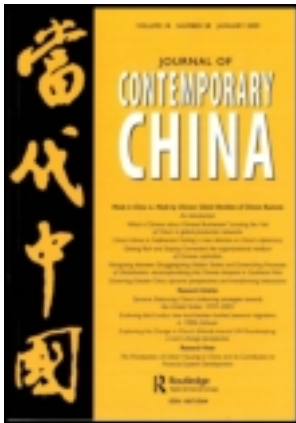


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# Moving Beyond Sovereignty? A brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the *tianxia* concept

ALLEN CARLSON\*

*This article examines recent trends in the evolution of elite Chinese foreign policy discussions about the normative organizing principles that should ground contemporary international politics. It finds that a pragmatic emphasis on sovereignty, albeit as a right which is flexible and far from sacrosanct, still maintains a core position within Chinese thinking in this regard. However, at the same time, a surprising reconstitution of an old world view has begun to take shape in China. More specifically, the tianxia (all-under-heaven) concept has emerged as a new reference point for some Chinese deliberations on the normative structure of international relations. While such a perspective is still of secondary importance within Chinese international relations circles, its emergence suggests that a potentially far-reaching, if still inchoate, reconsideration of international order is underway in China. Moreover, such a development may have broad ranging implications for the security dynamic that takes shape in Asia in the coming years.*

## I. Introduction

A decade ago, the modification of sovereignty's role in international politics, largely in the form of the transgression of sovereign boundaries, seemed to have taken root on the world stage. While sovereignty still provided order to the system, its role appeared to be in transition under the weight of a web of new transnational norms and increasingly vigorous multilateral institutions. Indeed, the momentum that had

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gathered behind new principles of humanitarian intervention, collective security, and the pooling of sovereignty suggested the potential for the emergence of a new post-sovereign order in which international organizations and transnational forces would stand alongside, if not supplant, sovereign states as the primary players in international politics. In retrospect, however, a high-water mark for modifying Westphalia may have been reached around the turn of the century. For example, over the last several years self-determination norms have garnered significantly less normative legitimacy vis-à-vis the jurisdictional claims made by existing sovereign states. Human rights standards, which were always contested at the system level, now stand on even shakier ground as questions of oversight and cultural specificity have grown more pronounced around the globe. Finally, as the global economy has faltered, issues of compliance with the statutes of the key international economic organizations, particularly those of the World Trade Organization (WTO), have proliferated, and defections from the so-called Washington Consensus on free trade and monetary openness have become more evident. In short, there are now multiple incipient cracks, if not outright reversals, in the nascent modified sovereign order of the initial post-Cold War period.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, China is now, as we often hear, on the 'rise'. Over the last two decades, its international profile has unquestionably grown across a host of issue areas ranging from the positions Beijing has taken in the UN Security Council, to expanding military influence within Asia, to the accumulation of extensive economic influence around the globe. In brief, whereas China had established only a modest regional role for itself in world politics in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, it now has a prominent place within the global order.

These dual developments then beg a reconsideration of the question which was first voiced during China's initial move into the international system at the end of the Mao era, mainly: to what extent will Beijing attempt to place its own imprint on the global stage? Or, put somewhat differently: is China likely to continue to accept the status quo in regards to defining the normative underpinnings of the contemporary international order, or will those working within the Chinese state's foreign policy and national security establishment attempt to re-orient international norms in a manner more consistent with their own preferences?

Variations upon these questions have implicitly grounded virtually all of the work on China's 'socialization' into international society, extending from Alastair Iain Johnston's influential study of Beijing's approach to arms control, to Rosemary Foot and Ann Kent's outstanding work on China's involvement in the international human rights system, to Margaret Pearson's consideration of the Chinese role in the WTO. Such analysis has shed a great deal of new light on specific aspects of Chinese thinking and behavior in the international sphere. However, much of this literature was written well before the current period of turbulence within the international system began to take shape and at a juncture when China was comparatively weak. In other words, the work generally assumed a degree of unity within international society in regards to norms that was probably overstated to begin with, and now appears to be even more out of synch with trends within the system.

1. For a more extensive discussion of sovereignty please also see Carlson, *Unifying China*, particularly chs 1 and 2.

At the same time, it tended to portray China as a passive recipient of outside influences, an actor that simply responded to international ideational trends.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the issue-specific nature of this research meant that it generally failed to explore the manner in which Chinese analysts were conceptualizing the normative foundations of the system, from which particular questions about international regimes and regulations must follow.

This brief article is intended to partially redress such shortcomings. It does so by examining recent developments in the manner in which Chinese foreign policy elites envision the organizing principles that they feel ought to ground contemporary international politics.<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is a study of Chinese normative thinking about the nature of the international system. In this regard, this article observes that two sets of contrasting worldviews have begun to take shape in China over the last several years. On the one hand, the predominant approach to world order is defined by a continuation and expansion of the broad grouping of pragmatic viewpoints that first emerged in Beijing during the early 1990s. This position is premised upon an acceptance of sovereignty as the bedrock of the international system, tempered by a realistic acceptance of enduring US hegemony, and a degree of flexibility on questions of multilateral intervention and the diminution of states' sovereign rights. However, alongside this conventional mainstream outlook, elites have engaged in a surprising promotion of a re-invented vision of the *tianxia* concept as a historically-based Chinese perspective that may form a new normative reference point for the international system. In light of these developments, the article contends that Chinese thinking about international order is more fluid, and contested, than it was a decade ago. It concludes that such a trend may have significant policy implications for the way in which China approaches the rest of the international system, especially along its borders in Asia.

## II. Continuing to go along (even when the new order appears to be fleeting)

At the start of the 1990s, Chinese thinking about the normative foundations of the contemporary international order was rightfully characterized by most outside

2. On this point, special thanks go to Eryn MacDonald who recently finished an interesting Master's thesis at Cornell University's Government Department that touched upon this issue with reference to Beijing's approach to space weapons. See Eryn MacDonald, *Socialization on Shaky Ground: China's Policy-Making on Space Weapons*, unpublished MA thesis, Cornell University, 2009.

3. As in Carlson, 'More than just saying no', I use the term 'foreign policy elite' to refer to 'the group of scholars affiliated with a short list of prominent government sponsored research institutes, think tanks, and universities within China that are involved with analyzing China's foreign relations and broader issues of international politics. Such organizations include, but are not limited to, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Economics and Politics (*Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi Yanjiusuo*) and American Studies Institute (*Meiguo Yanjiusuo*), the Foreign Ministry's Institute of International Studies (*Guoji Wenti Yanjiusuo*), the State Council's Institute of Contemporary International Relations (*Xiandai Guoji Guanxi Yanjiusuo*), the Shanghai Institute of International Relations (*Shanghai Guoji Wenti Yanjiusuo*), Peking University's Institute of International Relations, Fudan University's Institute of American Studies, and the Foreign Affairs College'. For two excellent surveys of the role and influence of these institutions, see Bonnie Glaser and Phillip Saunders, 'Chinese civilian foreign policy research institutes: evolving roles and increasing influence', *China Quarterly* 171, (September 2002), pp. 597–616; and David Shambaugh, 'China's international relations think tanks: evolving structure and process', *China Quarterly* 171, (Fall 2002), pp. 575–596. More recently, see Xuanli Liao, *Chinese Foreign Policy Think Tanks and China's Policy Toward Japan* (The Chinese University Press, 2006); and, for a survey beyond the field of foreign policy, see Zhu Xufeng, 'The influence of think tanks in the Chinese policy process', *Asian Survey* 49(2), (March/April 2009), pp. 333–357.

observers as particularly rigid and unyielding. It was grounded by an unrelenting attachment to sovereignty's foundational role within international politics. Such a position was most clearly expressed by Wang Tieya, a scholar who is widely regarded as one of the founders of the contemporary study of international law in China. Wang wrote,

Strict adherence to the principle of the inviolability of sovereignty has become a distinctive feature of the foreign policy of the People's Republic of China and is treated as the basis of international relations and the cornerstone of the whole system of international law.<sup>4</sup>

However, in contrast to Wang's pronouncement, Chinese thinking and actions related to the normative principles that frame the international system changed rather dramatically over the next decade. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s the Chinese foreign policy establishment had reluctantly come to terms with most aspects of the apparently changing nature of sovereignty's role in ordering international politics, and accepted that such a development had specific implications for Chinese foreign policy.

This development was led in the mid-1990s by Wang Yizhou, an influential scholar working out of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' (CASS) World Economics and Politics Institute. For example, in 1995, Wang wrote extensively about the limitations (*xianzhi*) which had begun to be placed on sovereignty as growing transnational trends and developments transformed the international system. More specifically, Wang noted,

In some situations, placing limitations on the practice of sovereignty is related to the unjust and unreasonable international order, [and] very likely the result of western countries attempting to develop a narrow, selfish interest, but on the other hand, the conditions (*sisu*) on sovereignty reflect the reality of the deepening of the trend toward global interdependence and international society, reflecting a pressing need to solve serious global issues.<sup>5</sup>

When Wang Yizhou first published such an analysis, he was soundly criticized by many in the Chinese foreign policy community as being too 'soft' on sovereignty.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as I have previously noted, strident differences persisted within this group throughout the 1990s over the scope of change which was unfolding within the structure of the international system following the end of the Cold War. Those who dissented with Wang's analysis took greatest issue with the degree of seeming naivety it encompassed with regards to the expansiveness and assertiveness of US hegemony and the extent to which both Washington and the 'West' were making

4. Wang Tieya, 'International law in China: historical and contemporary perspectives', *Recueil Des Cours* no. 221, (1990), p. 228. For more on such conventional approaches to sovereignty within China, please see Carlson, *Unifying China*. For my earliest work on this issue, see Allen Carlson, *Constructing a New Great Wall: Chinese Foreign Policy and the Norm of State Sovereignty*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2000.

5. Wang Yizhou, *Dangdai Guoji Zhengzhi Xilun [An Analysis of Contemporary International Politics]* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1995), pp. 81–82. This work is also cited in Carlson, 'More than just saying no', p. 226.

6. During interviews I conducted in Beijing at the time, a handful of influential scholars suggested that being weak on sovereignty was paramount to *maiguo*, literally 'selling out the nation', and more generally translated as 'traitorous'.

illegitimate use of concepts such as the ‘passing of sovereignty’ to further their own interests within the international arena. However, even the most skeptical analysts of Western motivations tended not to deny that the international order was in the process of changing and China could not afford to ignore such a development.<sup>7</sup>

While these differences persisted through the turn of the century, during this period it is also apparent that they were also gradually surpassed by a new consensus among Chinese foreign policy elites regarding the scope of change which was unfolding in the international system. Such agreement hinged upon an acceptance that China needed to become more selective in its use of sovereign-centric rhetoric and more aware of the costs and benefits that could accrue from compromising on limited facets of the principle. One core aspect of this shift was an endorsement of Beijing’s continued rhetorical promotion of a narrow, official interpretation of sovereignty, particularly with reference to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. This was coupled with a much more pragmatic set of practices that followed the substance of Wang’s early analysis, particularly his emphasis on how much sovereign change had occurred and the appropriate policy response to such a development. As I have observed in a number of publications, since the mid-1990s Beijing has repeatedly compromised on the sanctity of the line between international and internal affairs vis-à-vis each facet of sovereignty, including with reference to multilateral intervention and UN peacekeeping operations.<sup>8</sup>

To no small extent, such an approach continues to predominate today within China as evidenced by underlying continuities in elite discussions that are unfolding there about international order and sovereignty. Indeed, in a general sense, Chinese writing in this regard continues to portray the principle of sovereignty as being in flux and no longer capable of sealing individual states off from the outside world (if it ever did).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, sovereign change is treated by virtually all commentators as one of the new empirical realities within the contemporary international system. As such, it is simply a new challenge, or issue, with which individual states (including China) must cope.

Most interestingly, even as momentum for large-scale multilateral interventions appears to have stalled on the global stage, Chinese analysts have continued to endorse the necessity of such operations. Once more, the work of Wang Yizhou formed the leading edge in articulating this position. In a 2005 article on the study of

7. The observations made in this paragraph draw directly on points made in Carlson, *Protecting Sovereignty*; and Carlson, *Unifying China*.

8. On this last point, see Carlson, *Protecting Sovereignty*; Carlson, *Unifying China*; and Carlson, ‘More than just saying no’. For earlier, excellent analysis of this trend, see M. Taylor Fravel, ‘China’s attitude toward UN peacekeeping operations’, *Asian Survey*, (November 1996), pp. 1102–1122; Jin-Dong Yuan, ‘Multilateral intervention and state sovereignty: Chinese views on UN peacekeeping operations’, *Political Science*, (1998), pp. 275–295; and Bates Gill and James Reilly, ‘Sovereignty, intervention and peacekeeping: the view from Beijing’, *Survival*, (Autumn 2000), pp. 41–59.

9. See for example, Zhu Mingquan, *Beyond Westphalia and New Security Concepts*, GIS Working Paper, no. 6, (2005), available at: [www.IRChina.org](http://www.IRChina.org). Also see Zhang Haibin, ‘Lun Guiji Huanjing Baohu Dui Guojia Zhuquan De Yixiang’ [‘Impact of international environmental protection on national sovereignty’], *Ouzhou Yanjiu [European Research]* no. 3, (2007). In addition, see Liu Kai and Chen Zhi, ‘Quanjihua Shidai Zhiyue Guojia Zhuquan Rangdu De Kunnan He Wentu Fenxi’ [‘Analysis of the issues and difficulties in the restriction of national sovereignty in a global era’], *Hubei Shehui Kexue [Hubei Social Sciences]* no. 9, (2007). Most recently see Yu Feng, ‘Zhuquan De Xiangqi, Lishi Lixing, Hefaxing, Yu Rentong Jizhu’ [‘The origins of sovereignty: historical justice, legitimacy and identity base’], *Shijie Jingji Yu Zhengzhi [World Economics and Politics]* no. 4, (2008).



international relations, Wang noted, ‘People often say that in international relations, sovereignty cannot be interfered with. However, now, more and more phenomena prove that non-interference (*buganshe*) has preconditions (*you qiantide*)’.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Wang argues that in light of such developments sovereignty can be divided, or, differently stated, it has multiple levels among which some form a core, while others are only of peripheral or tangential significance. Interestingly, he then turns such a discussion to China’s own situation and emphasizes that for Beijing Taiwan involves a core aspect of sovereignty (*hexin zhuquan*). However, in referring to the war in Iraq, he emphasizes that this ‘is definitely not an issue of core sovereignty for us’.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he concludes that students of international relations must realize that within the system all countries are faced with similar issues, and many weaker states, particularly those incapable of governing, will be increasingly subject to international oversight.<sup>12</sup>

A wave of more specific analysis has followed in Wang’s wake. In 2006, Song Zhe readily acknowledged the extension of the UN’s peacekeeping activities, and rather than questioning the normative underpinnings of such a development, called for a revision in the laws and principles which regulated multilateral operations. Song cautioned about the ease with which ‘big states’ have used peacekeeping as a ‘tool’ (*gongju*) to serve their own purposes. Nevertheless, the Nanjing Normal University professor also acknowledged that in a ‘globalizing world, mankind faces many new challenges, a deepening of inter-state interdependence, and global problems that can only be solved with increased cooperation between states’, with the UN and its peacekeepers playing a crucial role in such a process.<sup>13</sup> In a positive review of the emergence of preventative diplomacy (*yufangxing waijiao*), Fang Wenqin, a scholar from Peking University, added that while China had previously voiced a certain attitude (*kending taidu*) about the extent to which Western nations made use of ‘human rights’ to interfere in the internal affairs of developing countries, complete opposition to humanitarian intervention no longer serves China’s international role given the development of economic globalization and increasing sophistication in the articulation of China’s national interest. Therefore, China must develop an engaged and coherent approach to the issue that goes beyond simply opposing peacekeeping.<sup>14</sup>

While such a direct admission of change is by no means unusual within the growing Chinese literature on international order, it should also be noted that explicit acceptance of such a development still lies somewhat outside the mainstream of Chinese elite thinking about the pros and cons of multilateral intervention. However, even more guarded analysts now write from the perspective of accepting the reality, indeed, necessity, of coordinated international responses to transnational threats in a

10. Wang Yizhou, ‘Guoji Guanxi Yanjiu Ruogan Wenti’ [‘Several issues in the study of international relations’], *Ouzhou Yanzhou* [European Research] no. 3, (2006), p. 131.

11. *Ibid.*

12. For a dissenting voice on this issue see Guan Liping, ‘Rendao Zhuyi Ganyue’ [‘Humanitarian intervention’], *Xueshu Tansuo* [Academic Exploration] no. 1, (2005).

13. Song Zhe, ‘Quanqiuhua Beijingxia Lianheguo Wehexingdong De Falu Jizhi Jianshe Shentao’ [‘A probe into the legal mechanisms in UN peacekeeping during globalization’], *Nanjing Shuye Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of Nanjing Forestry University] no. 4, (2006), pp. 61–62.

14. Fang Wenqin, ‘Yufangxing waijiao’ [‘Flexible diplomacy’], *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* [International Politics Research] no. 3, (2007).

globalized world (*quanqiuhua shijie*). For example, in a recent edition of *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, a publication not known for particularly adventurous content, Zhang Ruizhuang, a prominent international relations scholar from Nankai University, took note of the broad implications that international involvement in Sudan would have for the development of a new phase in the international order (*guoji zhixu*). After discussing the evolving relationship between sovereignty and UN sponsored activities over the course of the post-World War II period, Zhang lent substance to such an observation by adding that during the course of the 1990s Western nations became much more active in promoting the concept of humanitarian intervention. This process had culminated with the 2001 report to the General Secretary of the United Nations, entitled, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty*. Rather than rejecting such a development outright, Zhang rhetorically asks when calls for intervention are heard on the global stage: ‘Who is “international society”? Who is “the regional organization” and “concerned states”? Has a “humanitarian crisis” occurred? Is there a need for “humanitarian intervention”? After all, who has the final say?’<sup>15</sup>

Although Zhang’s comments on intervention suggest a lingering degree of concern within China over the implications that the devolution of sovereignty’s foundational role within international politics will have for states, it is also clear that such reservations do not extend into direct challenges to the legitimacy of such a trend. In other words, Zhang and other skeptical Chinese analysts are not taking issue with the apparent fact that the specific manifestations of sovereignty’s role in international politics have changed, but rather continue to feel uneasy about the potential abuse of such a situation by powers perceived to be hostile to weaker states in general, and China more specifically. At the same time, within such a normative vision it is clear that sovereignty forms the bedrock of contemporary international society. In other words, to use Christian Reus-Smit’s framework for describing the various normative facets that make up the ‘international order’, within such Chinese discussions there is a broad acceptance of the anchoring role which sovereignty plays as a ‘constitutional structure’ within international politics, where such a norm is defined as ‘the constitutive values that define legitimate statehood and rightful state action’.<sup>16</sup> Where Chinese elites then differ is over the extent to which recent changes in international politics have raised questions about the nature of the system’s ‘foundational institutions’ (‘the elementary rules of practice that states formulate to solve the coordination and collaboration problems associated with coexistence under anarchy’) and its ‘issue specific regimes’.<sup>17</sup>

15. Zhang Ruizhuang, ‘Jingti Xifang, Yi “Rendaozhuyi Ganyu” Wei Ming Dianfu Xianxing Guoji Zhixu’ [‘Be vigilant about the West subverting the existing international order in the name of “humanitarian intervention”’], *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi* [Contemporary International Relations] no. 9, (2008), pp. 12–13. For similarly cautious analysis, see Chen Xiancai and Song Linlin, ‘Guoji Rendaozhuyi Weiji Guanli’ [‘Crisis in the administration of international humanitarianism’], *Guoji Luntan* [International Forum] no. 3, (2008); and Ji Nan, ‘Cong Guojifa Kan Guoji Ganyu’ [‘Examining international intervention from the perspective of international law’], *Fazhi Yu Shehui* [Law and Society] no. 10, (2008).

16. Christian Reus-Smit, *Moral Purpose of the State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 14.

17. *Ibid.*



### III. Inventing a new order: *tianxia* and rethinking China's role (in Asia and beyond)

Chinese pragmatism of the last decade entails an acceptance of the general parameters of the status quo normative values within the international system, and is largely consistent with earlier Chinese positions on sovereignty and international order. However, over the past five years, a new wrinkle in Chinese thinking about world order has also begun to take shape. During this period, ideas grounded in a specific interpretation of Chinese history have begun to be articulated in Chinese foreign policy circles. Moreover, in returning to Reus-Smit's conceptualization of international order, such thinking extends to a rather explicit questioning of the very 'constitutional structures' that are at the core of the international system.

Interestingly, prior to this turn, a consideration of historical influences on Chinese foreign policy had long played a prominent role in outside analysis of Beijing's approach to foreign affairs and national security. For example, in his seminal work from the 1970s on China's approach to world order, Samuel Kim emphasized the possibility that China's Sino-centric past, as described in John Fairbank's influential work on the Qing, might have an influence on contemporary Chinese thinking about the international system.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Alastair Iain Johnston's research on China's approach to national security drew on the enduring role in China of a *realpolitik* strategic culture.<sup>19</sup> Most recently, David Kang's work on the absence of balancing against China in Asia is grounded by a reconsideration of the residual imprint of Sino-centrism in the region.<sup>20</sup> In short, outside observers have tended to take history seriously in their discussions of China's place on the world stage. Somewhat ironically, this was not the case within China. Indeed, while in the course of interviews Chinese analysts often called attention to China's 5,000 year history, the indignities suffered during its 'century of humiliation', and its historical stand against hegemonism, their written work has not featured such variables. On the contrary, although the vast knowledge of most Chinese foreign policy elites about the relationship between various Chinese dynasties and their neighbors is readily apparent in personal conversations, it has rarely made its way onto the pages of China's leading foreign policy journals.

This being the case, a dramatic shift in this regard has recently unfolded within China. The earliest proponent of this movement is Zhao Tingyang. The centerpiece of Zhao's re-conceptualization of the world in line with Chinese philosophy is a resurrection of the well-known term *tianxia* (most directly translated as 'all-under-heaven'). According to William Callahan's critical survey of Zhao's work, the controversial CASS philosopher used this term as an all-inclusive concept that encompasses geographic, demographic and political components. For the purposes of

18. See Samuel Kim, *China, the United Nations, and World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

19. See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Cultural realism and strategy in Maoist China', in Peter Katzenstein, ed., *The Culture of National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 216–270.

20. See David Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

this article, we can then largely leave aside questions of the historical accuracy and philosophical coherence of Zhao's definition of *tianxia*, and instead focus on the points where the concept appears to contrast with the principles of sovereignty and the structure of international anarchy which form the core of the contemporary international system.<sup>21</sup>

Zhao takes up this very issue in his consideration of the relevance of his writings to 'contemporary problems' within international relations. He notes that his intent in doing so is not to criticize the existing system in general, or the UN more specifically, but rather to highlight the 'given limitations in the potentiality of the United Nations pattern' particularly in regard to its ability to address global problems and the new American imperialism. More specifically, his work belittles the UN as an institution that is only capable of working with 'national interests' rather than global ones, and is unable to deal with American power. Indeed, Zhao cautions that we are currently facing the prospect of a 'failed world' in which 'American empire as "winner takes all" will not lead to something of the cheerful "end of history" but rather to the death of the world'.<sup>22</sup> To deal with such a prospect, Zhao argues that it is imperative to give greater consideration to the *tianxia* concept. While Zhao adds that 'ancient Chinese patterns' might not fit exactly with contemporary international politics, nonetheless 'we could see some eliciting points in the all-under-heaven institutions and policies that are still worthy of consideration even today'.<sup>23</sup>

More specifically, Zhao calls attention to three normative changes in world order that could be derived from his philosophical observations. First, in an all-under-heaven system, states (or to use Zhao's term, 'sub-states') are not to be seen as independent entities that are parts of a union, but rather, as 'sub-sets pertaining to a general set' or 'shares in a world of a company' in which 'the imperial center had served as the supervisor to recognize the political legitimacy of social institutions'. Secondly, Zhao asserts that the center 'had been designed to enjoy its limited advantages over the sub-states', yet, in his vision of *tianxia* there is also no 'superpower'. Third, he observes that within such an approach politics moves beyond nationalism and territorial borders.<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of how one judges Zhao's grasp of these issues, two things are of particular significance for this article. First, the system he is proposing contrasts with the normative principles underlying the contemporary international order. While

21. For a direct critique along these lines, see William Callahan's extensive reviews of Zhao's work. For a synopsis of Callahan's thinking on these issues, see *The Implications of Tianxia as a World System* (USC-China Institute, 4 December 2008), available at: [http://china.usc.edu/\(A\(2fC53LGOyQEkAAAAMjJINjk0YWUtMDZkNC00MDc0LT hjMzktYzJjYWE3OGVmYWI4MR9kFFSCX9LQWEidYgrna6lZsiM1\)S\(jozakdrh5nuppx55fsrmy45\)\)/Show Article.aspx?articleID = 1280](http://china.usc.edu/(A(2fC53LGOyQEkAAAAMjJINjk0YWUtMDZkNC00MDc0LT hjMzktYzJjYWE3OGVmYWI4MR9kFFSCX9LQWEidYgrna6lZsiM1)S(jozakdrh5nuppx55fsrmy45))/Show Article.aspx?articleID = 1280). Much of my own thinking about the emergence of the *tianxia* idea in Chinese international relations theory is inspired by Callahan's earlier work. However, whereas Callahan has tended, to date, to focus on Zhao, I treat Zhao as a secondary figure, and instead focus on how Chinese international relations scholars have begun to make use of *tianxia* ideas in their own writing.

22. Tingyang Zhao, 'Rethinking empire from a Chinese concept "all-under-heaven"', *Social Identities*, (January 2006).

23. Tingyang Zhao, 'A political world philosophy in terms of all-under-heaven (tian-xia)', *Diogenes* no. 1, (2009).

24. Tingyang Zhao, 'Empire and peace: the Chinese presentations consisting of a semantic introduction, a philosophical analysis, and an anthropological description: Part I, the concept of all-under-heaven: a semantic and historical introduction', *Key Words Studies for Transcultural Encyclopedia of Le Robert* 1, (2006).

Zhao demurs from making such a challenge explicit, his implicit intent is quite apparent: it is now crucial to re-order international politics in accordance with a revival of the principles which once underscored politics within China's dynastic past. As potentially far-reaching as such a call is, it is also necessary to bear in mind a second point related to Zhao's work: while the Chinese language publication which brought together the multiple strands of Zhao's thinking about the *tianxia* system was a best-seller and attracted considerable attention within China, its initial impact on Chinese thinking about world order should not be over-estimated. To begin with, the focus of Zhao's work was largely on domestic issues rather than on international politics. More importantly, for all the attention Zhao has received within China, he was not part of the foreign policy establishment. In other words, Zhao is a philosopher—a controversial and celebrated one, but not an expert on China's foreign relations. Thus, his work was at best of a peripheral nature within Chinese thinking about international politics.<sup>25</sup>

This limitation, however, has been superseded over the last several years as a handful of influential foreign policy elites have rushed to bring *tianxia* and other historically-framed concepts into their discussion of China's emerging place in the world. The direct referent for much of this turn stems from a reconsideration of a debate that was first raised in the mid-1990s over the extent to which it might be possible, or even advisable, to develop international relations theory with Chinese characteristics (*you zhengguo tese de guoji guanxi lilun*).<sup>26</sup> However, whereas the earlier incarnation of such a discussion was a rather clumsy extension of China's leaders' orthodox call to develop 'Chinese characteristics' in various aspects of political and economic thinking, the recent surge of interest in this issue has broader, largely historically-conditioned, intellectual roots. As such, this wave, particularly the writings of Qin Yaqing, Wang Yiwei and Yan Xuetong, merits closer scrutiny than Zhao's initial work.

The first of these specialists, Qin Yaqing, is a scholar who was simply chair of the English Department of the Foreign Affairs College in the 1990s, but is now considered one of the more influential foreign policy elites in China today. While Qin has long been associated with the development of the constructivist strand of international relations theory in China, over the last several years he has published articles in *World Economics and Politics* and *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* that re-oriented his work around the development of a 'Chinese international relations theory'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, after surveying the establishment of Western international relations theory in China over the last several decades, Qin proposed that China possesses the intellectual tradition to reorient the entire study of international relations.

25. However, it is also possible to argue that the attention Zhao devoted to *tianxia*, and the popular response to his writings, did stir interest within this community. In other words, it may have been a catalyst for more specialized writings on the concept on the part of international relations scholars.

26. Liang Shoude, at the time Peking University's senior international relations scholar, was at the center of this call. However, according to interviews conducted by the author during the 1990s, Liang's writings about Chinese international relations were not taken especially seriously by junior international relations specialists in China.

27. Qin translated Alexander Wendt's *Social Theory of International Politics* into Chinese. He has also written extensively in English and Chinese about constructivist approaches to international relations.

Qin contends that there are three possible sources of such a development: *tianxia*, modernization and reformist thinking. It is the first of these that most obviously cuts against the grain of core aspects of the current international order and thus warrants closer attention. Along these lines, Qin finds three particularly significant aspects of the *tianxia* system. First, according to Qin, *tianxia* and the affiliated practice of the ‘tributary system’ deserves consideration for inclusion in contemporary international relations due to its ‘holistic’ nature, in which there is space for the ‘far away’ but no ‘dichotomy of the self and other’. He then adds, ‘This holistic worldview is different from the Western dualistic view of the two opposites, where an inevitable conflict is implied’. Alongside this, *tianxia* has a second normative component that is global and hierarchical; such a view may then offer a positive alternative to the ‘inter-nationalness’ of the Western system. Third, within such a system, order derives from ‘unequal but benign’ relationships (as seen in the ‘perfect Tributary system’).<sup>28</sup>

In sum, in the process of articulating these three points, Qin effectively lays out a normative re-ordering of the international system. While his advocacy of such a radical change is framed in theoretical language, rather than that of policy studies, its underlying implications are still relatively clear. Qin’s writing suggests the existence of a pathway for a benevolent expansion of power within international politics and a fundamental shift in its normative underpinnings.

Wang Yiwei, a rising scholar working out of Fudan University, also phrases his reconceptualization of world politics with reference to international relations theory, but his writings in this regard are less oblique in their criticism of Western scholarship, and more direct in their call for the rise of ‘undeveloped countries’ and the deconstruction of ‘the Western system’. Indeed, Wang has no qualms with forwarding a radical frame for his work. He notes that through its realization, ‘This will be the real revolution of international relations. This is the theoretical and temporal background for censuring western IRT [international relations theory] and approaching the possibility of a future *Chinese school*’.<sup>29</sup>

As with Qin, Wang’s understanding of the roots of such an approach are to be found in ‘Chinese philosophy, which lacks the dichotomies that define western thought (and by extension western IRT)’. Indeed, drawing rather directly on Zhao Tingyang’s work, Wang notes that a Chinese international relations theory ‘based on the theory of all-under-heaven’ constitutes a more appropriate approach to today’s world, as it ‘should have its own system of ontology-theory of knowledge-methodology-theory of value, which embodies the common idealisms of liberty, equality, and fraternity in international relations’.<sup>30</sup> Such a theory would more specifically surpass Western international relations theory along six lines. Among these, the most important, at least in terms of the contemporary international order, is its ability to surpass ‘the logic of anarchy’.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, such a capacity allows Wang to situate the Chinese approach to

28. Qin Yaqing, ‘Why is there no Chinese international relations theory?’, *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 7(3), (August 2007), pp. 313–340.

29. Yiwei Wang, ‘Between science and art: questionable international relations theories’, *Japanese Journal of Political Science* no. 2, (2007), p. 194. Italics in the original.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

international relations in the middle of a re-organized Wendtian framework of international relations theory, and conclude:

When China represents the development trend of the advanced productive forces of the world, the orientation of advanced culture and the fundamental interests of the overwhelming majority of the world, the Chinese School will replace the western IRT as the dominant school of IRT.<sup>32</sup>

While Yan Xuetong, Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Qinghua University, also thinks in terms of theory and with reference to the *tianxia* system, he adds an element of strategic thinking to Qin and Wang's work. More specifically, Yan, one of the most well known senior scholars working on international relations in China today, develops his advocacy for a re-framing of international politics via a discussion of the contemporary relevance of the Chinese philosopher Xun Zi. By bringing Xun Zi into this discussion, Yan is able to extend the references to culture that appeared in his early work on national interest, and, like Qin and Wang, elucidate a distinctly Chinese interpretation of what a new normative world order should look like.

The implications of Yan's turn to Xun Zi for Chinese thinking about international relations are directly noted in his work. For example, Yan observes, 'The purpose of my discussion of Xun Zi's thoughts on international politics is not only to present the views of an ancient thinker on international relations, but, more important, to offer enlightenment on China's rising strategy'.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Yan requests,

If China wants to become a true kingship country—a superstate grounded in high morals and ethics—it should bring about a world order more peaceful and secure than that today. True kingship may not be the perfect international system, but, compared with the current hegemonic system, would be one imbued with greater cooperation and security.<sup>34</sup>

Yan takes particular issue with the current emphasis within China on the concept of a 'harmonious world'. Indeed, he finds this policy line to be both hollow and contradictory. Instead, Yan argues that Beijing should place greater emphasis on Xun Zi's 'yi' (moral and ethical principles) concept, and oppose the extension of Nye's ideas about 'soft power' within China to a hegemonic status. In other words, according to Yan, Chinese foreign policy makers should study the successes and failures of China's past (in particular the necessity for successful states to make maximum use of the human resources at their disposal). More importantly, in terms of international order, Yan observes,

After the signing in 1648 of the Westphalia Treaty, equality of state sovereignty became a universal international norm. It is one in direct opposition to Xun Zi's belief that a differentiated, hierarchical norm helps prevent conflict between states. Certain countries worry that a rising China might revive the old East-Asian tributary system. But any such renewal would inevitably lessen China's international political mobilization. Objectively, however, big and small states are not equal as regards power. Establishing a hierarchical norm, therefore, could help maintain a balance of power

32. *Ibid.*, p. 208.

33. Yan Xuetong, 'Xun Zi's thoughts on international politics and their implications', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* no. 1, (2008), p. 159.

34. *Ibid.*



and responsibility, thereby reducing international conflict and strengthening cooperative relationships.<sup>35</sup>

While Yan then partially blunts the impact of such a call by noting the difficulties involved in developing a ‘normative hierarchical order’ and warning that this development might not be especially well received in the region (and broader international arena), the implications of his observations are also relatively clear: the time has come for China to start casting a wider and deeper shadow on the international stage. Indeed, when read together with Qin and Wang, Yan’s work is suggestive of an emerging nodal point in the Chinese foreign policy discourse, mainly the development of a new vision of world order which supplements, if not replaces, Westphalia with newly resurrected, yet historically grounded, ‘Chinese’ concepts of how international politics might be re-organized.

#### IV. Conclusion: would a resurrection of *tianxia* bring stability to Asia?

In light of the prominence of those now writing about *tianxia* within the Chinese foreign policy establishment and how vastly different the constitutional structure of a *tianxia* system would be from the modified Westphalian order that has long anchored international politics, it seems prudent to briefly envision how a world remade along such lines, particularly along China’s borders, might look. In this regard, it is instructive to refer to Samuel Kim’s work, as his early discussion of Sino-centrism offers an apt description of the main characteristics of what a renewed *tianxia* order might resemble. Kim has observed,

[T]he Sinocentric world order was a concentric extension of the hierarchical principle which prevailed in the domestic social structure of the middle Kingdom ... It was not a system of international relations in the modern European sense, whose stability was maintained by the balance of power among more or less equal member states. It was instead a system of hierarchical harmony enforced by the preponderance of power and virtue anchored in China.<sup>36</sup>

If such a system were to again emerge in Asia, it is possible to predict two pointedly different shifts in the manner in which Beijing would frame China’s relationship with the rest of the world and the type of security dynamic that could then emerge within Asia as a result.

First, it is reasonable to expect that China’s leaders might place less of an emphasis on the sanctity of territorial boundaries than is currently the case. On a theoretical level, such lines are only of significance with reference to the principle of sovereignty. Or, as Kim observed in his description of the tribute system, which he argued constituted the real world application of the Sino-centric order, the principles of

national independence, national sovereignty, and national equality, upon which modern international law are built, were meaningless for the Chinese; in fact, they were repugnant to their sense of a universal state and civilization. The boundaries of the Chinese world order were strictly cultural, separating the civilized from the barbarian.<sup>37</sup>

35. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

36. Kim, *China, the United Nations, and World Order*, p. 23.

37. *Ibid.*

Thus, in a reconstituted *tianxia* system, the territorial and jurisdictional concerns which have so preoccupied China's leaders over the course of the last century could be re-imagined as issues involving peripheral regions, not zero-sum disputes over sovereign recognition. In this sense, a *tianxia* order might pave the way for the novel solution of such controversies, and as such lead to greater stability within the region.

This relatively benign development can be contrasted with a second, less pacific interpretation of the potential impact of a Chinese attempt to implement policies consistent with a new *tianxia*-framed vision of international politics within Asia. In brief, any such move would be premised upon the expectation, particularly along China's periphery, of an acceptance of what Yan Xuetong described as a 'normative hierarchical order'. Within such a system it is clear that it is China that is to occupy the paramount position, while those along its margins are expected to accept such dominance and show fealty to the center. Obviously, within such an order there is no rhetorical space for any external arbitrator of normative principles, such as the United States.

It is then difficult to imagine that any of the larger states along China's periphery would enthusiastically accept such a revision of the organizing principles underlying international politics within the region. Indeed, while some of China's small neighbors (such as Myanmar, or possibly Nepal) might view this Chinese dominated frame as entailing new opportunities to cement regime legitimacy and forestall certain forms of external involvement in their domestic affairs, it is also reasonable to anticipate that the majority of actors within Asia would construe any moves to re-create *tianxia* values and practices in the region as a threat. Thus, the promotion of such a system would have a deleterious impact on the security dynamic in the region.

In closing, it is imperative to emphasize that to date China has made no moves to create such a *tianxia* order in Asia, nor is it likely to move in the direction of such an undertaking. Indeed, as emphasized in Section II of this article, the mainstream in the Chinese foreign policy establishment continues to exhibit a deep attachment to the existing international order within the prism of a passive acceptance of the normative status quo in the international system, one in which sovereignty continues to remain supreme (albeit not without constraints). Nonetheless, a central intent of this article is to call attention to the fact that over the last several years, an expanding number of core Chinese foreign policy elites have begun, for the first time in the history of the People's Republic, to give extended and public consideration within their written work to how the normative underpinnings of the international system might be re-constituted. In short, they have started to give serious consideration to what a Chinese-defined international order might look like. At the very least, this is a trend that is sure to warrant close attention in the coming years.