdles still faced by the PRC to becoming a (dominant) superpower. The difference is that position (1) is sceptical, arguing that China still lacks both military and economic capabilities as well as global outreach and/or assumption of responsibility backed by its soft power (Cho and Jeong, 2008), while struggling with internal conflicts (see Shirk, 2007). Scholars advocating position (2) see China as part of a "multiplex world" (Archarya, 2018), as a global actor and a partial superpower with the potential of going all the way – pointing to its significant economic clout and permanent member status at the United Nations Security Council. However, they claim, China is not yet stable enough internally and not sufficiently recognised militarily in global and regional conflicts (see Agone, 2013). Scholars arguing for position (3) claim that China will inevitably develop into the world's dominant superpower (see Hu, 2018; Pye, 2005; Subramanian, 2011) or at least will strive for this status (Pillsbury, 2016).

Comparisons between China and the USA, as the current global superpower, are common to all the above positions (Beardson, 2013, Economy and Oksenberg, 1999; Ikenberry et al., 2015; Lampton, 2005). China is also occasionally compared with Russia (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010; Turner, 2009; Weitz, 2012) and India (Bahl, 2010). From a historical perspective, some scholars have reviewed the rise of Germany (1930 to 1945) and the Soviet Union (1945 to 1989) in the twentieth century as aspiring superpowers (see Shambaugh, 2013: 17–18). The "lessons learnt" hence are described as particularly important, as both lost in this quest against the USA.

Nevertheless, scholars of position (3) are very optimistic for China's future. They see it as a current, or soon-to-become, superpower, and link this status to a global transformation. Using profuse superlatives, they have described China as "a titan," "a palpable global force," and its rise as "without precedent," "meteoric," "transformative," "inexorable," and "the great drama of the 21st century" (Evans, 2009: 678). These scholars tend to embrace China's "exceptionalism" as a foundation for a Chinese-led world order. For Hu (2011), as for countless other Chinese academics who praise China's exceptional traits, it is not a question of when but merely one of what kind of superpower China will become. Hu (2011: 12) predicts that China will be a "mature, responsible and attractive superpower." As a manifestation of this position within economics and trade, some scholars speak of a "Beijing Consensus" as a counter-model to the so-called "Washington Consensus" (Callahan, 2011a: 2). Others, however, reject this notion as not solid enough (Medeiros, 2009: 213; Wang and Rosenau, 2009: 26) and prefer to speak of a "Beijing proposal" (Hu, 2011: 17).

Many observers, including both advocates of the "China threat" scenario (see Lanteigne, 2016: 128), and more nuanced voices, have discussed the possible existence of a Chinese

“grand strategy” to advance as a global superpower to eventually topple the USA. Pillsbury (2016) identified Beijing’s “secret strategy” to slowly resume its “natural” role as a world-leading and categorically authoritarian power, while Mosher (2017) harshly describes China’s dreams of becoming a great power as an emerging global nightmare. Pei (2018: 38) similarly sees China’s grand strategy of undermining the Western liberal order and attaining hegemony in Asia as unfolding after 2008, and accelerating under Xi Jinping. However, the key discussions have focused on domestic challenges and inequalities (ethnic, political, economic, social, and environmental) that have the potential to obstruct this great plan as well as forms of political mobilisation under the central leadership. Similarly, a growing body of literature has examined how China employs legal and conventional tactics as well as covert and unorthodox methods to challenge Western ideological, institutional, and diplomatic dominance. A common position is that China is well behind the USA in terms of global responsibility, democratic credibility, and soft power, and is thus a “partial power” (see Shambaugh, 2013). As a consequence, China, often in alliance with Russia or the BRICS (see Cooper and Farooq, 2016), has concentrated on real or symbolic defiance of the perceived Western order such as in the South China Sea, in Taiwan and Tibet, and in relation to human rights. It has adopted radical and new approaches, dubbed “sharp power,” including cyber-attacks, espionage, and extraordinary forms of control over internal opposition, minorities, and external actors like the Chinese diaspora (National Endowment for Democracy, 2017; US State Department, 2020).

In light of the above, many scholars have expressed concerns about a “hegemonic transition,” first in the Asia–Pacific region (Mearsheimer, 2010) and subsequently at a global level. Allan et al. (2018) summarised three scenarios of a hegemonic transition: a persistence of the liberal order under US guidance or a great power coalition, the dissipation of the liberal order without replacement and the PRC enforcing a hegemonic transition either from within, or by launching an alternative order. However, the authors considered the first two scenarios to be the most realistic. Song and Wang (2016: 7) provide a different perspective, and ask whether the PRC will be “further socialised” into existing global structures of governance or challenge this West-dominated system. They conclude that, most likely, China will choose “a middle way between the two.” Similarly, both Medeiros (2009: 201, 208–209) and Nathan (2016) surmised that China currently does not want to replace the USA because its own domestic problems are too challenging, the requisite resources are too great, and the risk of a possible recoil is too high. Moreover, some recent studies have suggested that after an initial phase of rapid advancement, China now shows signs of struggling with both its economy and its image after the trade war with the USA, burgeoning criticism from indebted developing countries, and fervent opposition in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The coronavirus pandemic is also viewed by some observers as a possible game changer in China’s global image (e.g. Schanzer, 2020).

China's Civilising Project for the Twenty-First Century

Well into the nineteenth century, Chinese imperial rulers principally operated with a five-fold territorial model, in which the central civilisation was surrounded by a variety of “barbarians” and in which the level of civilisation decreased with distance from the centre (e.g. Babones, 2020). China axiomatically claimed cultural superiority, while the Han majority carried out “civilising missions” towards other nations in the south, sometimes expressed in an institutionalised system of tributary states, in which “barbarians” and “lower-ranked” civilisations paid tribute to the centre. Bell (2017: 36) notes that “Chinese imperial courts did not usually use the idea of tributary relations to interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring states, and the states on China’s periphery often had complete independence” (see also French, 2017: 5). The Chinese Communist Party subsequently replaced this policy with measures of domination related to the Stalinist categories of “ethnic minorities” (see Harrell, 1995; Heberer, 2014).

Similar to the literature on Western civilising missions, studies have examined such missions carried out by China (e.g. Clark, 2015: 6). For instance, Schneider (2017: 89) distinguished three sets of historical civilising missions in China: the Chinese nationalist discourse, the Confucian mission, and the European Christian missions. Similarly, Harrell (1995: 3) identified at least four “civilising projects” carried out by Chinese governments and Western missionaries between the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 and the creation of the PRC in 1949: the Confucian, the Christian, the Republican, and the Communist civilising projects. They all had an impact on those who were their targets, but also on China’s society and identity, including the account of its history.

The imperial or “Confucian” civilising project historically had the most lasting impact in China, as it constituted the core of state-building and southward expansion in the region. Building primarily on cultural rather than racial distinctions, it aimed at moulding people and communities by training them in the moral, philosophical, and ritual principles considered virtuous, establishing at the same time scales of civility with scholar-officials on top, and peasants and semi-integrated peoples at the bottom (Harrell, 1995: 18). However, both conceptually and cognitively, the equivalence between speaking and writing Chinese, and having a culture/civilisation (文化, *wenhua*), in principle ruled out the recognition of non-Chinese civilisations. Degrees of complicity might have characterised the imperial civilising mission between those peoples easily assimilating, at times forming a ruling elite such as in the case of the Manchu, and those fiercely resisting on the basis of their own cultural identities, such as the Yi, Tibetans, Mongols, and Uighur. There is little doubt, however, that China’s civilising mission rested on a constant strive for hegemony, which in many regions resulted in lasting conflict. Unlike in Western societies, Nyíri (2006) argues, nation-building and civilising projects in China took place at the same time, and targeted various overlapping constituencies. Other scholars who have discussed a civilising Chinese mission are Friedman, Gladney, Murphy, and Schein and Oakes (see Nyíri, 2006: 86, 91–92).

The above reveals a pivotal aspect of what we arguably see today: a simultaneous civilising mission among domestic populations, the Chinese diaspora, and the global public. In recent years, the PRC has flaunted a number of neoclassical philosophical and

political concepts that form the rhetorical foundation for the rise of a benevolent superpower (in China, “rejuvenation” is a common term). The claim is that these alternatives to the Western system will conduce to the prosperity of both China’s neighbours and the world at large. Accordingly, China has been intensively providing developmental assistance loans to other countries, but without attaching them to the conventional Western conditions of good governance and protection of human rights (Nyíri, 2006: 83). At the same time, China showcases its own development model by bringing in Chinese companies, workers, and technical advisors – not without parallels to colonial projects (Nyíri, 2006: 85).

The new emphasis of the Chinese Communist Party leadership on harmony and classical virtues is expressive of its complex relationship with the self-centred Chinese tradition, shifting from total rejection during the cultural revolution to a more recent adoption of Marxist justifications for traditional philosophy (e.g. Barabantseva, 2011: 195; Nordin, 2016: 44). However, the re-emergence of traditional thinking follows a general trend both among Chinese intellectuals and the general public, and links up with a desire for “national learning.” Billiod (2011: 215, 216, 235) argues that traditional thinking has entered both the religious, educational, patrimonial, economic, and touristic arenas. Yet, continued Marxist weariness of tradition relates to the fact that there is a fine line between the classical Chinese tradition and popular cosmology and religion, including Daoism and a range of divinatory techniques and belief in ghosts and spirits (e.g. Li, 2019), something that the Communist party has battled as “feudal superstition” since its ascent to power. Next, we assess the extent to which the *tianxia* worldview, classical concepts, and the model of a “harmonious world” contribute to the restoration of a Chinese civilising project.

China’s Vision of World Order: All Under Heaven

The scholarship on China as a potential superpower, at the same time, has reviewed historical Chinese visions and projections (see Kim, 1979; Kissinger, 2011; Yan, 2011; Zhao, 2015). The central notion of *tianxia* (“under heaven” or “all under heaven”) has been instrumental in understanding and governing the Chinese world for a period of two millennia (Callahan, 2008: 749). It is philosophically related to the Confucian rationalism of “bringing the world to one.” The notion may refer to a governance system “[...] held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical borders” (Wang, 2017b: 1). Barabantseva (2011) suggests that the ideal can be considered the best notion to represent China’s traditional view of the known world as equal to Chinese imperial territory, clearly distinguishable from the world order created by European imperial powers. In its abstract form, “all under heaven” emphasises China’s peculiar role in the world, potentially introducing new thinking and rules based on Chinese exceptionalism (Barabantseva, 2011: 187). Wang (2017a: 31) describes the original *tianxia* imperial order as “[...] the Qin-Han imperial polity based on Confucianism-coated legalism, authoritarian and totalitarian autocracy that is predestined and compelled to order and rule the entire world that is known, and reachable in

reality or in pretension.” In other words, the original *tianxia* aspired to a Chinese-controlled empire, although a tension between reality and imagination may be seen to transcend history.

Building on previous attempts to promote Chinese values for a new and better world order, including the work of Tu Weiming and other scholars of New Confucianism, *tianxia* has re-entered the philosophical–political debate in the early twenty-first century, and is closely linked to popular Chinese calls to reassert its historical identity as an empire rather than a country or a nation (French, 2017). In Chinese academia, a similar impulse has been to integrate Chinese worldviews and traditions, including *tianxia* thinking, into a grand theory that explicitly provides scholarly backing to China’s increasing global influence, often by combining Marxism and Western international relations theory with Chinese traditions, and several Chinese journals are devoted to this endeavour (Kristensen and Nielsen, 2013: 74–81).

The concept of *tianxia* was aggrandised in Zhao Tingyang’s book, *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution* (Zhao, 2005). The book became a bestseller in China as it responded to a popular craving for promoting Chinese solutions to global challenges, while combining “[...] the seemingly contradictory discourses of nationalism and cosmopolitanism” (Callahan, 2008: 750). In this book and subsequent works, Zhao (2019, 2011) describes *tianxia* as the fourth form of “empire” that, in essence, can be considered good, unlike its predecessors the Roman, British, and “American” empires. For Zhao (2011: 32, 33), “all under heaven” is “perhaps the grandest narrative in political philosophies” as based on the trinity of the geographical world (Earth), the psychological world (hearts of the people), and the political world (world institutions). He suggests abandoning the Westphalian system, which he sees as the cause of global disorder (Callahan, 2008; Zhao, 2009: 5). While he perceives the Western world order as limited to territorial thinking, and including the bad practices of hegemony and colonialism, he suggests that *tianxia* offers “worldness” instead of Western “internationality” (Zhao, 2009: 6), and the qualities of a voluntary, shared, and hospitable system (Zhao, 2019: 65). In his words, “the central idea of ‘all-under-heaven’ is to reconstitute the world along the lines of the family, thereby transforming the world into a home of all peoples, as it should be” (Zhao, 2009: 11, 17), such as by means of relational rationality as opposed to individual rationality based on self-interests (Zhao, 2019: 2), and explicitly modelled on China as a “world-patterned country with various integrated ethnicities and cultures in an ingenious institutional form” (Zhao, 2019: 23).

As is characteristic of his style, Zhao is vague on the proposed world institution: will it mean China disguised as “world government”? For him, all under heaven and the United Nations (UN) share many features. But *tianxia* has the “theoretical potential to resolve international and intercultural problems,” whereas the UN serves mostly as a negotiation platform for national interests (Zhao, 2011: 30–31). He regards domestic democracy as advancing imperialist hegemony while “international democracy,” with more equal representation of non-Western states, would lead to the contrary. The ideal is a family-based harmonious world society, which he admits would be difficult to apply to the highly individualised and pluralistic Western societies. In Zhao’s thinking,

globalisation will eventually deconstruct the nation-state system, followed by the transformation of one or more nation-states into new forms of empires. He proposes a new world order on updated versions of *agora* and *tianxia*, “[...] where Greek and Chinese traditions meet in harmony” (Zhao, 2011: 17).

Key to assessing the potential of this rhetoric is how it is received beyond China’s borders. Callahan (2008: 755), among many others, disapproves of Zhao’s implicit revitalisation of the imperial distinction between “civilised” and “barbarian” peoples when he suggests the revival of the Chinese tributary system as a tool to convert enemies into friends. Barabantseva (2011) and Carlson (2011) both note the contradiction between the claim to transcend the nation-state system, and China’s persistent advocacy of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Shambaugh (2017: 139–140) has shown the inherent contradictions between China’s routine insistence on the inviolability of its sovereignty and the significant benefit it derives from its integration into the Westphalian system, both in terms of security (UN Security Council) and trade (World Trade Organisation) (Shambaugh, 2017: 139–140).

Several commentators further note that related to the conception of all under heaven is the notion of the “son of heaven” (天子 *tianzi*, the ruler of *tianxia*), an authoritarian leader whom the people have an obligation to obey. According to Zhao (2011: 22–24), his mandate is determined by his deeds, but this does not mean democratic elections as it is the ruler’s obligation to observe social trends and preferences. To outsiders, there are striking parallels between the consolidated presidency of Xi Jinping (and his designation as the Great Arbiter in Chinese media) and the rising social control of Chinese citizens both inside and outside the mainland. In a commentary, Bell (2017: 140–141) emphasised that *tianxia*’s respect for other cultures does not mean “equal respect”:

[T]here may be a worry that Confucianism’s confidence in its own values could translate into ‘civilising missions’ outside the Confucian nation, similar to John Stuart Mill’s justification for British imperialism in India on the grounds that the ‘barbarians’ were insufficiently rational to govern themselves.

However, since Confucianism argues in favour of “moral example, ritual and persuasion,” some may see it as a “gentle civilizer” that can replace the current system of international law (see Koskenniemi, 2002). At a more fundamental level, however, both Chinese and Western scholars have argued that Confucianism was never the exclusive ideology of the state because statecraft at the time was based on strong legalist principles (e.g. Pillsbury, 2016).

Callahan (2008: 750) alludes to Chinese critics depicting Zhao’s book as the author’s own interpretation of *tianxia*, not the “Chinese view” per se. He sees Zhao’s reading of *tianxia* as a potential blueprint for a renewed world order, but concludes that its impact will be greater at home than globally: a projected Sinocentric hegemony rather than a post-hegemonic world order. He regards Zhao’s argument as stemming from a widespread feeling among Chinese thinkers that Chinese domestic and international order was demolished by violent Western nation-states acting within the Westphalian system.

For Zhao, *tianxia* is the solution. According to Callahan, *tianxia* represents a hierarchical system prioritising “order over freedom,” “ethics over law,” and “elite governance over democracy and human rights.” Literally, the notion means top-down, heaven (天, *tian*) and what is underneath it (下, *xia*) (Callahan, 2008: 752, 753). Zhao fails to mention that *tianxia* is supposed to be “united,” also by force, which contradicts the predominant narrative of a benevolent and noble empire. He further relies on binary notions (China versus the West), in which his own *Pax Sinica* resembles analogues offered by Western imperial scholars, while he establishes a reverse form of Orientalism at the same time (Callahan, 2008: 755).

Other scholars have questioned the meaning of *tianxia* such as is promoted by academic and popular writers. Mosher (2017) refers to *tianxia* as the outcome and continuation of the grand unification under the despotic Qin empire, which gave rise to a political order based on social conformity and tight restrictions on dissent. He argues that the ghost of the Qin emperor Shihuangdi (秦始皇, *Qin Shi Huang*) lurks behind every Chinese ruler today, joined in the fear of chaos and disorder. Thus, just as the official ideology of Imperial China was a clever amalgam of legalist principles and Confucian rhetoric, tough unitarian policies hide behind lofty philosophical notions, as expressed in Confucius’s quote: “just as there are not two suns in the sky, so there cannot be two emperors on Earth” (Mosher, 2017: 48–4948–49). In a similar vein, Pillsbury (2016: 30) refers to an interview with Zhao Tingyang in 2012, in which the latter answered the question of how China would handle disobedience by other nations under the *tianxia* order by saying that this is easily answered by the *Rites of Zhou*’s prescription of a four-to-one military superiority for the emperor to enforce the order (see Zhao, 2019: 15).

Yet an explicit criticism of the “Western-led” world order contained in most *tianxia* theorising has inspired a host of writers to apply the concept to new fields, without necessarily buying into the idea of a Chinese moral superiority. For instance, Babones (2020) suggests *tianxia* as a useful alternative to hegemony and empire by proposing a “more spiritual form of international society coordinated, but not dominated or ruled, by a single, central state.” Drawing on the work of Zhao Tingyang, he further suggests *tianxia* as a model of regional international societies, such as one in South America centred on Brazil and another in Euro-Asia and the BRI countries centred on China (Babones, 2020: 131, 140). Similarly, Ling (2010: 225), by reviewing the many meanings of *tianxia* and holding it up against both the liberal world order and a possible Confucian world order, discerns the contours of a “‘worldly world order’ where humility and learning drive one’s engagement with others, rather than what we have today: hegemony and imperialism.” She has developed these ideas further into a model of “wordlist” international relations, based on a post-Westphalian and essentially non-Western approach towards sustainable and democratic governance. In this model, Daoist dialectics is seen as a balanced perspective on the forces that drive world politics as well as a path towards a more inclusive and less coercive world centred on compassion and care (Ling, 2014).

However, altogether Chinese politico-cosmological concepts, which have only recently witnessed a revival after having been discarded for generations, may appear either vague or outright mystical to the outside world. Apart from a narrow range of

historical “resonance countries,” of which most currently have strained relationships with China, few are likely to willingly adopt the country’s ancient political rhetoric: externally, and above all in Asia, the narrative of a Chinese-led empire replacing nation-states gets little traction. To some scholars, this indicates a weakness in those layers of Chinese state–society interaction, where cultural and intellectual production takes place (Ling, 2014; Pillsbury, 2016; Shambaugh, 2013; Yan, 2011). Owing to underlying circumstances in the authoritarian state, China appears to struggle with a marked discrepancy between its global ambitions and the parochial nature of its educational system, as well as with formidable political checks on intellectual life and cultural production – hardly nourishing for a cosmopolitan citizenry nor conducive for building Chinese soft power resources. Zhao (2019: 12) claims that the “psychological world” means that people are more important than land and to win the people’s hearts is a key to success. However, we claim that, under Xi Jinping’s leadership, this divide between China’s global ambitions and the pertinent resources of its citizenry is enlarged, while both the internal repression, and the external managing and policing of the Chinese diaspora, have expanded. As a consequence, China’s external and domestic civilising narratives are increasingly intertwined and subjected to tension. Beyond inconsistencies, the Chinese party-state may have put itself in a position where it is compelled to deliver, at least rhetorically, an “empire within” to uphold its internal credibility. Conceivably, the breadth of China’s ancient philosophy and its timeless underpinnings in popular cosmology may turn out to be a Pandora’s box, from which a multitude of criticisms against the party-state may be released; the regime repeatedly turns to compulsory classes in Marxism for ideological alignment.

Global Governance with Chinese Characteristics: Harmonious World

Support for the claim to the global relevance of native politico-cosmological concepts has permeated Chinese academia for some time. For instance, the “soft power” scholar Men Honghua of the Central Party School argues that the key Confucian concepts of harmony (和, *he*), virtue (德, *de*), ritual (礼, *li*), and benevolence (仁, *ren*) can make significant contributions to international norms and co-operation (Shambaugh, 2013: 43). Yet, the increasing dominance of realist and nativist perspectives, as opposed to liberal and globalist perspectives, in the Xi Jinping era indicates a hardening political atmosphere, including a drift towards explicit anti-US sentiments and support for Chinese global dominance (Shambaugh, 2013: 43). This is reflected in a recent report from the US State Department, which proposes that President Xi aims at “displacing the USA as the world’s foremost power and restructuring world order to conform to the CCP’s distinctive way of empire” (US State Department, 2020: 7).

Opening a critical review of Chinese politics in international affairs has not been part of the equation (Callahan, 2011b: 253; Nordholt, 2018). However, the nativisation of global theorising has entailed internal competition and mutual criticism among Chinese academics (e.g. Qin, 2011; Yan, 2011). For instance, the famous political philosophy

scholar Yan Xuetong (2011) suggests that the theoretical weakness of Chinese scholars and insufficient theoretical debate are the reasons for inadequate progress. Referring to his own field, he stresses Chinese scholars' lack of training in traditional Chinese political thought, which could help them develop a native core for their theory (Yan, 2011: 256). Commenting on Chinese "harmonious world" diplomacy, he argues that it needs to present a universal vision to achieve any great influence. The Confucian ideas of benevolence and justice, indicating a universal moral order rather than a hegemonic order, would serve that purpose. Conversely, "harmonious world" diplomacy based on Chinese characteristics would merely resonate with a small number of countries, just as pursuing material power alone cannot become the basis for China's national resurgence (Yan, 2011: 62, 142).

The notion of "harmonious world" (和谐世界, *hexie shijie*) was formally introduced by President Hu Jintao in 2005 (Hu, 2005). It built on the Confucian-inspired concept of "harmonious society," which sought to balance social inequalities resulting from uneven economic growth, and presumably was instituted as a reaction to widespread social and ethnic unrest (Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 517). "Harmonious world" proposes to offer the world an alternative model of global governance – one of "lasting peace and common prosperity" that is less dominated by the West, and is thus more acceptable for non-Western societies. According to Callahan (2011a: 3), the timing of the introduction of the "harmonious world" at the UN's sixtieth anniversary summit in 2005 was not coincidental, given that sixty years represent a natural cycle of five-times-twelve in traditional Chinese cosmology.

"Harmonious world" deviates from global governance in key respects. For instance, Wang and Rosenau (2009) discuss how Chinese perceptions may acknowledge global problems, global actors (including multinational companies, interest groups, NGOs and social movements, at least outside the PRC) and, to some extent, shared values (human rights, democracy, rule of law, international organisations, and global civil society). Yet, they challenge the perspective of a rule-based system of global governance: "Not all Chinese analysts share a positive view of the desirability and feasibility of global governance" (Wang and Rosenau, 2009: 6). They tend to see the image of a "global village" as an illusion because great powers still operate as the driving forces in the international system. Furthermore, West-driven global governance is not seen as inherently democratic: "The implicit proposition that the West will bring good governance to the rest of the world while the rest of the world will give up national sovereignty in exchange is a reflection of West-centrism and European superiority" (Wang and Rosenau, 2009: 13). At the time of writing, Wang and Rosenau (2009) interpreted the Chinese "harmonious world" perspective as promoting four principles of reform to existing global governance: (1) the democratisation of international relations: a more just participation of states (less Western dominance, particularly in financial/economic organisations, and in terms of US unilateralism); (2) justice and common prosperity (richer countries should open markets to poorer ones, including the transfer of technology, providing more aid and debt relief; more South–South co-operation); (3) diversity and tolerance (opposing Western ideas and cultural imperialism); and (4) peaceful resolution of international conflicts, including a new Chinese approach to security

that increases confidence-building, and a big role for the UN and the Security Council (Wang and Rosenau, 2009: 17–21). Wang and Rosenau (2009: 21–24) concluded that “[...] it is clear that China does not aspire to create an alternative global governance system,” in part because it is not strong enough to challenge the current international order, and continues to struggle with multiple identities in international affairs (as a victim, stakeholder, reformer, and responsible power).

Similarly, Shambaugh (2013) has shown that despite the countless academic contributions to building a new Chinese perspective on the world, China has multiple international identities, and is a conflicted country in its international persona. However, he has also shown that the centre of gravity in perspectives on international relations is clearly located in the realist and nativist end of the spectrum, which indicates that the People’s Liberation Army, Foreign Ministry, and key party organisations are their core constituencies. Chinese academics of these orientations are staunch nationalists and “China-firsters” who uphold the principle of state sovereignty based on a strong state. While internally divided in their harshness towards Western, and particularly American, influence, they are distrustful of the international system based on Western norms, such as free market competition, human rights, democracy, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. Current “global governance” is mainly seen as an attempt to trick China into paralysis or deliberately bring it down. These schools promote the view that China should use its newfound economic, cultural, and military powers, while the most hawkish nativists argue that China must lead the world and “conduct business with a sword in its hand” (Shambaugh, 2013: 27–34).

As Lynch (2013) has shown, in Chinese debates on an alternative world order, the prevalent view is that traditional China was a kind and noble empire that guaranteed peace and stability, until Western imperialism changed this centuries-old balance. He refers to Yan Xuetong and Xu Jin, who claim that the promotion of “harmonious world” can strengthen the legitimacy of the Chinese strategy: “China can position itself as something of a golden-mean country: lodged between developed and developing, democratic and authoritarian, religious (Confucian) and non-religious.” To group China like this would make it more attractive to a number of countries, and would “[...] enhance Beijing’s capacity to mobilise international coalitions of supporting policies that would strengthen China’s relative position” (Lynch, 2013: 635–636). Similarly, Bell (2017) describes the reference to traditional thinking as a way to adapt China to a globalised world and rethink its role in Asia. Traditional values help Chinese leaders “make sense of their international responsibility,” and help provide “moral resources for social critics” to expose the inevitable gap between the ideal and reality (Bell, 2017: 131). In Bell’s view, the concepts of *tianxia* and, more concretely, *hexie shijie* reflect a Chinese civilising project to justify Beijing’s global actions and ambitions to the world and its home audience, and to help explain the contradictions in them.

In the perspective of Nordin (2016), further developed in Hagström and Nordin (2020), harmony in the world is fictitious: “Rather than offer an alternative world order, official visions of a ‘harmonious world’ replace ‘the West’ with ‘China’ at the head of an imagined historical queue,” in fact with close resemblance to “hegemony” as described

by Gramsci (Nordin, 2016: 2, 46). Historical comparison will show that harmony discourse has legitimised and enabled oppressive, homogenising, and bellicose expansion and rule in the West and Japan; the present Chinese discourse gives little reason to hope that China will exercise its soft or hard power with any less violent consequences (Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 507, 509). Although a politics premised on harmony might pose as soft power par excellence, its innate dichotomisation with flawed and unattractive others sets a rhetorical trap that forces audiences to identify with China or risk being lumped together with historical imperialism: “The desired effect [...] is to make audiences empathise and identify with the Chinese self and against its Western and Japanese others.” The authors dismiss the Chinese politics of harmony in relation to mediating and reducing antagonism; there is a risk that it will authorise the use of physical violence to impose unity and to punish dissent (Hagström and Nordin, 2020: 508, 521).

Inevitably, the Chinese party-state is caught between its nationalist and self-aggrandising domestic political rhetoric, which emphasises China’s role as a natural leader, and its desire to assure the world of China’s peaceful intentions and respect for national differences. A Chinese order writ large would inevitably invite comparison between China’s management of the “harmonious society” at home – and in Tibet, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang – and its expected handling of international conflicts based on a “harmonious world” dogma (Hagström and Nordin, 2020; Nordin, 2016; Shambaugh, 2016: 55).

Conclusion

This article set out to examine China’s emerging imperial oratory and ambitions, which have moved beyond the “peaceful rise” rhetoric into the revival of autochthonous, politico-cosmological conceptions that imply a Chinese-centred global order. The oratory emerges as a pragmatic–eclectic constellation of Marxist internationalism, including the idea of China as a Third World leader, realist and nativist views of international relations, narratives of national suffering and resurrection, and classical Chinese one-world cosmology. The latter indicates that the party-state has to give in to general pressure to revitalise Chinese classical and popular tradition in the search for post-Communist identities. The result is a broad-based campaign to raise China’s global standing and influence.

Similar to contradictions in Western attempts to legitimise, downplay, or neglect their own role in past and ongoing civilising projects, China’s new imperial oratory has many inconsistencies. Opening up the domestic political space to classical Chinese cosmology and morality may provide leverage to those who see discrepancies between the regime’s words and deeds, and there is an implicit risk that the “cosmological turn” in the drive to fill China’s soft power gap may backfire against the party-state. Opponents may query both the mandate to rule and the justification for rebellion. However, in accordance with our theoretical reflections on what civilising does to the civiliser, China’s ongoing struggle for a global civilising influence may also in turn contribute to re-traditionalising

Chinese state power: this is a crucial topic for future research, especially considering its global implications.

China certainly has many general traits of empire outlined in the beginning of this article. It has a large and expansive political unit, and a capacity to entrench and reproduce subordination, including the co-option of elites in subordinated societies. It also has a normatively informed programme of progress derived from its own sense of superiority and exceptionalism, including a self-proclaimed responsibility to improve other cultures. *Tianxia* and the associated politico-cosmological conceptions derived from Chinese imperial history are advanced as the ideological foundation for an external civilising mission to rival European Enlightenment philosophy and US soft power in previous epochs. However, if management of diversity is key to success in any imperial project, China's uncompromising repression of minority cultures is a major drawback to its soft power resources and civilising credibility.

Externally, China promotes a rhetoric of replacing the existing international system with a "harmonious world" order under a universally accepted form of governance. Specifically, it mobilises opposition to what it sees as an unfair, imperialistic, and exploitative capitalist world (dis)order, and promises to end US and Western hegemony. Although this rhetoric may appeal to many regions of the world and may help gather support for Chinese interests in international organisations, many observers would interpret key aspects of China's "harmonious world" discourse as a striving for a Sinocentric hegemony rather than a post-hegemonic order. Accordingly, China's civilising rhetoric may offer the country a redefined superpower position without assuming the corresponding responsibilities beyond its own strategic interests.

However, many aspects of China's new civilising discourse are clearly produced for domestic consumption. They add a new layer to old slogans of suffering or sacrificing for the state, while glossing over social and ethnic inequalities, political repression, and environmental ills. Self-aggrandising depictions of global leadership have increasingly become part of the state-media-society interaction and communication, and play a crucial part in securing the party-state's continued legitimacy. They underpin the building of an "empire within," creating a sense of Chinese greatness and embracing those who share the narrative of national resurrection after a century of humiliation, with an overwhelming stress on Western aggression in the nineteenth century, as opposed to the Chinese party-state's political failures in the twentieth century.

The traditionalist turn has at the same time produced a series of contradictions in Chinese foreign policy perspectives, such as tributary versus voluntary relations, innate inequality versus *tianxia* cosmopolitanism, and political imagination versus social reality. Foreign observers, particularly in democratic societies, will further note the glaring inconsistencies between the "harmonious world" conception and the tough realities of the domestic harmonious society, and between China's global media outreach and its increasing domestic control, digital surveillance, blacklisting, and media isolation of the Chinese public. With the imperial rhetoric, China can be seen to raise the stakes. Externally, it risks further alienating the democratic world while attracting weak and authoritarian regimes to China's sphere of influence, thus contributing to regional or

global cleavage; the Trump–Biden transition in the USA will hardly improve relations with China in the short term. Internally, “losing” territory (Taiwan) or political control (Hong Kong, Tibet, or Xinjiang) would indicate an empire in decline, and clearing away resistance in such places takes priority and becomes a key marker of empire for the party-state. Civilising all under the Chinese heaven is already a burdensome task.

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