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American Tianxia

When Chinese Philosophy Meets American Power

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What is America? The world recoils when U.S. President Donald Trump says “America first,” ^[2] but nothing should be more natural than a president putting his country first. The problem with “America first” is that for many people around the world, America is not just a country. The United States is a country. America is something more—not only the most powerful state, but the cultural, economic, and institutional center of a world that it has partially recreated in its own image.

The West does not have a good word to describe America in this expanded sense because the modern West has never seen something like it before. The last time a whole world was so organized around a single, central state was in the fifteenth century, when East Asia was centered on Ming-dynasty China ^[3]. China at the time wasn’t just the leader or regional hegemon; it was the central state of a political and cultural realm that stretched from Burma to Japan. And the word that came to describe this world was *tianxia*.

Tianxia literally means “everything under the heavens,” but in the days of imperial China, it came to refer to “an enlightened realm” of “universal values that determined who was civilized and who was not,” in the words of the eminent historian Wang Gungwu. In the old *tianxia*, for instance, Chinese culture was the standard to which all others aspired, with the mastery of Chinese calligraphy serving as a sign of refinement everywhere in East Asia, even among people who didn’t speak Chinese. The Ming court granted titles to non-Chinese leaders, and although these honorifics weren’t absolutely necessary for Asian rulers, the lack of one always made their hold on power a little less secure. The titles also allowed foreign leaders to trade with China. Access to Chinese markets wasn’t crucial, since most countries were self-sufficient in meeting their basic needs, but it was important if a country was to have any meaningful trade at all.

Today the United States is at the center of a global *tianxia* ^[4]. This “American Tianxia” is much more than a state or country, or even an empire. It pervades all areas of life. In today’s connected world, Chinese businesses, Russian universities, and even Iranian revolutions are run on American lines. The Islamic State (ISIS) recommends that its fighters use Android devices whereas North Korea’s ruling Kim family famously prefers

Apple. Many people around the world oppose the United States, its policies, and its president, but they still want to send their children to American universities, invest their money in American companies, and express their opinions on American social networks.

This is not some kind of consumerism run amok. Standing at the center of the global order, the United States has, over the last quarter century, reoriented the way the world—and especially the world’s elite—works, plays, and thinks. It has brought them into an international hierarchy in which gaining status requires succeeding within U.S.-centered networks ^[5] and playing by U.S. rules. And it makes twenty-first century America more powerful than any empire, kingdom, or commonwealth in history. The United States—that is, the country itself—has plenty of hard and soft power. But the United States has limits. The American Tianxia does not.

THE CENTRAL STATE

The name for China in Chinese, “*Zhongguo*,” literally means “middle kingdom,” or, more prosaically, central state or states (there is no plural inflection in Chinese). “Middle Kingdom” is also the name of China in Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and most other East Asian languages. Within the cultural and political sphere of East Asia, China was always at the center. For example, the Japanese name for Japan, *Nippon*, literally means the “land of the rising sun”—as seen from China. The “nam” in Vietnam means “south,” indicating its direction from the Viet, an ancient people of southern China.

China’s neighbors recognized that China was the central state of East Asia and used the Chinese word *tianxia* to describe the system to which they belonged. China did not directly rule over East Asia as an oppressive imperial overlord, nor did it provide system-wide security as a regional hegemon. Chinese centrality was simply a matter of size and location—China was large and all the surrounding countries were small.

Tianxia thus referred not to hegemony, but to a system in which China was both the dominant political and economic power as well as the center of the cultural universe, especially for elites. China’s neighbors adopted Confucianism; in Korea and Japan, elites studied classical Chinese, which was long the language of government, scholarship, and even literature. Chinese diplomatic recognition could turn a local warlord into a respected king. China also had the economic weight to play “take it or leave it” in trade negotiations with its neighbors.

When China sent armies abroad, it was usually to intervene in support of one faction or another in its neighboring countries, not to conquer them. In fact the founder of the Ming Dynasty, the Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368–1398), left a letter of advice to his successors reminiscent of George Washington’s warning about “entangling alliances”:

China’s size, power, prestige, and location meant that all of East Asia was subsumed within the Chinese *tianxia*. But when Europeans arrived in the sixteenth century, the world suddenly seemed a lot bigger. By the end of the Ming Dynasty in 1644, China was no longer at the center of “everything under the heavens.” It had become just another major regional power in a much larger world.

The Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) was, in its first two centuries, even more powerful than the Ming, but it lacked the moral authority to define civilization in the eyes of its neighbors. In this period Japan completely closed itself off from interaction with China, and Korean rulers only accepted Qing suzerainty by force. Whereas Ming China aspired to be the font of universal wisdom, Qing China was merely the bully next door. Later it became the victim next door, as China was bludgeoned into signing a series of unequal treaties, first by the European powers and later by Japan.

Now China is once again a major regional power ^[6] in a much larger world. China's neighbors have adjusted to the return of China, but few of them have reoriented their self-understandings around it. Japan and South Korea, wary of China's rise, continue to align their foreign policies with that of the United States. Only in Southeast Asia is China the dominant player in international relations, but even there the balance is more against China than in its favor.

Some Chinese scholars, such as the philosopher Zhao Tingyang, have promoted the idea of a new, twenty-first century *tianxia*, by which they mean a harmonious global system run on Chinese Confucian principles. But if there is a central state of the twenty-first century it clearly is not China. To be fair, Chinese writers and diplomats routinely deny any special status for China in their plans. Instead they assert the principle of sovereign equality, eschewing any special role for China in their prospective "harmonious world" (the term used by China's then-President Hu Jintao in his 2005 speech to the United Nations). But can there be a true *tianxia*—a harmonious ordering of everything under the heavens—without a central state to harmonize it?

A close look at the historical Ming *tianxia* suggests not. Harmony may require a certain Confucian forbearance on the part of the central state, but it requires a central state. Ming-era East Asia wasn't stable because everyone agreed to live peacefully and respectfully in a harmonious commonwealth with China; it was stable because, practically speaking, all international affairs had to be conducted with regard to one overwhelmingly influential central state, and that central state was generally wise enough not to leverage its centrality to maximize its own narrow short-term gains. Compare that to the extreme violence of the European interstate system that arose in the Renaissance and lasted until World War II, in which multiple evenly-matched powers slugged it out for dominance.

Today the United States is the central state—the *zhongguo*, so to speak—of the international system. Some people say that we now live in a multipolar world; that the U.S. share of global GDP is in terminal decline; that the dollar's central role in the world economy is under threat; that the rest of the world no longer respects the United States. These declinists miss the point: the United States doesn't have to rule the world in order to harmonize it. In a *tianxia* like Ming East Asia or today's American world, it is not the raw power of the central state that stabilizes the system. It is its centrality.

THE GLOBAL INDIVIDUAL

If there is one thing that defines the United States' role in the current world system, it is centrality. For instance, despite all the supposed bad blood between China and Donald Trump, the U.S.–Chinese relationship is among the bright spots in the new administration's foreign policy. One of Chinese President Xi Jinping's major goals for his first summit with Trump, in April, was to keep the U.S. financial system open to Chinese

state-owned banks and clearinghouses. He got what he wanted in exchange for delivering on Trump's priorities on market access and North Korea. For all countries, but especially a major trading nation like China, access to the dollar system is crucial.

The United States' centrality in the global financial system gives it considerable leverage over the rest of the world. Indeed U.S. economic sanctions [7], such as those on Iran and Russia, are much more effective now than they were at the height of American postwar hegemony, during the 1950s and 1960s, because globalization has increased the interconnectedness of the world and that interconnectedness is centered on the United States. And it is not just the threads of global finance that run through New York and California—the vast majority of the world's Internet traffic crosses the United States, too. The United States benefits from its centrality in other networks as well: academic networks, business networks, media networks, you name it. It is hard to think of any global network that isn't centered in and on the United States.

This prominence is not limited to cyberspace, however. Foreign universities increasingly offer U.S.-style degrees, partner with American (or other English-speaking) universities, and even seek U.S. accreditation. Elites all over the world school their children in English, exposing them to American culture and ways of thinking. In the world of business, U.S.-style shareholder value principles, management styles, and work ethics have become global best practices. The top organizations in almost every profession are disproportionately located in the United States.

One result of this centrality is that the United States is not just the favored destination for the world's money. Perhaps more importantly, it has become the favored destination for the world's people. This especially true for the Chinese—citizens of the greatest putative rival to U.S. power. More than 300,000 Chinese students are now studying in the United States, with an annual flow of nearly 100,000 new students every year. But the flow of Chinese students may soon be overtaken by a new source of enduring U.S.–Chinese ties: Chinese anchor babies.

California maternity hospitals catering to Chinese mothers try to keep a low profile, but everyone agrees that their business is booming. Estimates are that anywhere from 10,000 to perhaps 100,000 Chinese women give birth in the United States every year—and these babies are automatically eligible for U.S. citizenship. By mid-century there may be 2–3 million elite “Chinese,” raised in China, who are in fact citizens of the United States and only the United States, since China does not allow dual citizenship.

Birth tourism was once difficult because U.S. consulates routinely denied visas to pregnant women. But all that changed in November 2014 when the United States and China agreed to offer 10-year tourist visas to each other's citizens. Now a Chinese woman can get a visa before she gets married, wait until she becomes pregnant, then fly to the United States at the beginning of her third trimester. This dramatically cuts the time, hassle, and expense of having a “USA baby.”

China's “USA babies,” graduates of American universities, and other elites with investments in the United States may not even live in the country and probably do not think of themselves as Americans. But they are inextricably tied into U.S.-centered networks of money, power, and prestige. Like the Russian oligarchs who left Moscow for

London a generation ago, they may imagine that they and their children will remain attached to their native country. In reality, such families become global citizens who live in a transnational space built in the image of the United States—the American Tianxia.

Those who inhabit this American Tianxia—transnational elites from China and elsewhere—all share a common connection to the United States (or one of its close Anglo-Saxon allies, such as the United Kingdom) that results in the formation of shared values. Chief among them is the very American value of individual self-fulfillment. Detached from any particular country of origin, these elites inevitably adopt an individualistic approach to life. The idea that “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are inalienable rights is distinctively American, but it is no longer uniquely American. These days, elites all over the world have learned that it is right, even moral, to prioritize their own happiness over traditional national and religious attachments.

This individual focus on personal self-fulfillment, combined with the centrality of the United States in nearly all global distinction hierarchies—the academic, artistic, business, financial, and technological rankings by which we judge ourselves and the people around us)—has created a world in which individual elites owe their status as much to the United States as to their home countries. A banker in Hong Kong, for instance, may have landed their job thanks to a degree from Harvard. The ultimate power that the United States derives from its centrality in the American Tianxia is thus network power, or the ability to get what you want by shaping the life opportunities that are available to others. Transnational elites must operate within a global network based on the United States and respond to its incentives. As a result, they don’t want to bring down the U.S.-centered global system and its U.S.-centered value chains, educational hierarchies, and Internet. Their greatest fear is that the system will be undermined by others: Russian hackers, Muslim fundamentalists, or even a U.S. president.

THE NEXT AMERICAN CENTURY

The American publisher Henry Luce is well-remembered for predicting, in 1941, that the twentieth century was the “American Century.” Less well-remembered is his assertion that the twentieth century would be “America’s first century as a dominant power in the world,” which strongly implied that it would not be the last.

These days American boosterism has fallen out of favor. Declinism is in, and contemporary accounts of U.S. decline inevitably hinge on the challenge from China. Forecasts of future Chinese economic power routinely assume that China will simultaneously continue to grow in per capita terms while remaining a country that is four times the population of the United States. Most people now acknowledge that China’s economic growth is slowing, and there are grave doubts about its future trajectory. But multiply any growth at all by 1.3 billion people, and the figures are still impressive.

Yet the Chinese population is set to begin declining by mid-century, while the five English-speaking countries at the core of the American Tianxia (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States), will continue to grow, thanks to healthy rates of fertility and immigration. There are too many uncertainties involved for demographic predictions on such a long time scale to be taken at face value, although the exercise is

suggestive. But if the American Tianxia thesis is correct, demographic competition is almost beside the point. Increasing numbers of Chinese people will identify with the maintenance of the global order represented by the American Tianxia.

Today's *Pax Americana* is not rooted in the military strength of the United States; as Syria and Ukraine demonstrate, the United States has little interest in ending the wars of others. The true stabilizers that underlie the *Pax Americana* are the global networks of the American Tianxia. As a result of the openness of these networks, the most effective way for Chinese families to increase their power and wealth is not for them to lead China into successful foreign wars. A much better strategy is just to move to the United States.

By transferring status competition from the country level to the individual level, the American Tianxia has neutered the nation-state. Countries are still very important as units of local administration, as are provinces, cities, and districts. But national states are no longer the main actors on the historical stage. States still do a lot, but they no longer make history as we have known it in the West—history as the constant vying of politically organized human communities for power and prestige.

When “everything under the heavens” is unified in a single hierarchical system, people are more concerned with climbing up the hierarchy than with bringing down the sky. That makes the American Tianxia more stable than any system the world has ever known, including the old *tianxia* of Ming China. It may not always be fair, but it is harmonious, and it is here to stay.

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