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## Deciphering Chinese views on the liberal world order

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### Introduction

A dominant theme in the contemporary discourse on International Relations has surrounded the theme of the future of the liberal world order. While some scholars have already hailed its demise,<sup>1</sup> others believe that it continues to survive.<sup>2</sup> Yet others see the 2008 financial crisis as aggravating the crisis of the liberal order<sup>3</sup> which is disputed by those who believe the world order was never liberal to begin with.<sup>4</sup> A core component of these narratives have been the increasing participation of China in global governance institutions, which in turn has generated debates on whether or not China is a revisionist power looking to overhaul the liberal order. On one hand China's "rise" has taken place through deep integration into global value chains, particularly since its entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2000; on the other, Chinese assertions indicating its renewed ambition and intentions to "establish a new type of international relations" has made many – especially in the West – anxious. A lot of ambiguity surrounds Beijing's "real" intentions,

given the mismatch between its proclaimed statements and some of its policy actions. There is no uniform, unchanging Chinese vision of the world order as it has constantly evolved in a manner which serves its national interests best at various points in history.

### Through the prism of Chinese history: Decoding 'Tianxia'

Scholars have used the ancient Chinese cultural concept of *Tianxia* – which roughly translates to "all under heaven" – as the starting point for the study of Chinese vision of world order. It broadly "refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical boundaries."<sup>5</sup> Zhao Tingyan, one of China's most influential contemporary philosophers and author of "The Tianxia System: An Introduction to the Philosophy of a World Institution," uses it as a political concept to counter the "chaos of Hobbesian system" based on nation-state, which he sees as leading to "aggravation of antagonism and endless wars."<sup>6</sup> *Tianxia*, according to him, is

the best philosophy for world governance for it truly represents the oneness of the world by promoting “world-ness” instead of internationality and means an “institutionally ordered world.”<sup>7</sup> Zhao’s philosophy of *Tianxia*, emphasising ‘non-exclusion’, ‘harmony’, ‘cooperation without hegemony’, however, is a revision of the imperial concept to suit the realities of 21st century world politics. Zhao himself acknowledges that his system is an ‘ideal,’ ‘a grand utopia’ which has never been realised in Chinese history.<sup>8</sup>

In Chinese historiography, this concept is believed to have been embraced during the Zhou dynasty where the emperor, who was the “son of heaven”, was bestowed the world and thus ruled ‘all under heaven’ (*Tianxia*). The Chinese empire grew in East Asia and its tribute system – which refers to diplomatic practices acknowledging the superiority of the Sinitic civilisation – is believed to have been institutionalised.<sup>9</sup> This empire collapsed with the introduction of the treaty system following the Chinese defeat in the Opium Wars, forcing China to acknowledge Britain as a “sovereign nation” equal to itself by signing the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858. This collapse – where China lost its tributary states such as Hong Kong to Britain – was accompanied with forced acceptance of the Westphalian concept of sovereignty and equality. The defeat of imperial China at the hands of European and Japanese powers motivated a struggle for national rejuvenation and *return* to the state of former

glory. The ‘Century of humiliation’ only ended with Mao Zedong establishing People’s Republic of China (PRC), and who dreamt of Chinese resurgence as “a great power in a world of great powers.”

### **China’s evolutionary approach**

*Mao Zedong era:* During the early years of Mao’s leadership, PRC declared itself as an openly “revolutionary” power in world affairs as the West tried to develop an international order which would “contain” global communism. Mao’s China obviously tilted towards the Soviet Union until the Sino-Soviet rift, after which China proclaimed a people’s war against both the superpowers. Based on Mao’s “Three Worlds theory”, Beijing projected itself as a developing country which sought to unite with other third world countries against the hegemonic intentions of both superpowers. Driven by a strong urge to be self-reliant and develop itself on the basis of its civilizational strength, without relying on foreign powers, Beijing extended its support to the Non-Aligned Movement as a counterweight to bipolar politics of the time. The Republic of China retaining its seat on the Security Council and wielding veto rights was a major source of PRC’s frustration with international organisations. This found expression as hostility towards Taiwan and the international organisations.

*Deng Xiaoping era:* Motivated by the philosophy that China cannot grow in isolation and needs a

peaceful international environment to develop itself, Chinese energies were focused on internal reform and opening up to the outside world. The United Nations General Assembly decision of “restoration of lawful rights” to PRC by granting it the seat at the UNSC and expelling Taiwan marked the beginning of steady Chinese participation in international organisations. The remarkable success of the reforms led to Chinese economic power growing steadily as it registered one of the highest growth rates in the world, averaging 9.5 percent from 1979-2018.<sup>10</sup> Commensurate with its increased economic opening up, China joined various global financial trade institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO)<sup>11</sup>etc. The infamous Tiananmen Square incident adversely affected China’s international reputation. Worried that it might reverse the steady economic growth it had achieved, China embraced multilateralism and further integrated itself into the liberal order through signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1992, Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in 1996, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1998; aimed at “keeping a low profile and bide(ing) its time.” Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, China continued to cultivate a healthy relationship with international institutions and prioritized domestic development while reiterating the need for a peaceful and favourable international

environment. This is not to suggest that Beijing blindly adhered to Western dictates; rather it was vocal about the needs to reform existing institutions to reflect the strategic reality of increasing centres of power and consciously moved away from previous national narratives which demanded an entirely new system.

*Xi Jinping era:* Since 2010, China started becoming more vocal about its ambition and capabilities to reform the international order in a manner conducive to its own priorities and interests. Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and his distinct vision for China was evident from his early pronouncements. Speaking in Moscow in 2013, he criticized 19th and 20th century colonial imperialism and the Cold War model of international order and called for establishing a “new type of international relations” underpinned by “win-win cooperation.”<sup>12</sup> In 2014, Xi convened the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, an authoritative gathering of Chinese leaders including politburo members and prominent individuals from the Chinese foreign, trade, military, security, intelligence community, where he elaborated on his diplomatic approach. Based on the preceding trends and features, Xi called for China to “develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role of [sic] a major country.” This means that China must “conduct diplomacy with a salient Chinese feature and a Chinese vision.”<sup>13</sup> It was only in 2015 that Xi formally announced

these ideas to a global audience at his speech in the UN, calling to establish a “community of shared future for all humankind” based on “mutually beneficial”, “abundantly beneficial”, and “collectively beneficial” relationships where China would not “pursue hegemony or expansionism” or “carve a sphere of influence.”<sup>14</sup> Although “correct sense of justice” and “win-win cooperation” became Xi’s catchphrases, he repeatedly assured national audience that China would not jeopardise its “core national interests” in the process. At the opening ceremony of the 2016 G20 business summit in Hangzhou, Xi Jinping delivered the keynote address titled “New Start of China’s Development, New Blueprint for Global Growth” where he reassured the international community that “China’s opening to the outside world will not stagnate, let alone go back” and made a case for One Belt, One Road and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank to serve as initiatives which would “supplement and improve existing international mechanisms.”<sup>15</sup> A more assertive message from Xi came amidst China’s trade dispute with United States in 2018, where, during the 19th Party Congress, he stated that China would take active part in “reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance.” Boasting how China had “crossed the threshold into a new era” Xi set out a blueprint for China where 2049 was declared as the target year for achieving China’s

restoration as a great nation and achieving superpower status.<sup>16</sup>

### Assessment

Contemporary China is very different from the days of Mao’s revolutionary China. Beijing’s vision is not one of complete overhaul of a system which it has benefitted from, but it is a “strategic brand of revisionism”<sup>17</sup> since it continues to feel some of its core national objectives being hampered by the existing system. The unresolved partition of Republic of China from the mainland continues to shape Chinese thinking in many ways and President Xi has gone beyond his predecessors to assert unification as the only option available for the Taiwanese.<sup>18</sup> While it is important to contextualise China’s evolutionary approach against the backdrop of changing post-cold war realities where multipolarization is in fact a strategic reality, yet Chinese vision is not restricted to benign reform. This is not to suggest, either, that Beijing will not contribute to resolving global problems stemming from the obvious insufficiencies of the global order, but its motivation to restructure international order to address its own persistent frustrations and dissatisfaction is extremely dangerous. More recently, Chinese attempts to assert and to flex its military muscle in a border conflict with India during a pandemic does not inspire confidence about its credentials as a responsible power. China is more ambitious than ever before, driven by an economy which is quickly recovering while

the rest of the world is struggling, but it is clear that this has created more anxieties than reassurances. Take the example of China's increased engagement with global health governance institutions, e.g. managing HIV/AIDS (where Beijing acted unilaterally and handed out aid opaquely),<sup>19</sup> manipulating the election of WHO Director,<sup>20</sup> and most recently, Beijing's lack of transparency during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic which was aided by the WHO.<sup>21</sup> As China continues to increase its economic might, there remains little doubt that it will try to shape the terms of the international order to suit its national interests and seek to legitimise its own authoritarian models. What remains to be seen is how the rest of the world will respond to these developments.

***(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])***

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Richard N Haass, "Liberal World Order, R.I.P.," Council on Foreign Relations, March 21, 2018, Available at <https://www.cfr.org/article/liberal-world-order-rip>

<sup>2</sup> G. John Ikenberry, Why the Liberal World Order Will Survive, *Ethics & International Affairs*, 32, no. 1 (2018). Available at [https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/gji3/files/why\\_the\\_liberal\\_world\\_order\\_will\\_survive.pdf](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/gji3/files/why_the_liberal_world_order_will_survive.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Harold James. "International order after the financial crisis." *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No.3, (May 2011). pp. 525-537

<sup>4</sup> Michael N. Barnett, "The End of a Liberal Interantional Order That Never Existed," *The Global*, (April 16, 2019), Available at <https://theglobal.blog/2019/04/16/the-end-of-a-liberal-international-order-that-never-existed/>

<sup>5</sup> Ban Wang, *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Zha Tingyang, "A Political Philosophy of World in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia, 天下)," *The New Legalist*, March 18, 2009, Available at <http://www.xinfajia.net/5820.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Tingyang Zhao, "Rethinking Empire from a Chinese Concept 'All-under-Heaven' (Tian-Xia,)," *Social Identities* 12, no. 1 (2006): pp. 29-41.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang Feng. "The Tianxia System: World Order in a Chinese Utopia," *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 21, March 2010. Available at: [http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021\\_utopia.inc&issue=021](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/tien-hsia.php?searchterm=021_utopia.inc&issue=021)

<sup>9</sup> Yongjin Zhang. "The Tribute System." Oxford Bibliographies. (New York: Oxford University Press, 22 April 2019) Available at: <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0069.xml>

<sup>10</sup> Wayne M. Morrison, "China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States." Congressional Research Service, June 25, 2019, p.5, Available at: [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190625\\_RL33534\\_088c5467dd11365dd4ab5f72133db289fa10030f.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20190625_RL33534_088c5467dd11365dd4ab5f72133db289fa10030f.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Chinese participation in these organisations is highly contested and several of its policies have openly violated trade rules. Many countries have argued that China's treatment of foreign companies IP rights is unfavourable. China has been accused of blatantly copying designs of military hardware in violation of IPR of foreign designers of military hardware. For details, see: <https://news.usni.org/2015/10/27/chinas-military-built-with-cloned-weapons>.

<sup>12</sup> "Xi Jinping: Establishing a new type of international relations centered on win-win cooperation." *People's Daily Online*, March 24, 2013 Available at: <http://jhsjk.people.cn/article/20893314>

<sup>13</sup> Michael D. Swaine, "Xi Jinping's Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: Assessing and Advancing Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics." *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46. Available at: [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael\\_Swaine\\_CLM\\_46.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael_Swaine_CLM_46.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> H.E. Xi Jinping, "Towards Win-win Partnership for Sustainable Development." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 27, 2015, Available at: [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1306508.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1306508.shtml)

<sup>15</sup> Xi Jinping, "A New Starting Point for China's Development: A New Blueprint for Global Growth" September 3, 2016, Available at: <http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2016/160903-xi.html>

<sup>16</sup> "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress." Xinhua, November 3, 2017, Available at: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm)

<sup>17</sup> Evan A. Feigenbaum, "Reluctant Stakeholder: Why China's Highly Strategic Brand of Revisionism is More Challenging Than Washington Thinks." MacroPolo. April 27, 2018, Available at: <https://macropolo.org/analysis/reluctant-stakeholder-why-chinas-highly-strategic-brand-of-revisionism-is-more-challenging-than-washington-thinks/>

<sup>18</sup> Chris Buckley and Chris Horton, Xi Jinping Warns Taiwan That Unification Is the Goal and Force Is an Option, Jan 1, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/01/world/asia/xi-jinping-taiwan-china.html>

<sup>19</sup> Becky Carter, "A literature review on China's aid." Knowledge, evidence and learning for development, September 7 2017, Available at: [https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/177\\_China\\_aid.pdf](https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/177_China_aid.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Yanzhong Huang, "Tedros, Taiwan, and Trump: What They Tell Us About China's Growing Clout in Global Health." *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 7, 2017. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/tedros-taiwan-and-trump-what-they-tell-us-about-chinas-growing-clout-global-health>

<sup>21</sup> Hinnerk Feldwisch-Drentrup, "How WHO became China's Coronavirus Accomplice" Foreign Policy, April 2, 2020. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/02/china-coronavirus-who-health-soft-power/>