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REVIEW

Why "All Under Heaven" is Wrong

Tianxia, Beijing's favorite theory of global power, is held up by Chinese scholars as an alternative to West-centrism. The latest work of its loudest cheerleader is an empty ax ever.

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HISTORY | POLITICS

Reviewed: Zhao Tingyang, *The Whirlpool That Produced China: Stop Hunting on the Central Plain*, tr. Edmund Ryden (SUNY Press, 2024)

In the late 1990s, as Western scholars dismissed Samuel P. Huntington and his thesis on the emergence of civilizational blocs, Chinese scholars saw an opportunity: throwing *Clash of Civilizations*-sized bricks at the U.S.-led global order might legitimate the development of an alternate international system. Specifically, one modeled on Chinese antiquity. This reinvigorated interest in the hitherto overlooked theories of contemporary intellectuals such as Li Shenzhi and Sheng Hong, who had seized on "all under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下) theories as a potential new organizing principle of international relations.

Tianxia is shorthand for a traditional Chinese vision of a world order in which states govern their relations on the basis of Confucian norms of filial piety, benevolence and the "five relations" of ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, sibling-sibling and friend-friend. Each involves specific duties and expectations for maintaining moral conduct. *Tianxia*'s substance, however, is less important to the Chinese state than its ability to discredit the chaotic, selfish and poorly-structured status quo of the U.S.-led international order, in which America monopolizes the legitimation of violence. Conversely, *tianxia* is advertised as capable of managing global interests in a manner that avoids hegemonic relations.

Zhao Tingyang's first monograph on *tianxia* or "all under heaven" theory.

Zhao Tingyang (赵汀阳), a professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, is *tianxia*'s most eminent advocate. He first elaborated his thoughts in a 2005 monograph, *The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution* (orig. 天下体系), followed by several essays and books such as *Redefining A Philosophy for World Governance* (2019) and *All Under Heaven* (2021, orig. 天下的当代性). As such, Zhao is the spearhead of nativist Chinese *tianxia* thinkers who caricature the West as constitutionally incapable of supporting the cosmopolitanism that comes naturally to China.

As *tianxia*'s loudest cheerleader, Zhao presents a significant target for critiques of the genre. These include accusations of: selective and arbitrary readings of history; exaggerated claims regarding China's pacifism; an uncritical imposition of philosophical theory on history; the whitewashing of Confucian patriarchy; implicit racism towards ethnic minorities; and adherence to essentialist West-East binaries. Scholars such as Ge Zhaoguang have critiqued *tianxia*'s muddled accounts of history in the past, as has Chisheng Chang, who dismissed Zhao's work as "*dénisierie* theories at the expense of theoretical coherence." Other critics fault him for implicit Sinocentrism and a preference for authoritarianism. Zhao rejects those claims — but also refuses to admit that it would be so terrible if *tianxia* led to a Sinocentric-authoritarian world system.

Tianxia's proponents invariably claim that Beijing will avoid acting in a hegemonic manner after the U.S.-led order is deposed. Such claims depend on not saying the quiet part out loud: that China does not promise to refrain from domination, but rather to never be immoral. This amounts to not acting in ways the state cannot justify to itself — a distinction with quite a difference.

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Now Zhao Tingyang has returned to the fray with *The Whirlpool That Produced China: Stop Hunting on the Central Plain* (SUNY Press, 2024, tr. Edmund Ryden, orig. 惠此中国: 作为一个神性概念的中国旋涡模式). Here, Zhao adds the imagery of a stag hunt to his *tianxia* theorizing. The metaphor comes from game theory, in which players must decide whether to cooperate to hunt a stag (a risky but rewarding outcome) or hunt a hare individually (a safer, less rewarding route). For Zhao, China's formation has been one long stag hunt, conducted by both sedentary and nomadic tribes and kingdoms. In selecting the metaphor, Zhao alludes to a passage in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* (史记, c.91 BCE) which refers to the Qin empire having lost its "stag" in 207 BCE, forcing the other Chinese states to go on the hunt for it. The overall picture is one in which those who join the stag hunt, "a huge, irresistible temptation," get sucked — in Zhao's mixed metaphor — into a whirlpool.

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The book's main thrust is that China's expansion was not the result of colonialism but of aggressive neighbors who contributed positively to this whirlpool of cultural and economic growth thanks to Chinese statecraft, which worked to absorb competing cultures in an inclusive and diverse core. This is a panglossian take with roughly as much historical merit as the claim that Rome was a defensive power who selflessly forged *Romanitas* from the poorest human ores. Moreover, it is difficult to think of a single example of aggression, in global history, in which the acquisition of cultural capital trumped material gain, despite Zhao's insistence that such a dynamic dominated the strategic calculus of China's periphery.

Ultimately, Beijing believes it can heal from its post-imperial trauma only by returning to global centrality. This in turn involves remastering and reselling ancient patterns of governance. *The Whirlpool That Produced China* tells the story of how those patterns developed, dissecting the historical processes that fueled China's ideological trajectory and state formation. In doing so, Zhao ostensibly glides toward the cosmopolitan end of *tianxia* scholarship, a camp largely defined by the historian Xu Jilin, who spurned nativist versions of *tianxia* in favor of a universalism not encoded with Chinese norms. (In 2012, for example, Xu observed that if China's rediscovery of *tianxia* involves the construction of a "culture in opposition to the world mainstream civilization, then we are better off without such an awakening.")

Cosmopolitan rhetoric, however, tends to act as a trojan horse for reiterating the exceptionalist narrative of previous works. In Zhao Tingyang's telling, China somewhat anachronistically emerges as a primordial force of liberalism. The strategy of validating Sinocentrism via appeals to the liberal ideals purportedly pursued in its achievement can be unpacked by examining two trends.

First, conceptual shadow play: Zhao shrouds claims of Chinese exceptionalism in clothes made of liberal silk. The sincerity of this is hard to gauge as Zhao appears to appropriate liberalism's moral authority to acquire narrative power on Beijing's behalf in the international sphere. This dissimulation may be necessary. Though deploying liberal rhetoric is useful abroad, it remains sensitive at home due to the perception that the West weaponizes it against China. This leaves Zhao in a position where he alludes to liberalism — calling for member-state autonomy, voluntary ties, soft-power appeal — without using explicitly liberal terminology.

Second, Zhao's defense of Chinese exceptionalism is grounded in the national discourse of divining what makes China "great" or "good" and projecting those traits backwards. Just as Americans pushed west to fulfil a manifest destiny that later went global, so the people of the Central State (中国), Sacred Land (神州) or Celestial Empire (天朝) can only realize their innate superiority once they have achieved the "high drama of a great people making a modern comeback," in the words of John Fairbank, founder of Chinese studies in the U.S (though Chinese netizens are not above poking fun at the same concepts).

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The *Whirlpool That Produced China* could have offered a response to the criticism that *tianxia* literature swallows government rhetoric about its own record. Yet the book ignores the accusation that *tianxia*'s alleged positive attributes — such as moral and cultural leadership, and the voluntary submission of neighbors — are myths that only possess discursive vigor due to China's state power. Instead, these errors are replayed on loop, as if readers were fools and the answer to their concerns was further rote-learning. Since Xi Jinping granted *tianxia* his seal of approval as a guiding theory in the mid 2010s, it has been furnished with the credentials of state ideology, resulting in it being taught rather than questioned.

A graphic for a 2022 state-media program titled "Watching the World with President Xi," captioned "The concerns of all under-heaven as one family." (CCTV)

In 2007, Hu Jintao started to use the phrase "community of common destiny" to plug together the future of mainland China and Taiwan. By 2017, Xi Jinping had turned it into a *tianxia* label, encouraging a "community with a shared future for mankind" as the guiding slogan of Chinese foreign policy, accompanied by *tianxia* jargon such as "harmonizing myriad nations" (协和万邦) and "all under heaven as one family" (天下一家). Zhao, like the CCP leadership, is more interested in mythologization than history, cherry-picking the past to provide fodder for *tianxia*'s maw. A cavalier use of sources — such as Zhao's treatment of legendary stories at face value — is par for the course.

A cursory reading of Chinese history would find deception, competition and violence between the central Chinese state and its neighbors to be the standard rather than the exception. Tibet's history resisting assimilation into China since the 7th century (with a homeland now under de facto occupation and a spiritual core in exile) suggests that far from neighbors coming for the spoils and staying for the civilization, regional players often used pre-emptive violence in order to pursue self-preservation. In short, non-participation in China's war games by the lesser states on its periphery risked the loss of their ancestral territory — hardly a benign process. Such a dynamic persists today, with several states surviving courtesy of Beijing: Laos and North Korea, for instance, are left alone thanks to ideological alignment, while Cambodia and Myanmar are forced to adjust to forms of clientelism.

Considering the Disneyfied account of national formation in the *tianxia* narrative, it is worth flagging that the Shang dynasty (1600-1050 BCE) indulged in the sacrifice of barbarians; the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) emerged after burying 200,000 troops alive; and China did not resemble its modern shape until the Han conquered southern and western parts of its ecumene. Zhao sanitizes this aggression, claiming that "since there was also no nationalism or racism, the various cultures had no incompatibilities that could not be reviewed and reconciled."

At the high noon of *tianxia*, far from facilitating peaceful transfers of power, the Mongols and Manchus only established their respective empires after decades of warfare against the Han-led Song and Ming dynasties. If *tianxia* failed to prevent mass violence during these dynastic transitions, it is unlikely to have had much traction in other periods and clearly acted as a retrospective gloss that reconciled the Chinese to foreign rule. Rather tellingly — considering Zhao's claims to *tianxia*'s ethnicity-agnosticism — in the midst of the 20th century China refused to assimilate into imperial Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," itself a *tianxia*-esque zone, except one under Japanese leadership.

That so many obvious rejoinders are ignored says less about the caliber of academic scrutiny that *tianxia* theories have received than the strength of their political necessity within China. *Tianxia*'s main role is not to present an honest historiography of imperial China but to construct a plausible narrative that fortifies Beijing against an identity crisis that might follow full assimilation to a Western world order. By offering native patterns of governance on an international scale, China can globalize without suffering assimilation. The means to this end is a moral superiority harvested from Chinese history, which the *tianxia* theory gracefully provides.

The actual historical record of China soils this idea. While *tianxia* literature such as *The Whirlpool That Produced China* tries to bluff its way out of this predicament, most readers will see through its historically inaccuracies, cod-philosophy and phoney packaging of the "China dream" in a liberal framework, and see *tianxia* for what it is: a polemical apologia for Chinese exceptionalism. ■

Header: "The great Qing Dynasty's complete map of all under heaven" (大清万年一統天下全图), c. 1811, based on map by Huang Qianren, 1767. (Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

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